Reason, Aesthetics & Emancipation

Questions of Identity and Representation in Critical Theory

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Contents

Abstract

The thesis looks at the question of representation in critical and feminist theory: how, in the wake of radical philosophy's critique of metaphysics, can a non-dominatory knowledge be forged? My discussion is framed in terms of the relation between reason and aesthetics in a number of key thinkers: Jürgen Habermas, Jean-François Lyotard, Theodor Adorno and Judith Butler, among others. I submit that the struggle between reason and aesthetics underpins much recent debate over postmodernism. Depending on whether reason – representing the cognitive sphere of language and symbol – or aesthetics – the affective, figural realm of feeling and desire – is privileged, politics is construed either as a potential site for rational discourse or an agonistic network of heterogeneous narratives. I argue that neither Habermas nor Lyotard adequately account for the interplay between reason and aesthetics in knowledge. Habermas is guilty of subsuming aesthetics under rational modes, while Lyotard cannot sustain the primacy he lends to the non-cognitive and heterogeneous.

I turn instead to the earlier critical theory of Adorno, and suggest that the tensions in his thought between the universal and the particular, reason and the body, identity and non-identity resonate strongly with contemporary feminist concerns. I test his approach against some leading feminist thinkers, in particular Judith Butler's deconstructive postmodernism. I argue for a dialectical, mimetic knowledge that avoids one-sided views that bind emancipatory knowledge to either identity or difference, reason or aesthetics. All knowledge must be seen as aesthetic, but this should not lead to the demise of reason, as some postmodern accounts would have it, nor a rationalist faith in the transparency of the self and other. A just community requires a *culture* of 'rational aesthetics' to balance the diversity and commonality of social existence.

Declarations

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

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In memory of my sister, Jane.

Introduction: Feminism, Aesthetics, and the Dilemmas of Identity

The possibility of reconciling the unifying, practical realm of reason with the aesthetic-affective realm of desire and embodied experience has been a recurrent theme in Western notions of freedom. But in the wake of recent radical critiques of knowledge the idea of reconciliation has been fundamentally destabilized, and critical theories, and especially feminism, have undergone 'a profound identity crisis'.[1] With the rejection of Cartesian and natural law paradigms of knowledge, we are no longer strictly the authors of our own utterances or beliefs, and there is no objective standpoint from which to criticize social institution and practices. Increasingly, knowledge is recognized as in some sense aesthetic, that is, a social construction rather than a naturalistic reflection of the world. Politics and ethics become an *art* in the sense that there are no fixed rules by which they might be guided. I am concerned here, broadly speaking, with mapping the contours of just this 'crisis' in contemporary postmetaphysical thought. I do this through an examination of the tensions between reason and aesthetics, as distinctive but interrelated modes of knowing. These concepts provide a critical focus through which I consider the theoretical, ethical and political difficulties inherent in a number of influential thinkers, representative of modernist, postmodernist and feminist perspectives.

I submit that an analysis of the reason-aesthetics relation exposes the tendency for critical theory to polarize around paradigms of identity or difference, resulting in reductive and limiting views of the social. I argue instead for a more synthetic, dialectical approach to knowledge that understands the rational and the aesthetic

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[1] See Linda Alcoff's influential essay, 1988.

as interdependent yet distinctive. The value of using this interpretative framework lies in the fact that it cuts across a range of debates about modernity, in particular those involving postmodern and feminist concerns. I am not interested in pitting critical theory against postmodernism, nor feminism against these two, however.[2] Rather, I am interested in overcoming any 'false antithesis' between them, as Nancy Fraser puts it, 'by integrating the best insights of each' (1991: 168).

I have chosen a number of key thinkers to furnish this argument: Jürgen Habermas, Jean-François Lyotard, Theodor Adorno and Judith Butler, among others. None of these is a 'straw' figure, for they all offer substantial and provocative responses to problems of identity and representation in critical theory. In the context of my discussion, it is important to recognize that all, in their different ways, share a concern to defend the aesthetic-affective from instrumental modes of action. All reject the possibility of any stable first principle or absolute grounds of philosophy, and offer a critique of social totalities, whether in terms of the hegemony of the capitalist logic of exchange, the violence of symbolic systems, patriarchal relations, or systemic imperatives. Each one also sees the subject as discursively constituted, yet retains some idea of the self's critical reflexivity. But their respective understandings of reason and aesthetics differ markedly, characterized by a reliance on 'discursive' models of justice on the one hand and non-discursive, mimetic-affective models on the other.[3] Whereas in Habermas aesthetics is notably absent from the rational, procedural realm of argumentation, Lyotard's is a thoroughly aestheticized politics of feeling, celebrating heterogeneity and relegating the rational to a secondary position. Butler's work also privileges difference, divesting the political of any scientific or naturalistic status, and positing a radically constructivist understanding of identity which implicitly reduces reason *and* aesthetics to ideology. These different

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[2] All these approaches have different emancipatory interests and roles, none of which need be mutually exclusive.

[3] Indeed, it has been put that 'communicative rationality' and 'bodily autonomy' represent the two main themes of critical politics since the 1960's, in the wake of Marxist theories of resistance (Boyne & Lash 1990: 120-121).

positions are instructive, but I submit that none has succeeded in moving far beyond the paradoxes of Adorno's negative dialectics in tackling the difficult task of reconciling social critique with the demise of metaphysics. Adorno's critique of identity as totalizing thinking invests aesthetic experience with emancipatory content, but allows it only a brief, negative moment in the dialectics of knowledge. Reason and aesthetics are not opposed here, but connected – if somewhat tenuously – through a corporeal, mimetic relation of affinity.

Not all of the theorists I consider here explicitly address the concepts of reason and aesthetics, and a preliminary methodological note would be useful at this point. Admittedly, a reason-aesthetics opposition imposes a dualistic theoretical framework on spheres of action and understanding that often defy clear categorization. They do however, if imprecisely, refer to different registers of knowledge and experience, overlapping, to be sure, but containing enough self-coherence to be useful interpretative tools. Where reason often implies the cognitive subject, processes of argumentation and justification, mind, or the universality of conceptual or symbolic systems, aesthetics refers to the specificity of the mimetic body, the emotional, sensuous or imaginative self, or the figural dimensions of discourse. Reason has been primarily aligned with the potential universality of the discursive and the conceptual, but can also be variously construed as instrumental, communicative, or mimetic. Aesthetics has principally been aligned with the singularity of affect, desire and feeling, yet it can also refer broadly to a realm of creative freedom and imagination. Both might also be viewed as social as well as subjective. It is central to my argument that critical theory needs to acknowledge the dialectical relations between these categories: without an understanding of their mutual identity and non-identity, any theoretical understanding of the political is restricted.

The reason-aesthetics framework thus pays due respect, but also problematizes, the Western convention that divides the question of knowledge into two camps: the one 'Apollonian', understanding language, thought and subjectivity in terms

of rational, clear and ordered imagery; the other 'Dionysian', understanding those categories in terms of desire, the sensuous body and 'emotional intoxication' (Vasseleu 1993: 76-7). These distinctions will, in the course of my argument, be duly criticized, but for heuristic purposes they illuminate a number of distinctions that remain central to contemporary critical theory; those in particular that revolve around the tensions between universal and particular, philosophy and history, difference and identity. Reason and aesthetics acts as an immanent critique, therefore, as well as an evocative structure for my inquiry. By representing on the one hand the universal, conceptual achievements of the symbolic realm, and on the other the desiring, affective self, they reflect feminism's paradoxical task of using the very (rational) conceptual tools it attacks in order to bring the embodied (aesthetic) self into the centre of the philosophical – and political – agenda.

The aim of this introductory discussion is principally one of clarification. I will firstly expand upon the feminist problematic within which my argument unfolds, and then sketch a short history of the concept of aesthetics to situate it in the discussion to follow. I will then go on to summarize the thesis as it unfolds in each chapter.

1. The Dilemmas of Postmetaphysical Feminism

Why are the issues of representation, difference and identity so important for feminism? Feminism has participated in the general destabilization of knowledge that occurred with the linguistic turn in twentieth century philosophy. But alongside its concern with language and discourse, the status of the gendered, embodied self is also of central significance. As Rosa Braidotti puts it, the re-incorporation of the 'intelligent and intelligible' body as the point of philosophy's departure brings the feminist agenda into the centre of philosophical discourse. In so doing, it poses the problem of whether philosophy is 'able to accept the limits

which the corporeal origins of all knowledge imposes on the primacy of the reason it incorporates....' (1991: 35).[4]

This amounts to a challenge for philosophy to rethink representation, but it is a challenge that feminist philosophy must also confront, for the status of the (newly) gendered, embodied subject is far from clear. Thus although feminism's critique of western metaphysics has destabilized many of its assumptions as an identity politics, forcing it to rethink any recourse to 'grand narratives' to explain women's oppression, it continues to face the ubiquitous question of identity and difference: how to make truth (identity) claims about women without falling prey to the very violent and exclusionary logic that ignores difference and sustains the status quo.[5] The risk here is one of entrapment in paradigms of domination and exclusion, evidenced in the protests against feminism's neglect of race, class and sexuality made from within its own ranks (Hennessy 1993: 113).

The concept of local, concrete experiences of women's lives has long been used as a strategy to subvert the unifying and dominatory claims of masculinist theories. But investigations into local forms of oppression must also examine their own assumptions, and it is not at all obvious how the concrete, empirical experiences of women's lives should be understood. If experience is discursively constructed, it provides no epistemic guarantee, for women's stories may also be shaped by ideological assumptions of hegemonic narratives. The difficulty might alternatively be expressed in the idea that the category of 'woman' cannot be held unproblematically, implying as it does certain essential and identitarian biological traits, but neither can it be rejected – on the grounds of its complicity with patriarchal structures, or as a totalizing and thus violent concept – without losing the very object and *raison d'être* of feminism's critique. At its extremes, feminism is therefore torn between a position that undermines all claims to identity, notions of subjectivity, and reference as permeated with power, and the need to make

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[4] As Alcoff and Potter point out, it is the concept of a universal human nature which allows philosophy to ignore the specificity of the knowing subject (1993: 4).
[5] See for instance the exchange between Benhabib, 1991; Butler, 1991; and Fraser, 1991.

normative interventions and truth claims on behalf of an implicitly universal category, 'women'. Both these positions are in various ways problematic, even destructive of feminist aims: on the 'constructivist' view, feminism helps construct the very subject positions it wants to emancipate (Butler 1990: 29), while the naturalist perspective is vitiated by an unreflexive, positivist view of women's experience and knowledge as potentially unmediated, undistorted by ideological forms.[6]

Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson's injunction to combine a 'postmodern incredulity towards metanarratives with the social-critical power of feminism' (1990: 34-5) points to exactly this tension between ideology critique and postmetaphysical theory. If women's lives and their discursive understanding of it are coterminous, then feminist theory loses its privileged epistemological role as demystifier of social oppression and cannot legitimately speak for all women, but only specific subject positions. If on the other hand theory claims a disjunction between actuality or objectivity and experience, it faces substantial justificatory problems. How can a rejection of universality be reconciled with a critique that needs to cling to some general notions of women and social structures, notions that transcend their local context?[7]

The significance of these questions of representation lie in the way they affect all the categories through which we understand the social. How we understand identity impacts directly on politico-juridical concerns, for instance, since the more we understand subjects to be identical with themselves, or knowledge to be identical with its object, the more legitimate *a priori*, universal laws appear to become. Conversely, the more subjects and knowledge are seen as heterogeneous, constituted through relations of difference, or incommensurable, non-rational processes, the more justice seems to demand a repudiation of socially regulated

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[6] See for instance Rosemary Hennessy's discussion of standpoint theory, 1993: 15.

[7] Fraser and Nicholson argue that a postmodern feminism 'would eschew unitary notions of woman and gender identity for 'plural and complexly constructed conceptions of social identity', theoretically 'forswearing the comfort of a single feminist method or feminist epistemology' (1990: 35).

practices and laws. What is at stake here is the status that is imputed to knowledge and meaning, what counts as knowledge, who gets to make knowledge, who gets to represent others, what an ethical decision and mode of decision making would look like, and the kind of social, legal and political arrangements that would be necessary for an ethical or just society.[8]

Now, for many feminists the suspicion of universal theory does not stifle the articulation of women's oppression but represents a liberation from hegemonic, unified narratives. The rejection of male-centred thought opens opportunities for alternative modes of knowledge; thus anti-humanist, genealogical and deconstructive analyses take their place alongside the heterogeneous, multiple and local accounts of women's lives.[9] For a theorist such as Judith Butler, the attempt to formulate a feminist epistemology or ethic which defines women as subjects is a fundamentally flawed project, a futile attempt to transform patriarchal or dominatory modes of thinking into an emancipatory project. On her view, it is impossible to reconcile feminism's demands for equality and difference with notions of social justice and law, for the very law that will accord women's rights inevitably defines them again under its patriarchal form. In structuralist fashion, analysis now looks at why and how women are produced as subjects through discourse: women's testimonies, the articulation of their own concrete experiences, are no longer of primary import. Instead, the theorist or observer remains detached and suspicious of embodied being, seeing it as either fraught with humanist assumptions, or alternatively uncapturable by virtue of the deconstructive movement of non-presence.

Ethics and philosophy are on this view abstracted, crypto-normative pursuits which merely reflect the experience and interests of privileged white males. The strongest bulwark against domination is found in a de-humanized understanding of the social, and the embrace of diversity and particularity. The subject, and

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[8] As Warren Montag puts it, 'precisely the knowability of the diverse practices that we sum up as 'culture'' (1988: 97).

[9] See, for instance, Walker, 1993.

indeed the material world, is always constituted by the very language that purports to merely reflect it, and this process of meaning-formation necessarily establishes boundaries, excluding and repudiating its outside as unintelligible. The contrast between the heterogeneity of being and the universal claims of the symbolic demonstrates the illusory separation of idea and context and the latent power relations that sustain that illusion. The notion of 'woman' as a unified, self-identical category whose subjective identity or ego is a reflection of her biological self is undermined, along with any claims to knowledge of abstract categories of the social – the people, morality, law – as scientific or empirically demonstrable.

In humanist terms this could be read as an approach based on the premise of an heterogeneous, anarchic, Dionysian realm struggling to emerge between the cracks and fissures of the false unity of dominant modes of thought. But ontological, epistemological and normative questions cannot so easily be avoided by these deconstructive strategies alone. Invoking the play of discursive representations does not wholly resolve the dilemmas of referentiality in a postmetaphysical age, and indeed the humanist assumptions and truth claims in such anti-humanist positions often remain unexplored. Butler's work indeed hangs ambiguously between the idea there is nothing outside the text, and on the other that 'life is drawn as that which exceeds and resists all measure' (Vasseleu 1993: 71). These two notions, on the one hand that discourse cannot transcend its historical context, presupposing some element of material determinacy, and on the other that there is nothing outside the text, that the world as text is created through discourse, which implies textual determinacy, are indeed emblematic of a central tension in postmodernism's critique of Western metaphysics.[10]

Yet I argue that critical theory as a political intervention requires some recourse to the 'real' – truth claims, however they are understood – and not simply to the absences and silences of representation. For if the representation of women's

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[10] The difficulty in conceptualizing how discourse is related to the actual world is extensively dealt with in Hennessy, 1993.

experience is inescapably entangled with ideology, feminism's normative legitimation will always remain at best a contradictory task. As a theory of emancipation, feminism may not yet be ready to renounce or transcend its 'particular' object, women, under an undifferentiated notion of domination. It cannot be a matter of 'postfeminism', as Nancy Fraser observes, until the advent of 'postpatriarchy' (1991: 114).

Feminist practice goes on regardless of these theoretical dilemmas; but it is of more than simply passing interest to attempt to clarify the theoretical terms of its political projects. As a practical intervention as well as a philosophy, feminism cannot avoid confronting the epistemological status of its claims.[11] Of course, such questions may not admit of any single resolution: as Diane Elam puts it, women are at the same time 'pure abstraction (ideological construction) [and] raw bodies (real historical objects)': a 'challenge to an entire epistemology' (1994: 59).

A growing number of feminists have turned to the body in an attempt to address these increasingly labyrinthine questions.[12] Knowledge becomes, as Donna Haraway expresses it, a 'function of the embodied expression of our affective investment in the world' (1993: 112). This is, unavoidably, dangerous terrain, and feminists can expect little help from many 'mainstream' theorists and philosophers, who often (still) view the issue of gender as, at best, of secondary concern.[13] Postmodernism's often de-humanized accounts of subjectivity and the social are frequently ambiguous on this score, for instance. Elizabeth Grosz points to tensions between Foucauldian and Nietzschean accounts of the body, the one portraying the body as the surface on which meaning is inscribed and introjected, the other assuming a deeper, libidinal, pre-discursive self (1994: 196). The

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[11] Epistemology here implying no more than a reflexive analysis of the claims to knowledge of any text. Any notion of how we should act towards each other and how we should regard ourselves as moral agents cannot take place outside an interpretative framework, be that a framework informed by a certain kind of feminist, liberal, postmodern or any number of other methodological permutations. Making this *a priori* framework explicit and thus self-reflexive is crucial if theory is to avoid the dominatory and exclusionary pitfalls of traditional modes of thinking.

[12] See, for instance, Kirby 1991, Grosz, 1994, Butler, 1993, Gatens, 1996, and Diprose, 1994.

[13] I include Habermas and Lyotard in this accusation, despite the fact that their work nonetheless contains much of importance for feminist theory.

dilemma for postmodernism in this regard is that while its project is to protect that which falls outside the discursive, it cannot name that outside without, it implicitly believes, continuing to do violence to it. I am not so much concerned here with the question of whether the 'outside' to discourse is natural or the unintended effect of iterated discursive structures. I do however argue that this realm, or aspects of it, *can* be brought inside the discursive without doing violence to it. As part of the social, whether 'natural' or not, the possibility must be held open that the excluded, repressed or marginalized can potentially be brought to cognition. This is conditional on a language conceived not as inevitably unitary, fixed or totalizing, but flexible, always reaching beyond itself to what is *not* language, and creating new understandings, however imperfect or approximate.

It is at this point that the concept of aesthetics takes on a heightened significance for critical theory: both its *cognitive* dimensions, that which refers to imaginative and creative faculties, and its *non-cognitive*, mimetic and affective elements. Before proceeding any further with my argument, however, and in order to help unpack its terms (and turns), the following section provides an historical overview of the notion of aesthetics in political philosophy. In doing so, I mean to provide some rationale for its (if at times only implicit) centrality in my thesis. In the course of showing its various usages, the dialectical relation between aesthetics and the rational should also become clear. As both the traditional 'other' of reason and its silent partner, the simultaneous ubiquity and obscurity of aesthetics both demonstrates its importance in the history of western thought and lends the concept a certain compelling fascination.

2. Aesthetics and the Political

The concept of aesthetics is an immensely elastic one, but I hope to demonstrate that it nonetheless remains useful. In the history of western thought, aesthetics has often represented the 'other' of an instrumental, objectifying reason, namely, all

that relates to or comes from the sensual body, feeling, the emotions, the imagination, and creativity. Standing over against reason and law, it has encompassed questions of 'human nature', taste, sentiment, sensation and motivation in political convictions and judgement, distinct from the transparent rationality of functional and logical modes of thought. As Terry Eagleton comments, 'Aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body' (1990: 13). Not surprisingly, questions of aesthetics in social and political thought are notoriously contested ones. In much Enlightenment philosophy the aesthetic-affective realm has been subordinated to rationality and cognition, the latter holding normative primacy. In the German romantic tradition for instance aesthetics has underpinned knowledge and morality, which then assume a secondary position.[14] More recently postmodernists have reconceptualized the conventional distinctions between knowledge and experience to propose an *anti*-aesthetic: the impossibility of differentiating between reason, art and desire. While there are numerous ways to conceive the aesthetic-affective realm, it is at least partly non-discursive, exceeding and escaping language as well as its own reflexive boundaries through ineffable symbolism, image, imagination and intuition, problematizing from the start any theoretical comprehension. For a critical theory, however, the potentially ideological function of this realm, whether involving unconscious or unacknowledged forms of homophobia, sexism, or racism,[15] or the possible political and economic manipulation of aesthetic forms, demands its thematization.

On a more affirmative note, aesthetics holds a particular affinity with the politics of emancipation through mimesis, imagination, art and the sensuous body. Through a range of affective impulses, aesthetic experience is able to make knowledge compelling: feelings such as pleasure, fear, altruism, sympathy, or pity endow the symbolic realm with motivation and commitment. Aesthetics is

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[14] See Korthals, 1989.
[15] Refer, for instance, to Iris M. Young's discussion of an 'aesthetics of oppression', 1991.

thereby intimately related to ethics, in fact in its motivational function it might be seen to act as 'a guide to human life' (Kearney 1991: 7). It opens the possibility that an idea of knowledge may be conceived starting *from* the body, in contrast to the usual attempt to insert the body into an 'always already' given reason (Eagleton 1990: 197). For many radical philosophers, as Terry Eagleton observes, the aesthetic constitutes an 'incipient materialism', retaining a 'charge of irreducible particularity, providing us with a kind of paradigm of what a non-alienated mode of cognition might look like' (1990: 196, 2).

I understand the aesthetic's 'incipient materialism' in terms of *mimesis*. This concept refers to the actual *process* of knowing: both the physical dimension of experience, the senses's connection with the world that is required for knowledge to take place at all, and the creative act of re-presenting sense-data in conceptual form.[16] Mimesis thus implies a two-fold imitation of the other as well as connection.[17] Expressed in ideas such as Kant's sublime, Marx's species-being (our sensuous, creative connection with the world), or Heidegger's poetic being-in-the-world, the mimetic dimension of aesthetics assumes an ethical, emancipatory dimension far beyond any simple notion of mimicry or sensuous connection. It invokes a kind of authentic, particular and affective relation to the world that escapes the ideological, repressive influence of the symbolic sphere. It thereby suggests that truth lies in the ethical quest to transform life, to achieve a feeling of aesthetic harmony with the world and fulfillment in intersubjective relations.[18]

In its use by thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno or Luce Irigaray – all of whom strongly inform my understanding of the concept – the strongly ethical aspect of the concept remains, but is joined by a suspicion of

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[16] The notion of mimesis is discussed again in chapters five and six, particularly pp211-216.

[17] See Michael Taussig's important study on mimesis, 1993.

[18] Heidegger 'rejects objectifying thought not because every attempt to build a bridge [between a worldless subject and an object] is a failure – although he agrees it is – but because man [sic] already belongs to Being (the world) in a more primordial way, long before propositional discourse arrives on the scene' (Asher 1988: 121). For the Marx of the 18th Brumaire, as Eagleton shows, 'the true sublime is that infinite, inexhaustible heterogeneity of use-value – of sensuous, non-functional delight in concrete particularity – which will follow from the dismantling of abstract rational exchange' (1992: 30).

representation and respect for difference. For such thinkers, the senses are still valued as an important vehicle through which to escape social domination. Yet now there is seen to be no immediate translation of sense experience into symbolic representation, and thought is ethically bound to remember this gap, the inability of representation to identically 'cover' its object. Knowledge therefore involves an inescapable element of imagination, fantasy and play; the creative activity required to re-present the object *despite* its ultimate unknowability. Its creativity allows for the expansion and experimentation of concepts or language to follow the object's specificity. In more political terms, this translates into an ethical receptivity and attraction to otherness that incorporates the affective, unifying social bond, that intuitive area which directs social feeling.[19]

The socio-political application of the aesthetics, and implicitly, its mimetic and affective elements, have recently been reinvigorated in postmodern theory.[20] With the demise of theories of natural law in the wake of critiques of modern metaphysics, political and ethical decisions appear to rest on nothing more than the 'art and practice of critical value judgement' (Sim 1992: 1). Postmodern political judgement is no longer decided on the old questions of moral truth or innate beauty, natural law versus contingency, since those contests have been decided in favour of aesthetics (Welsch 1996: 12).[21] The question of how social critique or moral action is possible once the Cartesian paradigm is rejected resolves itself into a question of art, the sublime, the realm of freedom removed from cause-effect relations. Postmodernists understand this 'art' via the influence of such thinkers as Nietzsche and Heidegger, who were suspicious of the identification of being, truth and ethics with the structures of given historical

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[19] See, generally, Armstrong, 1993.
[20] See Caygill, 1989 & Carroll, 1987.
[21] 'It is my thesis that it came to this in consequence of the development of scientific rationality itself, through which truth has to a large extent become an aesthetic category' (Welsch 1996: 12-13). Welsch goes on to show how Kant himself posits a transcendental aesthetic as the basis of knowledge, through the intuitive (and thus human-created) concepts of space-time. We do not have to accept the ahistoricality of such categories nor the individualism of Kant's formulation to appreciate the importance of this idea. Nietzsche of course took this fundamental aesthetic basis of knowledge even further, reducing knowledge to metaphor (Welsch 1996: 13).

language, instead attempting to forge new ways of understanding these categories, one that encompassed the non-symbolic dimensions of experience and knowledge rather than neglecting them (Vattimo 1993: 12).

We see this reflected in postmodernism's aversion to the homogenizing, *a priori* logic of abstraction and exchange. As the embodied particularity of experience and feeling, our affective and sensuous experience of the world, aesthetics is always also a part of rationality. It reconstructs and represents the experience and sensual feeling of the world, leaving cognitive representation (speech, reasoning, ethics) as secondary and derivative, providing the conditions on which meaning and morality arise (Crowther 1993: 90). Foucault, for example, viewed the idea of a generalizable morality as 'catastrophic', turning instead to an aesthetics of the self as a means to liberation (Weiss 1989: 91).

Non-discursive, aesthetic elements of communication may also characterize the contemporary era of late capitalism. The heightened significance of the aesthetic in everyday life is increasingly recognized in much social and political thought, from Baudrillard's radicalization of the commodity form to Stuart Hall's and Dick Hebdige's work in cultural studies.[22] A renewed focus on the figurative and the expressive witnessed in a strengthening culture of consumption now becomes an important adjunct to class, social structure and economic analyses. Wolfgang Welsch (1996) for instance argues that today's aestheticization processes are both superficial and deep-seated, operating in the realm of animation, experience and embellishment and also in fundamental changes in the production process. This involves both material and immaterial aestheticization, microelectronic production processes transforming the very nature of reality into a more clearly artificial, controllable realm at the same time as it changes our consciousness of that reality. Scott Lash also records that:

> a great deal of the increasingly reflexive nature of economic growth is aesthetic, as products are increasingly associated with images; as symbolic intensivity at

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[22] See Hall & Jacques, 1989.

work often takes the form of design rather than cognition. The shift from mass to specialized consumption implies a certain set of decisions that must be made; these depend on much more than just resource maximization and cost-benefit thinking, and assume an important expressive dimension alongside the utilitarian one (1993: 19).

If we admit that there has been a shift in the hegemonic process of identity-formation in late capitalism from producer to consumer, entailing a concomitant increase in the aestheticization of everyday life, the transience of identity and the politics of presentation, communication achieved primarily through *perception* assumes increased importance in relation to that achieved though discursive *cognition*. In Baudrillard's words, 'art is everywhere, since artifice is at the very heart of reality...' (1983: 123).

But the inference of creativity and affectivity that adheres to the concept of aesthetics also implies, for postmodern theorists, an illusory dependence on the authorial subject. Hence while reason and thought is now detached from its conventional, more or less transparent communicative role, the multiplication and slippage of meaning that ensues is not due to subjective creative principles – emotion, the peculiarities of imagination, personality or genius – but to the formal, iterative acts of language. Where Habermas contends that the force of the better argument is what, ideally, characterizes the political process – aesthetics providing the integrative 'background' conditions of this discourse – postmodernism's critique of representation tends to privilege difference over identity, aesthetics over reason, attempting to rethink notions of representation as such in order to expose the realist assumptions in art, morality and science. Postmodernism thereby highlights the aestheticization of everyday life, mimetic symbols: images, sounds and narratives now make up 'the other side of our sign economics', signs which stand at odds with Habermas's faith in the reflexivity of the postconventional 'I', and the non-poetic, non-figurative, 'sincere' character of 'normal' speech acts (Lash 1994: 135). This turn in social theory is a direct effect of postmodernism's critique of the old distinctions between art, society and

economics as detached objects of study. The result of this critique is that politics falls under the banner of aesthetics, and tends to fragment: the question of judgment, value, sensation and motivation are all understood to be without criteriological foundation. They are instead the effect of a fundamentally agonistic and heterogeneous linguistics, destabilizing the idea of a moral community.

Postmodernism's aesthetic critique of reason is not homogeneous, however. While Derrida or Butler emphasize the formalist reproduction of meaning, here tending to totalize the effects of language and passing over the self as a source of knowledge, Lyotard looks to the limits of language, that which language cannot cover or identify, a libidinal self. This aspect of Lyotard's work – which I will later show in more detail – sits uncomfortably with its linguistic structuralism. On the one hand he insists that the subject is an effect of language. But the recognition that language is not identical to all realms of human experience opens knowledge to art and literature, at the same time evoking a more humanized aesthetics, one that acknowledges the creative, knowledge-producing role of an embodied, perceptive self. Here corporeal experience occupies a realm quite different from that of symbolic representation, a realm that may be symbolically constructed, but that is not amenable to social regulation or control. Aesthetics here, in the form of the sublime, indicates something like the felt effects of the symbolic's exclusionary practices. As a result, it is communicable and accessible only on the level of feeling. With his concomitant Kantian emphasis on reflexive judgement, however, Lyotard presents an illuminating example of the ambiguity of aesthetics in postmodernism, where, as Eagleton comments, 'it has come to occupy that ambiguous space between sense and cognition, world and body, universal and particular which threatens to undermine the harmonious philosophical and political project of the Enlightenment' (1990: 13-28).

Many theorists indeed point to the dangers of postmodernism's aestheticization of existence itself, for it seems to lead to a fragmented, subjectivist view of the social and a flattening of values, leaving no criteria of judgement (Waugh 1992:

178). Understanding discourse as grounded on an aesthetic plurality tends to undercut the intersubjective, common grounds conventionally deemed necessary for both ideology critique and ethics: notions of freedom and justice pertaining to social groups do not sit easily with postmodernism's radical critique of linguistic categories and totalities. Indeed, postmodernism's critique of commonalities of any kind, be that subjectivity, language or reason, seems to some critics to prevent the articulation of a moral position which extends beyond the aesthetic creation of the self.[23] Its dehumanized understanding of signification aestheticizes politics, but it now occupies a rather ambivalent place. In the absence of intentionality, aesthetics acts as a kind of vehicle for the creativity of language, rather than language expressing the creativity of the subject (Eagleton 1990: 2). Theory then has difficulty satisfactorily integrating the self into its social and historical context.

A quite different set of assumptions characterizes these kinds of arguments on the one hand and postmodern ones on the other. Whereas for postmodernists the recognition that knowledge is aesthetic exposes the illusory claims of universal knowledge, for critics on the left such as Terry Eagleton and Raymond Williams aesthetics is primarily associated with a sensuous form of ideology. They argue that aesthetics has been used as a strategy to *avoid* confronting the social dimensions of art and the senses: on the contrary, such critics argue, aesthetics is not independent of politics and ethics, but conceals them (Regan 1992: 12).[24] For Williams, as for Eagleton, aesthetics becomes political, even ideological, insofar as its ostensible autonomy from politics in fact conceals its political content, rendering hegemonic relations more palatable (Regan 1992: 12). Aesthetics is therefore 'if not fraudulent, deeply suspect', becoming 'positively runny', permeating 'everywhere and nowhere' (Armstrong 1993: 173, 175).

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[23] See Schusterman, 1988.
[24] Terry Eagleton sees a fatal line running from the emergence of the aesthetic to fascism: an important critique in light of the Gulf War's 'coolly technologized aesthetic' of destruction that appeared on television screens (Armstrong 1993: 175).

Its ideological function of aesthetics is based on a kind of native cunning, wherein subjects are deluded into believing they are free because self-created:

> It adopts the appearance of standing over and against power while being the very essence of the mystified power by which hegemony maintains itself. The virtuostic feats of hegemony, that look-no-hands trick by which hegemony makes people do what it wants by persuading them that they are doing it voluntarily, are performed through the aesthetic (Armstrong 1993: 175-6).

Any purely ideological reading of aesthetics, however, like a structuralist reading, tends to become reductive in its neglect of the more purely aesthetic, formal aspects of art, or the relation between feeling, response and representation (whether art, or politics, or language). That which evokes sensations of pleasure also influences value ascriptions, but cannot therefore always be reduced to an ideological function. This tendency to equate aesthetics and ideology may perhaps be an outcome of a suspicion of the essentialism associated with humanist notions of creativity and emotional response (Barrett 1992: 40).[25]

Habermas too exhibits a suspicion of aesthetics: the aestheticization of knowledge and culture in his eyes leads to irrationalisms that betray the emancipatory achievements of modernity, the reflexive, differentiated critique that makes deconstruction possible in the first place. It signifies a shift away from a rational, accountable and procedural politics to one based on feeling; not necessarily towards a free-forming, unregulated and heterogeneous community, as postmodernists might wish, but a repressive and reactionary political aesthetics. While for postmodernism the aesthetic indicates the indeterminacy and plurality at the heart of the political, then, for Habermas the aesthetic carries the central, if inadequately elaborated, role of integrating the spheres of activity and knowledge dirempted through the process of modernity. For him the aesthetic impulse must be – and just as importantly, can be – controlled, separated out from

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[25] Isobel Armstrong notes that Eagleton insists there runs a black line from the origins of the term to fascism; indeed, 'he sometimes argues as if the aesthetic *produced* fascism' (1993: 174).

normative discourse precisely so that no *one* aesthetic worldview can come to dominate the social sphere. This is an argument that warrants close consideration, despite its rationalist connotations. The ethico-political implications of these opposing views, associated with a universal justice on the one hand and a particularist ethic of care on the other, will be a central theme of my discussion.

Feminist concerns are deeply implicated in this debate. The aesthetic has indeed been central to the historical exclusion of women from political life, in particular through the Enlightenment's persistently derogatory connection of the feminine with the aesthetic as sensuous immediacy and seduction (Eagleton 1990: 179). We see too in the work of Irigaray the insistence that it is precisely the aesthetic realm of undifferentiated feeling, the mother's body, that the rationality of western philosophy has striven to deny and distance. Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of western civilization tells a similar tale: civilization constructs a primary, mimetic, aesthetic relation with the other as both odious and overpowering; the aesthetic lure of women and nature is identified as that which rational men must overcome. At the same time the Enlightenment's use of the aesthetic first made the feminine *visible*, 'albeit as a means of severely restricting the definitions of sexual difference'. Here it is precisely the seduction involved in this alliance of aesthetics with power, the incorporation of desire, beauty and pleasure into the political, that identifies it as a woman (Armstrong 1993: 175).

Despite its historically ideological role, aesthetics at the same time appears to offer a promising interpretative framework within which to conceive of a knowledge that includes the embodied self, for it is precisely women as a social group who have traditionally been unable to articulate their needs and desires through *rational* discourse. Critical focus on the aesthetic, figural and affective dimensions of discourse – the imagery language contains and the emotional response it can evoke, rather than merely its literal or referential meaning – provides an avenue by which to expose the injustices hidden in the idea of rational speech as universal and impartial. From this viewpoint, fear or

denigration of the 'other' in its many forms does not lie merely in the cognitive or rational realm, but in the often unacknowledged imagery and affective responses that accompanies symbolic representation.

Thus in Iris Marion Young's view, the bridge between politics and aesthetics is forged by the recognition and analysis of that aesthetic judgement which *oppresses*, those unconscious motivations, reactions and symbolic associations that may be constitutive of identity but which might also help sustain unwelcome forms of inequality and domination (Young 1990: 211).[26] An inquiry into these effects offers a way to thematize 'the aesthetic that oppresses', an understanding of the way in which oppression works in an ostensibly modern society (one, that is, that claims to extend equal rights, duties and privileges to all regardless of birth, sex, race, or creed). For as feminists have amply documented, carrying the knowledge that one is a member of a group which is despised or feared has a deep effect on one's subjectivity and discursive ability.[27] The challenge confronting a just society 'amounts to no less than a call to bring those phenomena of practical consciousness and unconsciousness [the 'determinants' of judgement, as it were] under discussion, that is, to politicize them': not allowing them to recede into 'a murky effect without representation' (Young 1990: 211, 209).[28]

It becomes clear then that although the aesthetic is a profoundly ambiguous category for feminism and critical theory, it is hard to overstate its importance for issues of representation. It is not only crucial for any understanding of processes of repression and exclusion, but also for the utopian moments of critique. What is promising about an inquiry into the aesthetic dimensions of representation is the possibility it opens to understanding power relations within the social imaginary. It suggests a knowledge that operates *through* the body, neither constructing that

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[26] This approach to aesthetics and its effects is analogous to Bourdieu's concept of *Habitus*, those unthought modes of being inscribed on the body: the whole range of tastes and aesthetic habits that constitute our most immediate habits and practices (Bourdieu 1990: 56-7).

[27] See Meyers, 1994.

[28] The task is to 'uncover the body aesthetic that labels some groups as ugly or fearsome and produces aversive reactions to members of those groups' (Young 1990: 208).

body nor simply emanating from it. But aesthetics also resists identification: it can be construed as either disruptive or integrative, socially manipulated or unpredictable and inadvertent. It is not least the ambiguity and suggestive nature of the term that interests me, the way in which it is able to point to a way of knowing that is both cognitive and bodily, a dialectical, material knowledge. But it also, because of that complexity, suggests a knowledge that can never be complacent. Hence a critique of aesthetics also implies a critique of its 'other', reason. By showing how these terms are interrelated, I neither want to flatten all knowledge out onto an aestheticized plane, nor hold them separate as discreet categories. Rather, I want to posit the idea of a *rational* aesthetics, that is, the need to develop a cultural ethos that reconciles ethical concern for the other with personal desire, a culture that can support the delicate balance between self and society this entails.

The next section traces the path of the argument that leads up to this conclusion.

3. Reason, Aesthetics and Emancipation: Questions of Identity and Representation in Critical Theory.

i) Chapters 1 & 2: Communicative Ethics and the Case for Universalism   p 34

In the first of the two chapters devoted to communicative ethics, I am interested in exploring how Habermas incorporates the concept of aesthetics in what is by any account a rationalist ethics. I am particularly concerned with how Habermas tries to reconcile reason with culture, the universal principles of communicative ethics with the specificity of cultural and aesthetic forms. Habermas's understanding of aesthetics as well as his relation to feminism have been the source of much critical interest. As for the first, he is undoubtedly the most Apollonian of the Frankfurt School theorists, the result, it has been argued, of his

personal aversion to the impassioned irrationalism of Nazi Germany.[29] As for the second, his reconstruction of Enlightenment categories intends to avoid the pitfalls of metaphysical thinking as much as the scepticism of anti-modernist positions without losing the normative grounds of critique; an aim which surely finds numerous feminist allies. Habermas understands the formation of identity as a discursive process in the broadest sense: wills, needs and interests are formed through communication, rather than brought to bear, pre-formed, to the discursive process. It is his aim to valorize and protect this process from domination by non-democratic systems.

This view of the self as relationally-constituted is in accord with much feminist theory in as much as it eschews individualist conceptions of the subject, unreflexive, communitarian notions as well as the poststructuralist view of subjectivity as an effect of language. With its emphasis on the conditions of open communication and its repudiation of monosubjective, unitary notions of the self, therefore, I agree with Pauline Johnson that communicative ethics offers 'a useful starting point in feminism's search for a non-discriminatory foundation' from which to build its critique of gender-relations (Johnson 1994: 100). Feminists indeed frequently support the notion of a non-dominatory discursive community: Linda Nicolson for instance calls for the development of 'reflexive criteria of validity claims' and 'decision procedures to guide choices in theory, research and politics' (Nicolson 1990: 11). But how such a community is to proceed is often left undeveloped (Love 1991: 102), and a growing number of theorists have looked towards Habermas as a guide in this endeavour.[30] Habermas's communicative ethics has much to offer critical theory: his rejection of an emancipatory project framed in terms of a 'philosophy of the subject' counteracts the essentialism of an intentionalist, authorial paradigm of consciousness with which feminism has also been troubled. Knowledge is no longer seen as the mastery of subject over object,

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[29] See Richard Bernstein's chapter on Habermas, 1991.
[30] See for instance, Meehan, 1995, Fraser, 1989, Benhabib, 1990 and Love, 1991.

but as a communicative, intersubjective process which must be continually thematized against its cultural backdrop. In short, its portrayal of a realm of non-dominatory, open and inclusive communication offers a promising foundation for a discursive democracy, eschewing the positivism of empirical theories as well as the relativism and idealism of certain discursive approaches to knowledge.

But while they may well share some political aspirations, Habermas stands in an ambivalent position in regard to feminism. For Habermas and other 'impartialists' like Seyla Benhabib or Susan Moller Okin, the principles of a universalist justice hold primacy over particularism in ethics. They account for the affectivity of human relations – its motivational elements – by conceiving justice and emotions interdependently. On this view, postmodernism's emphasis on the irreducibility of non-conceptuality – art, the imagination, feeling, the unpresentable – to cognition is a result of a monological view of knowledge and subjectivity that cannot construe subject-subject and subject-object relations in other than instrumental terms, in terms of concepts appropriating their objects (Prado 1992: 359).

Ambivalence is indeed endemic in Habermas's critical reception. On the one hand his thesis of rational communication provides the critical tools with which to attack dominatory social relations and the normative grounds for a critical subject without recourse to metaphysics, while on the other hand it is questionable whether he is able to combine the universal ideals of modernity with the multiplicity of identities characteristic of contemporary society. Many feminists, among others, suspect that his transcendental presuppositions orientating communication towards understanding and consensus work in practice to perpetuate a dominant paradigm of rationality which continues to uphold its normativity against a background of unexamined ideological assumptions (Young 1991). The target of this objection is an imputed rationalism that fails to account for the embodied self; the aesthetic as opposed to cognitive-universal modes of knowledge.

Habermas does not convince the sceptic that his developmental model of rationality is not simply an illicit generalization of the structuring principles of contemporary Western society (Ferrara 1990: 18). I concur that he cannot wholly satisfy those critics who object that the so-called universal norms of communication can only be binding in those societies where they have *already* been incorporated as cultural values, and that, therefore, the universality of those norms is in fact historically situated – generalizable only for that particular community. But at the same time his complex and multi-layered theory cannot be easily dismissed by simple analogy to discredited Enlightenment notions of reason, autonomy and universality. I argue that his work merits careful scrutiny, particularly in terms of the way he strives to reconcile the aesthetics of culture – broadly associated with substantive ethics – with a universal rationality; a procedural justice. But his ahistorical, quasi-transcendental claims, even though they are mediated by empirically-based principles of communication, are ultimately unsustainable. The ideal of an open, self-reflexive discursive community may be a worthy one, but it must be struggled for as an explicitly cultural, ethical and aesthetic achievement, rather than assumed as universal.

Chapter two pursues the explicitly ethical implications of the reason-culture relation in Habermas's work. It does this firstly by examining the justice versus care controversy in feminist ethics, and secondly by analyzing the role of aesthetics in communicative ethics. The justice-care debate is characterized by the competing claims of reasoning and feeling for the moral high-ground, with advocates of an ethic of care placing far greater emphasis on the non-rational elements of human relations, the 'habits of the heart', than proponents of discourse ethics. I argue that there are strengths on either side: in the absence of any overarching substantive criteria of justice, the abstract, universalist appeal to rights and duties alone is unable to settle a disputed claims' (Udovicki 1993: 52). An ethics of care is problematic in so far as it tends to presume a naturalist, unified view of subjectivity more embedded in the lifeworld than Habermas's

reflexive self. But there nonetheless remains advantages to the idea of a codifiable, universal justice as a formal insurance against inequality and the vagaries of convention.

This leads into the next section's inquiry into the relation between reason and aesthetics in communicative ethics. The position of aesthetics here is revealed to be far less stable than it first appears: it is simultaneously the affective cement that integrates the self into the lifeworld, and that which must be controlled and ultimately overridden in the interests of the rational political community. Despite his insistence that rational discourse can take into account, indeed, presupposes, the aesthetic plurality of contemporary life, Habermas fails to offer a truly multi-dimensional account of discourse, continuing to privilege identity over difference. Recognizing communicative ethics as historical rather than transcendental is the first step in incorporating the body in ethical motivations and granting greater respect to the heterogeneous, non-identical dimensions of knowledge. But a more radical integration of the aesthetic-affective into reason is required, without which I argue Habermas remains trapped within his own categorical distinctions, unable to satisfactorily integrate the universality of reason with the specificity of cultural, aesthetic-affective spheres.

ii) Chapters 3 & 4: Postmodernism's Aesthetic Challenge

The preceding chapters aimed to establish the need for critical theory to develop a more synthetic, dialectical notion of rationality, one that accounts for specific, affective ways of forging ethical relations rather than one that depends on abstract reasoning alone. The idea that postmodernism helps to uncover the 'figurative nature of all ideology' (Canning 1994: 371), that is, its non-rationalist, aesthetic-affective dimensions, indicates precisely those areas in which Habermas's communicative ethics is particularly vulnerable to critique, areas of real affinity between feminism and postmodernism. In chapters three and four I turn to Lyotard's postmodernism as a response to Habermas.

Chapter three looks at the manner in which Lyotard uses aesthetics to ground his notion of the heterogeneity of the social. This project results in an aesthetics of multiplicity and difference as the 'foundation' of political beliefs, subjectivity, experience and knowledge, a 'politics of the sublime'. His aestheticized politics in many ways takes an ethics of feeling to its limits, and for my purposes provides a provocative challenge to critical theory. And after Habermas, it offers a refreshingly idiosyncratic one. Lyotard's sense of politics as an endless task of judging in the absence of a priori criteria confronts Habermas's communicative ethics precisely with its privileging of the cognitive elements of language, as if they could be so easily be taken for granted (Bennington 1994: 108-109). and thereby connects with the concerns of feminism in a diametrically opposed manner to Habermas, through the sensuous body.

It is unsurprising that Lyotard's concern with the differend in communication leads directly to aesthetics, for we see in his work an overriding concern with the violence of the concept and its burying of the non-conceptuality of aesthetics (Prado 1992: 363). Lyotard's project, which starts from his earliest work, is indeed to protect that which falls outside the represented, the surplus of meaning, gestures and intensities that are not covered by representational communication. Thus, culture, knowledge and the social will not be contained by any one narrative, local, individual or collective. Lyotard insists on the unknowability and fundamentally anarchic, non-cognitive structure of our ethical orientation. The structures we impose in the world through reason are simply stories we have created to help us live in that world, one of which should not be accorded automatic priority over any other form of knowledge. Here is a diversity that underlies language or text completely at odds with Habermas's understanding of language and meaning as communicative: a diversity that stems from the singular character of our sensible interaction with the world, and in relation to which language and reason are secondary, or better, occupy an utterly different time-space.

Where Habermas saw the role of the lifeworld to *reintegrate* the dirempted spheres of modernity, Lyotard wants to maintain sharply defined boundaries around politics, science and legality. Lyotard's is indeed a paradoxical mix of libidinal, psychoanalytic and formalist approaches, an attempt to express the primacy of the aesthetic through non-aesthetic means. Here, language is underpinned by a radical heterogeneity of affect, function and signification which renders any generality, transparency or consensus illusory. Ethics, including Lyotard's own notions of justice, cannot be coherently argued for in conceptual terms: it is instead based on feeling, which precedes cognitive argument. Politics is an agonistic field: to deny this is to impose a false unity. Justice then becomes a matter of tolerating and respecting the inevitable heterogeneity of human existence.

Although his thought provides a valuable corrective in many ways to communicative ethics, it is also deeply problematic in its separation of the symbolic from the affective realm, reason from aesthetics. By granting autonomy to the aesthetic realm, Lyotard cannot satisfactorily understand the nexus between feeling, experience and the social; community is reduced to ineffable moods and enthusiasms, and knowledge to isolated, localized narratives, unable to theorize any general dimension of social being. I argue that his failure to articulate a more dialectical understanding of identity, that language, feeling and the world are interdependent and at times coextensive results at best in a limited view of the social.

Chapter five examines postmodernism's ethical self. Using the work of Zygmunt Bauman as well as Lyotard, I revisit the universalism versus particularism question in ethics, the central concern here being whether the universal, rational, Kantian moment can be eliminated from ethics, to be replaced by postmodernism's local, face-to-face, Levinas-inspired model. Although its thematization of the specificity of the embodied self is valuable, I argue that postmodernism effectively results in an overly-individualist understanding of the

political that renounces discursive normative action on the grounds of its prescriptive, universal nature. On this view it runs the risk of disenfranchising the subject, implicitly depending on a naturalist 'feeling' that resists discursive evaluation.

Again, I locate the problem in an insufficiently dialectical understanding of knowledge as containing both rational and aesthetic-affective aspects. With its emphasis on heterogeneity, and its reluctance to confront the relation between identity and meaning except on the level of domination or as a critique of totality, postmodernism threatens to flatten the political claims of the economically and socially oppressed *qua* social collectivities, ignoring the effects of social and structural difference.

iii) Chapter 5: Adorno's Negative Dialectics

Chapter five returns to the thought of a key figure in critical theory, Theodor Adorno. Adorno attempts to combine a critique of identity with a 'realist' social critique, supplementing the formalism of poststructuralism's elaboration of difference with a Marxian humanism. His project is characterized by tensions between rationalism and aesthetics, existentialism and historical determinism, philosophy and history, but these tensions are recognized and accepted. Adorno's uncompromising strand of modernism is indeed marked by paradox: on the one hand he develops a radical critique of identity which eschews affirmative models of social analysis and which holds that social control produces not equilibrium but crisis. On the other he holds out a faith in the subject and its possibility to engage in rational identity-thinking. Underpinned by an unrelenting aversion to the violence of conceptual thought, his parallel quest for freedom and a harmonious, aesthetic experience of communal life is tenuously poised between utopia and despair.

I am most interested in gleaning two methodological points from Adorno's writing: his dialectics and his mimetic basis of knowledge. His dialectics

understands knowledge to be constituted both with cognition *and* the material body, representing a compelling challenge to both Habermas and Lyotard in as much as it reinvigorates the suppressed aesthetic-expressive realm in discourse *without* isolating that realm from the cognitive subject. Unlike Hegel this is a *negative* dialectics that does not reconcile itself into a larger whole, but cancels out its affirmative knowledge by the simultaneous recognition of the gap between thought and its object. What saves thought from pointless despair however is the notion of mimesis, an ethical, sensuous relation between self and other that combines both rational and aesthetic, identical and non-identical moments. Adorno's work is indeed paradigmatic of critical theory's reliance on mimesis to forge an aestheticized reason, a non-instrumental mode of thinking as an emancipatory vehicle. It is no accident that mimesis represents a principal component of such utopian critique, for it provides a point of contact with the other that is – if only in its promise – congruous with a radical critique of reason. Because it is inclusive of the physical, subjective and the symbolic, mimesis permits us to understand the gap between the body and the symbolic as irreconcilable at the same time as they are mutually constitutive. Adorno thereby suggests a way to challenge the unifying modernist outlook by admitting that the world cannot necessarily be contained in symbolic or cognitive form without recourse to poststructuralism's often undiscriminating celebration of heterogeneity, or anonymous self-referential linguistic structures.

Adorno's endeavour to reconcile a modernist realist approach with a radical critique of identity led him therefore towards a kind of corporeal poetics, wedding a mimetic knowledge with an objective, structural critique in a way which I argue resonates strongly with many feminist concerns. Recognition of the commonality and objectivity of aesthetics, that it involves not only a subliminal sensuosity but cognitive and symbolic dimension, situates the particularity of the (gendered) self within a larger social framework, rescuing critique from disintegration under a view of knowledge as local, fragmented and unstable. If only strategically, this is

important for feminism: how can discourse be seen to dominate or oppress if its effects are multiple and unpredictable, rather than (at least partially) systemic and knowable? At the same time Adorno is scathing of any faith in the redemptive powers of present discourse, postponing the moment of reconciliation until the actualization of social transformation. Adorno's thought offers a realism and a materialism, that, if heavily mediated, constitutes a fruitful epistemological and normative basis for critical theory.

iv) Chapter 6: Feminism, Discourse and the Body

Chapter six asks how a dialectical-mimetic approach might impact on contemporary feminist concerns. To this end I look at Seyla Benhabib's revision of Habermas as well as Judith Butler's postmodern feminism. Benhabib provides an opportunity to reconsider both the strengths and limitations of communicative ethics discussed in chapters two and three. Hers is, I argue, a suggestive attempt to an amalgamate an ethics of care with a procedural justice. But in so far as she tends to presuppose unproblematic self-other relations, Benhabib betrays a rationalist orientation that fails to convince that her quest for impartiality in ethics is compatible with the singularity of aesthetic-affective difference that she also strives to accommodate.

Butler's Foucauldian critique of identity and subjectivity is radically opposed to Benhabib's project. It also differs in subtle but crucial ways to Lyotard's more Nietzschean model. Where both Lyotard and Butler reject the intentional subject, seeing it as an effect of language, Lyotard's theory of postmodern justice calls for a politics of feeling, of the sublime. The realm of heterogeneity that belies the unifying impulse of hegemonic, rationalist modes of thought is constituted by a multiplicity of bodies, whose sensuous experience, albeit discursively constructed, both underpins and subverts knowledge. For Butler, on the other hand, this realm of difference is the effect of the repetition of linguistic structures: there is no libidinal, pre-discursive self that can be summoned up against the symbolic.

On this basis Butler presents a radical critique of the categories of sex and gender: they are not related as nature is to discourse, but constructed through discursive practices and performances. The social in other words constructs the category of gender from which it retrospectively constructs an originary, but also mythical, sex. This is a kind of 'mimesis of mimesis', the socially regulated, ideological imitation of a pre-constructed nature. But Butler's work provides a clear example of the postmodern tendency to equate the symbolic realm of representation with domination, and to subvert this realm not by normative, collective means but by an anarchic, ineffable, dehumanized heterogeneity. Despite her insistence that discursive construction is also a process of materialization, and that she does not negate the critical subject, Butler does not allow any space wherein that subject can articulate a non-ideological experience, and no room for a non-dominatory, mimetic relation with the other.[31]

I argue that a more synthetic understanding of the rational as well as aesthetic dimensions of discourse – including a more dialectical understanding of the notions of reason and aesthetics themselves, as not simply reducible to ideological symbolic forms – would help resolve the referential dilemmas and ethical absences in Butler's theory. Mediated through the category of mimesis, this would permit a non-dominatory, non-universalist relation between self and other that her constructivist formulation implies but cannot develop. If knowledge is dialectical and mimetic, it contains both dominatory *and* emancipatory potential. The referential activity of language is recast in mimesis as an *ethical* and not only an epistemological relation with the other, evoking an affinity with the specificity of the other. The category 'woman' therefore also contains moments of truth, despite its ideological resonances.

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[31] See also Nancy Fraser's (1991) critique of Butler's position in regard to Benhabib.

v) Chapter 7: Conclusion

In the concluding seventh chapter I summarize my argument for a dialectical relation between reason and aesthetics. Underpinned by a mimetically-understood affinity with the other, it aims to provide an ethical and epistemological starting point – for 'ground' is inappropriate – for feminist critical theory. This is a mode of knowledge that incorporates a critical reflexivity with a concern for the specificity of the other, a recognition of the socially constructed, aesthetic basis of meaning as well as the reality of embodied experience: a kind of *rational* aesthetics. It is a dialectics that does not follow a Hegelian telos, pre-determining knowledge in advance, but works negatively, to destabilize identity, freeing knowledge to recognize the specificity of being as well as its commonalities.

My understanding of the self is not strictly a Foucauldian one, where anonymous bodies are subjected to equally anonymous discourses, nor a Nietzschean one, driven by libidinal, pre-discursive forces. Rather it is one that attempts to bring the principals of subjective agency and discursive construction together through the mimetic self. As part of a social whole, the subjective is also objective, even its moments of illusion, distortion or fantasy reveal instances of truth about its social condition. The self in other words is not simply an effect of language, but participates in discourse as an intersubjective and embodied being. It is this dialectical understanding of the self, its identity and the world that presents a promising – if schematic – feminist epistemology, one that is able to understand discourse as both a physical and an ideational process.

What I find promising in the concept of mimesis is its ability to express the dialectics between the aesthetic and rational dimensions of knowledge without dissolving the distinctions between them. It incorporates, that is, the physical relation between self and other and the subjective process of representation, informed by social structures of meaning. The material and the ideational, symbolic and figural, universal and particular are held together without

necessarily privileging any one moment, or losing the tensions between them. Mimesis also furnishes a momentary and mediated access to the real which satisfies feminism's obligation to represent women's experiences without falling prey to ideological modes of understanding. In ethics, the fact that we are all experiential, suffering phenomenological beings *matters*, and it is therefore on a realist ground that transformative action depends.[32] It thus suggests a means to momentarily break the hermeneutic circle, the entrapment within an always-already interpreted world: it does not pretend to escape that circle, but allows thought to start again, an immanent point of renewal and critical intervention.

This is not to abandon reflexive, critical thought or abstraction in some naive trust of immediate subjective experience, but to insist that an emancipatory theory also requires access to the empirical, to actually lived lives and feelings. Starting from the body brings the experiencing self into the centre of politics; it is that which lends the normative coherence to any critique of economic conditions, welfare and domestic policy, industrial relations, questions of gender or childcare. The focus on a *bodily* materiality should not then be made at the expense of other realms of the social, but a question of providing a framework within which the social can be understood.

Such mimetic-aesthetic knowledge demands a moment of faith in the subjective representation. But this is accompanied by a demand to expand the terms of rational thought, to resist foreclosure, to deny the stability of identity by virtue of the dialectics of knowledge. The importance of the *reflexive* self becomes clear, recasting the notion of 'rationality' beyond cognitive, instrumental or pre-determined paradigms to incorporate the imaginative, conceptual task of re-presenting difference. Knowledge is then both a corporeal relation and cognitive process, encompassing this movement from the 'real' – physical experience – to its socially mediated, symbolic representation.

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[32] Giving rise to a 'critical function of the flesh' (Levin 1991: 121-125).

1. The Rational Culture: Habermas's Discourse Ethics

In light of his rejection of metaphysics, much of Habermas's work is dedicated, directly or indirectly, to the difficult task of embedding the universal principles of communication in specific aesthetic and cultural forms. The universalism of his ethics is indeed intended precisely to accommodate the particularity of aesthetic and ethical worldviews. My aim here is to show both the strengths of this project as a political ethics and its limitations, which I locate in the failure to satisfactorily integrate the category of aesthetics into rational discourse. For Habermas, the universality of communication is grounded in the assumptions that accompany everyday discourse: rationality is abstracted out of these everyday practices, and depends on progressive stages of societal development. Communicative ethics has nothing to say about the merits of a particular worldview, cultural ethos or personal ethic, in other words, only about what is generalizable within those outlooks (Habermas 1993: 163-4). Diversity within and between cultural spheres is in fact a pre-condition of procedural justice. But in order to separate reason and aesthetics in this way, Habermas is obliged to *rationalize* aesthetics, as it were; render the aesthetic cognitively transparent and subordinated to generalized concerns. Habermas thereby privileges the unity and identity of knowledge, neglecting the non-literal, figural, affective elements that threaten to disrupt it and eliding some fundamental tensions in the relation between reason and aesthetics. While his work has much to offer in terms of its elaboration of a communicative and not simply an instrumental rationality, I argue that it fails to develop the full implications of its dialectical understanding of modernity.

My discussion of Habermas extends over two chapters. The first section of this chapter is devoted to an exposition of the normative and philosophical foundations of communicative action. It aims to act as a point of reference for the critical discussions to follow by establishing the depth and complexity of discourse ethics. The second section looks at a number of critical responses, particularly the problematic conjunction between reason – the universal and unavoidable presuppositions of communication – and culture, the contingent and particular substance of communication. This section raises a number of key areas that will be dealt with at greater length in chapter two. There I develop some defences to these criticisms, as well as delineate some areas of weakness.

My critique of Habermas remains largely within the realms of a qualified defence of his overall project. I argue that his theory can persuasively counter many of its critical objections, and can provide a useful framework for developing an inclusive yet self-reflexive democratic community. Moreover, its universalism holds certain advantages over aestheticized, anti-juridical accounts of the social in as much as it defends the possibility of a rational social order over the vagaries of either systemic imperatives or irrational cultural prejudices. But there exists a persistent undertheorization of the role of the extra-linguistic, particular, affective, motivational realm of aesthetic experience that vitiates many of its claims. I conclude that communicative ethics need be of no less value if conceived as a cultural and aesthetic achievement. It requires, however, supplementation by an interpretative approach that is far more sensitive to the specificity of the aesthetic-affective, and which does not unproblematically separate that realm from the rational.

In the context of the thesis argument, Habermas's discourse ethics will be used as a basis against which alternative, anti-cognitive approaches to ethics can be contrasted. Far from representing an anachronistically rationalist theory,

Habermas provides, in the face of significant contemporary scepticism, an important counterweight to the deconstructive emphases of postmodern thought.[1]

1. Communicative Ethics and Contemporary Theory

i) A Critical Overview

No contemporary analysis of discourse can ignore Habermas's powerful and influential theory of communicative action. His original reworking of the modernist project in social theory provides a bulwark against the postmodern aestheticization of politics, liberalism's subject-centred, ahistorical accounts, and communitarianism's often uncritical reliance on cultural values. Habermas's project expands critical theory's focus on reason as domination by insisting on its linguistic, and not only instrumental, nature, and offers a useful system-lifeworld model for analysing contemporary social structures. His theory of intersubjective identity formation challenges conventional accounts of reason and subjectivity and provides a critical standard by which normative discourses can be measured (Meehan 1995: 1-2).

The 'linguistic turn' in philosophy of which he is a part is indeed one of the most important philosophical developments in the twentieth century. Broadly, this turn shifts the critical focus away from what *is* to what *might* or *could be* – away from ontology and epistemology to how meaning is constructed, and hence to the normativity of social interpretations. Language is no longer thought of as simply 'marking' pre-existing identities, a universal, impartial rationality or ideology-free truth, but constituting them structurally and intersubjectively from situated positions (Cameron 1995: 15). Language is not therefore simply a reflection of society, but actively forms it. The assumption that meanings are

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[1] As there are a number of detailed full-length studies of Habermas's theory now available, I will not provide a detailed exposition but confine my exposition to the broad tenets of his thought, presupposing some acquaintance with its arguments. See for instance McCarthy, 1978; Rasmussen, 1990; White, 1988; Outhwaite, 1994; Brand, 1989; Ingram, 1987.

always socially designated represents one of feminism's principal critical methods: it transforms our relationship with language from one between intentional speaker and tool of representation, to a political struggle over meaning between people. This is a struggle whose first task is to break the nexus between existing meanings and nature or truth to reveal that 'facts' about women are often historically sedimented '*arte*facts' of men's traditional power to delimit meaning (Cameron 1995: 163).[2]

In contrast to postmodern views of language, however, Habermas does not want to leave critique suspended in strategic battles without foundations, but attempts to establish normative and rational principles of action in the deeper structures of communication itself, grafting the linguistic turn onto a revised Kantian moral theory. His theory of communicative action is Kantian in the sense that universal processes of cognitive reflection are required to fulfill our moral duty, but it moves beyond Kant in that this reflective process is no longer monological, or pertaining to the singular subject, but dialogical and intersubjective, and hence far less abstract. Kant's pure moral will depended on the ability to separate out the sensual, 'noumenal', empirical self, and act on duty alone, without the encumbrances and distortions of pleasure, desire or self-interest (Cronin 1993: xii). Habermas does not attempt to uphold this imperative for pure reason, insisting that participants cannot assume any completely non-interested or non-historical position on a moral issue.[3] There nevertheless exists a universal process where, by suspending our own particular interests and imaginatively moving between different subject positions on the evidence of other's arguments, we are able to establish rational resolutions to conflict which go beyond actual contexts to claim universal validity (Habermas 1984: 18). In sharp distinction to

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2 Cameron cites a cross-cultural study which shows that 'prescriptions for women's and men's speech are taken by society as symbolic expressions of what women and men are like': where, e.g., rules 'specifying deferential or modest speech for women is taken to reflect the 'fact' that women are by nature deferential or modest' (1995: 245ff).

3 Habermas has in fact recently rejected the infamous idea of an 'ideal speech situation' precisely because it suggests an ahistorical, abstracted impartiality in discourse (1993: 163-164). His critique of Rousseau's General Will expands on this point (1993: 181).

the fluidity, heterogeneity and poetics of poststructuralist and postmodern worldviews Habermas supports this position by assuming a degree of stability, transparency and univocity in language, identity and our experience of the objective world which gives sense to the notion of universality in moral and truth claims (1984: 10). His postmetaphysical modernism is both ontological and normative in the sense that it describes a hypothetical *is* – what always and necessarily occurs in communication and interpretation – as well as what *should* be, acting, in other words, as a political intervention, a reconstruction of possible reality. It thus goes beyond mere philosophy understood as a politically neutral pursuit and aims to uncover the necessary conditions of knowledge distinct from subjective interests and historical contingency (Soffer 1992: 233).

Habermas thereby hopes to retain the strengths of a Kantian ethics without its metaphysical baggage, and in so doing provides a powerful critical theory of particular importance to contemporary emancipatory politics, eschewing the naturalistic (and implicitly androcentric) illusions of conventional liberal moral theory, the danger of particularism in communitarian ethics, as well as the apolitical, aestheticized stance of some postmodern positions. It can indeed be argued that his discourse ethics is both based on a Kantian cognitivism, and represents a critique of Kant's monological and ahistorical assumptions (Cronin 1993: xi-xii).

The critical reception of Habermas's work has frequently been far from appreciative of these aims, however. In a contemporary *Zeitgeist* often more closely aligned to postmodern rather than modernist worldviews, Habermas's confident assureties of the intrinsic rationality of modernity appear to many to repeat the hegemonic, exclusive strategies of so much Western thought, destroying, through its juridical formulas, any attempt to rebuild a more thoroughly ethical basis of social life. From this perspective any move to recapture the lost utopian ideals of the radical enlightenment tradition and its unacknowledged subsumption of concrete particulars under idealized universals

can hardly be approached with too much caution. More sympathetic critics query whether the morality founded on the universal pragmatics of speech is sufficiently context-sensitive to the particularity of cultures and aesthetic-affective experience, whether the right and the good, like public and private, are as easily separable as Habermas contends.[4] Feminist critics point to the gender blindness and androcentric assumptions of his analysis;[5] while others reject the whole project of attempting to find universal principles of moral action and social organization.[6] Postmodern critics in particular contend that his revision of the aporias of Western philosophy – an illegitimate faith in 'Truth' and 'Reason' – cannot be resolved within the context of modern philosophy, and that the questions which are central to this tradition must be abandoned, not transcended (Lyotard 1985). Critics in general object that Habermas fails to adequately account for the motivational bases of rational action, which procedural rules alone are unable to generate.

There is without doubt some basis for these critiques. Communicative action is made possible through the separation of cognitive, moral-practical and aesthetic-affective spheres of knowledge, distinct spheres which must then be reintegrated through rational action. For this to occur Habermas needs to hold reason apart from the potentially subversive and disruptive effects of aesthetics, a step with many see as untenable. In contrast to the Habermasian reading of language and text as the dominant forms of representation in the 19th century liberal life, for instance, Joan Landes has recently argued for the centrality of the physical body, alienation, mutilation, and spectacle in the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere (Landes 1995: 102, 107). Although Landes admits that a shift towards textuality characterized the transition to modern systems of representation, she insists that it is misleading to prioritize language over the iconographic, performative dimensions of public life, a sphere marked by exclusion and violence as much as open discourse. Following Hannah Arendt, this is an approach which

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4 See for instance, Benhabib, 1992; Wellmer, 1991 and McCarthy, 1991a.
5 See Fraser, 1989 & Young, 1991.
6 See for instance Bauman, 1993a; Rorty, 1985 & Taylor, 1991.

focuses on the theatricality of public identities performed through story-telling, acting in and through the body, an understanding which incorporates the non-identical dimensions of politics, and emphasizes the multiplicity of representation in human communication over Habermas's language-centred model (Landes 1995: 102, 92).

On this account, Habermas's cognitive ethics cannot account for the multiplicity and interconnectedness of human communication and knowledge. The realm of motivation, affectivity and aesthetics is subordinated to the procedural requirements of a universalist ethics, pushing communication into an overly narrow discursive mould. Habermas's critical aim to expose the one-sidedness of Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the Enlightenment and their ensuing theoretical 'enthronement of taste' – their view of the repression inherent in the incroachment of juridification into non-juridical areas of life (Habermas 1990a: 123) – backfires on his own failure to consider the non-juridical forms of oppression that reside there, in the figural, unconscious and aesthetic-affective motivations underlying discourse.

Habermas however points out that the respect for difference that animates these anti-universalist positions is in danger of repeating yet another totalizing gesture: prioritizing the nonidentical tends to reduce the ethico-political to an irredeemable agonistics or leaves it defenceless against irrational expressions of particular cultures (1990). The dangers of a non-juridical ethics, of allowing discourse to be guided or motivated by aesthetics and its potentially socially destructive force indeed impels Habermas's project to reinstall rationality at the heart of the social. His aversion to the dangers of an aestheticized politics is based in a perceived moral ambiguity of Adorno's, Heidegger's and more recently Zygmunt Bauman's reading of the Third Reich as principally *technologically* driven, rather than motivated by *aesthetic* reactions to modernity.[7] Their faith in

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7 See Habermas 1993: 338. Scott Lash also asks why both Adorno and Bauman construe the Third Reich as pure technology, reason pushed to its limits, ignoring the ethical-aesthetic community it represented (1994: 143-4). I would argue however that Adorno does not so much ignore the

the emancipatory potential of aesthetics in this case is premised on an overly reductive notion of reason as domination, ironically, in light of their insistence on the 'other' of reason, ignoring the imaginary, figurative and affective bases of political action.

While not denying that many critics do point to valid areas of concern, then, it is too hasty to take leave of Habermas on the grounds of his purported rationalism without considering the terms of his subordination of aesthetics under a communicative framework. Despite the fact that Habermas tends to reduce expressive-aesthetic experience to linguistic form, eliding embodied, non-linguistic, experiential modes of knowing, I argue that Habermas's model is preferable to one which collapses knowledge into aesthetics – understood as some kind of ineffable and singular experience – denying the possibility of any distinction between them. Instead his discourse ethics permits an articulation of aesthetics not simply as some unknowable or purely intuitive experience but *also* as an objective, intersubjective realm constituted through the social. Even the tensions here can be viewed as instructive, not invalidating the premises on which discourse ethics is built but instead suggesting a distinctive space for aesthetic experience neither subsumed by the reflexive and the discursive nor as ineffable difference. Aesthetics, that is, can neither be reduced to the non-universalizable 'other' of reason, nor wholly concomitant with it.

The following sections provide summary overviews of Habermas's theory of communicative action, which then lead into a more critical discussion.

ii) An Outline of the Theory of Communicative Action

Habermas applies a singular version of the philosophy of language to the contemporary problem of modernity, drawing on counterfactual principles of

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aesthetic community but sees it as subordinated to the imperatives of a technologized system. As we will see, fascism co-opts aesthetics for itself, in a 'mimesis of mimesis' (chapter 6: 252). See also Richard J. Bernstein, 1991, on the inadmissable silence of Heidegger's thinking in regard to the Holocaust.

communication in the tradition of Marx's 'real abstractions'. In his *Theory of Communicative Action* Habermas argues that communication primarily concerns the coordination of social action, and is therefore in a structural sense oriented towards understanding, agreement and reciprocity (1984: 397). From these unavoidable assumptions, a rationality can be gleaned from communication that distinguishes itself from other – instrumental – modes of action. Societies, he believes, can learn to abstract these orientations in order to better resolve problems through processes of argumentation, but only under certain historical conditions. The process of rationalization that has occurred in western industrial societies, conventionally been seen by postmodern and critical theorists as an irredeemably negative one, is now reconceptualized as far more constructive. Contra Weber and the early Frankfurt School, modernity has not simply lead unremittingly towards the domination of instrumental rationality via system imperatives but has been accompanied by the development of an independent, normative, communicative form of rationalization in the lifeworld, which carries with it the possibility of overcoming modernity's repressive effects. This parallel process of rationalization has seen the separation of knowledge into distinct spheres according to function, or what kind of world is disclosed – scientific, aesthetic, legal, and normative – all increasingly subject to critical evaluation and elaboration.[8] Knowledge is then able to be evaluated according to its appropriate, distinctive logics or criteria, unleashing its rational and emancipatory potential. The world-disclosive and problem-solving force of language must 'prove its worth' for participants engaged in communication about their objective, subjective or their common social worlds; in these independent spheres of knowledge and experience reason can thus expand, increasingly able to clarify the specificity of different validity claims (1990: 313).

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[8] Habermas divides knowledge into three main spheres: cognitive, normative and expressive, analogous to the objective/scientific realm, the social, and the subjective worlds, where validity is respectively decided in terms of truth, rightness and sincerity/authenticity (1984: 175ff & 205ff).

Within this historical framework the primary communicative role of language contains certain universal principles which structure action and by which social analysis can proceed: since participants in communicative acts *necessarily* strive for agreement about something in the world, communication can be formally depicted in terms of its orientation towards understanding and agreement, separating out the contingency of strategic or instrumental action or mythic, poetic modes. Broadly, these qualities of communication – quasi-transcendental principles, or 'universal pragmatics' – are the prerequisites of any illocutionary act, invoking the ideals of reciprocity, equality and mutual respect between discursive participants, and permitting their extension to a possible universal community of participants. Understanding, deliberation and argumentation constitute the key elements of rational decision-making, and are normative in the sense that they imply a universal morality: if communication is to proceed discursive participants are *obliged* to assume a moral stance oriented towards the ideals of equality, mutual responsibility and solidarity.[9] Universality and the norms of reciprocity and solidarity which come under its umbrella are not therefore norms we chose, or arrive at rationally, but are pragmatic preconditions of speech (Benhabib 1986: 304).

Part of the unavoidable presuppositions of communicative action is that we understand speech acts as universal claims to validity; claims which are never closed off, but permanently open to criticism. Speech acts make claims to validity in three general ways: empirical truth, normative rightness and aesthetic adequacy, depending on their context, and, to gain legitimacy, must be able to achieve the unforced consensus of all those involved through appeal to 'good' reasons, that is, reasons that are convincing to all those involved (Habermas 1984: 18, 25). The legitimacy of these claims therefore rests on a principle of *universalization*: those claims which serve interests or needs that are not

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9 The normative universal presuppositions of everyday communication are non-circumventable, that is they are not a matter of disposition, but neither are they empirically verifiable: they are not inevitable structures but *possible* ones (Habermas 1991: 228–9).

generalizable, or that unfairly privilege particular or partial interests, will not achieve the unforced consensus of all under conditions of free and open dialogue and thus will not be legitimate. The principle of universalization, or generalization, links *universal* justice and *empirical* evaluative questions by ensuring that norms are only justified when they express an interest common to all those affected (1984: 19): any claim to validity appeals to a hypothetical, projected universal community of discursive participants, and aims to reach not an *actual* universal agreement but an agreement which, by being reached through rational consensus, and thus remaining open to challenge, addresses itself not *only* to those immediately affected but future participants as well. The pragmatic principles of understanding and evaluation according to rational criteria therefore presuppose that differences in material constraints, circumstances and lifeworlds can be extracted from particular claims to arrive at a kind of universal core of intersubjective validity. The requirement of the generalizability of interests compels this abstraction, since validity depends not on adherence to any substantive good but on the consent of all involved from the viewpoint of their respective interests (Günther 1990: 200). The legitimacy of a communicatively-achieved norm is measured by its adherence to these procedures of open, free and equal argumentation, a legitimacy which carries universal validity not only because of the unavoidable pragmatic assumptions of speech acts (which, if denied, involve us in a 'performative contradiction'),[10] but because of the fallibility and open-ended criticizability of claims and the reflexivity of post-conventional thought.

Rational discourse, removed from the immediate context of action, adopts a hypothetical stance to practical issues. Claims to truth, moral rightness or aesthetic validity are tested through the cognitive medium of reasons alone, offered in open discourse, rather than mediated through force, deception or particular material interests. On these conditions, claims that gain the assent of all discursive

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10 For a discussion of this concept, which occurs throughout Habermas's work, see M. Jay, 1992.

participants can be deemed universally warranted (Habermas 1982: 273ff). While the contingencies which might inhibit communicative action requires distancing oneself from one's everyday context and attitude, the interpreter cannot detach herself from evaluation, however, since she is – again necessarily – drawn into a performative attitude: we are obliged to critically assess reasons for and against validity claims or speech acts, and assume a 'yes' or 'no' position on them. The evaluative function of understanding assumes the recognition of those conditions which would make a claim acceptable, that is, whether a claim is right, true or authentic (1984: 282ff); understanding, in other words, the reasons that would motivate someone to defend, accept or reject a claim to validity, reasons which would be understandable to anyone under similar experiential circumstances. This interpretative function, whether mediated through time or space or with an immediate dialogical partner, requires an imaginative as well as rational understanding (in the sense of sound judgement as to a claim's consistency, coherence, and so forth) of the broad conditions of its possibility; the author's intended meaning and her lifeworld and possible range of particular experience all acting as 'evidence' with which a claim is both understood and evaluated (1984: 115-6). We can say then that procedures of argumentation and deliberation are only rational when they are susceptible to independent evaluation and testing, that is, when they are not simply legitimized by their adherence to formal laws or rules but remain open to critical judgement, to the actual needs of those concerned, and where participants are willing to suspend the motivating force of particular interests and assume a more flexible, reflective stance on ethical issues than their everyday attitude.

Such conceptual distinctions constitute the framework of common background assumptions without which public discourse could not proceed. They also mark the rationality inherent in communicative practice, seen in the fact 'that a communicatively achieved agreement must be based *in the end* on reasons' (1984: 17), reasons whose validity are judged according to their proximity to the

universal, idealizing presuppositions of speech, conditions marked by symmetrical and reciprocal opportunities for participation.

iii) Justification and Application

The distinctions between justice and ethics, the right and the good, are central to Habermas's attempt to ground reason in historical and cultural forms. According to Habermas, the contingencies and diverse ethical and aesthetic historical positions within a lifeworld can be subordinated to the minimal but overriding principles of a procedural morality: the *right* in other words, generalizable and impartial, can be distinguished from the substantive *good* of a community, worldview or individual's particular system of values. Habermas here draws a careful distinction between the ethical-aesthetic particularity of everyday life and normative discourse: discussion about norms requires a break from everyday contexts of action, away from the 'unquestioned truths of an established way of life with which one's identity is inextricably interwoven' (Moon 1995: 150). The particularity of aesthetics, coextensive with a community's, group's or individual's whole 'way of seeing', does not hold the same cognitive status as scientific or moral-practical knowledge within modernity. Aesthetic-expressive validity claims do not strictly count as *knowledge* as they deal with matters of preference and value, rather than general rightness or truth.[11] Universalizable claims of norms are distinguished from ethical or expressive-aesthetic claims in so far as the latter pertain to questions of particular interest, ethical matters primarily concerned with the self and its desires, goals and achievements, questions of who we are and who we want to be, of what kind of life we want to lead. The type of validity claim they make 'does not transcend local boundaries in the same way as truth and rightness claims'; they are a matter of taste, only made plausible in the context of a particular form of life, and hence

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11 In his *Theory of Communicative Action*, aesthetic validity is not dependent on the assent or agreement of all participants, but that the reasons given are intelligible, and the motivations 'authentic' (1984: 16-20).

not open to universal discursive redemption (Habermas 1984: 42). They cannot be evaluated according to universalizable criteria, in other words, for that criteria must itself be drawn from an alternative (aesthetic) worldview. Only claims to the good made *within* a worldview can be judged cognitively, as to their truth or correctness.

Any moral point might therefore contain these two moments of normative universality and ethical-aesthetic particularity. So while the procedural rightness of a substantive decision can be cognitively evaluated, akin to a question of truth, its non-generalizable, ethical content must be evaluated from within a shared worldview (1990: 60). Despite the primacy of the expressive-aesthetic and evaluative dimension in our everyday life, then, it does not directly address *general* needs and *collective* decisions, and is properly situated outside the realm of a discourse ethic, only being open to rational discussion within a shared worldview. They indeed 'point in a different direction from moral questions: the regulation of interpersonal conflicts of action resulting from opposed interests is not yet an issue' (1993: 6).

Like Kant, therefore, Habermas insists on the analytical distinction between the *justification* of a norm and its *application*, which must be left up to actual discourse. In the non-everyday mode of rational discourse the process by which a norm is justified – its generalizability, its openness to critique – can be increasingly distinguished from what exactly *is* justified and how it is applied, which pertains to a particular community's, group or individual's hermeneutically grounded notion of the good, intrinsically *non*-generalizable (1990b: 178). There are, for instance, a number of principles of distributive justice which may achieve rational agreement: 'To each according to their needs' or 'To each according to their merits' and so on; 'But only in their application to particular concrete cases will it transpire *which* of the competing principles is the most appropriate in the *given* context' (1993: 152). The qualitative evaluation of reasons – whether they are good for that community – thus occurs alongside the more abstract judgement of

procedural rightness, but only participants themselves can judge the former aspect. A procedural ethic therefore cannot pronounce *a priori* on the justice of how any given norm is applied, or on its consequences, only on the *manner* in which it is agreed upon. It must be left up to the actual discursive participants involved to apply a normative decision in the light of just procedures, for no-one else can have better knowledge of all the contingencies and expectations pertaining to a given situation.[12] Justification and application are both analytically distinct yet practically inseparable instances of moral action. In this way, discourse ethics neither remains purely procedural, nor renounces its claims to universality and its accompanying critical perspective.

The ability to distinguish between the universality of moral questions and the particularity of evaluative questions, or questions of the good, is essential if discourse ethics is to avoid on the one hand prescribing a culturally specific notion of the good for all, or an uncritical relativism on the other. This right-good distinction aims at protecting the domain of private morality, the 'free thought' essential for the development of autonomous individuals, as well as the difference which constitutes embodied social being. What becomes clear is that validity, rightness or truth hinges not on substantive unanimity, which, as we shall see, is recognized as an unachievable practical political goal, but on the possibility of determining the rationality of discourse by sustaining these distinctions between

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12 Thomas McCarthy explains this important conjuncture in Habermas's theory, one that requires that the idea of 'good' reasons – what those reasons *are* within empirical contexts – be compatible with the procedural criteria of rationality (how they are employed), and that particular and general interests be distinguished:

> The public deliberation that leads to the formation of a general will has the form of a debate in which competing particular interests are given equal consideration. It requires of participants that they engage in "ideal role-taking" to try to understand the situations and perspectives of others and give them equal weight to their own. This adoption of the standpoint of impartiality is what distinguishes an orientation toward justice from a concern merely with one's own interests or with those of one's group. And it is from this standpoint, the moral point of view as Habermas reconstructs it, that we can draw a distinction between what is normatively required of everyone as a matter of justice and what is valued within a particular subculture as part of the good life (1991b: 184).

the right and the good, justification and application, generalizable and particular interests.

The following two sections expand upon the requirements of justice in a postconventional society.

iv) A Minimal Justice

It is important to understand just how small, albeit vital, a role normative, generalizable justice plays. The application of moral principles needs a universal criteria by which it is measured, a criteria provided by the unforced agreement of all those affected by a claim. But the principle of universalization, as we have seen, is not appropriate for dealing with all kinds of practical questions, even most of them: Habermas comments that 'usually ethical-existential questions are of far more pressing concern for us [than questions of justice] – problems, that is, that force the individual or group to clarify who they are and who they would like to be' (1993: 151). In light of the requirement for generalizability, the validation and application of norms turns out to be quite minimal, and increasingly procedural rather than substantive; it rules out for instance the possibility of substantive consensus in pluralist societies, those societies with a multiplicity of lifeworld values (1984: 20-1, 40-42). In such societies a common *ethos* has been lost, with the consequence that social interaction must now proceed on a procedural level, that is agreement can only be reached on *how* everyone is to agree or disagree, if it is not to violate the freedoms of its members. Normative agreement in pluralist, postconventional societies tends to become both more abstract and negative in form; prohibiting non-universalizable actions, rather than prescribing notions of the good. Communicatively achieved norms function, in other words, rather more like constitutional protections against the violation of basic rights than specific criteria for dispute resolution.[13]

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[13] Simone Chambers (1995) indeed argues that Habermas's discourse ethics refers more to a consensually-*steered* society rather than one aiming towards decision-making procedures through discourse ethics. The latter is untenable because decision requires closure, which a communicative

Although Habermas insists on the primacy of universalist principles, the deontological right over the teleological good, in practice how a norm is applied must be compatible with the social good; it must fulfill the needs and expectations of all those involved in a context sensitive manner, or else the norm is itself neither universalizable nor just. But if justification only occurs through the right *application* of context-specific judgement, it in turn requires certain preconditions, namely, the separation of knowledge into distinct spheres of validity, decentred subject identities and social learning processes which have permitted the open contestation of conventional and irrational elements in its cultural worldview, all characteristic of a postconventional society (1991: 205). In a postconventional moral community, therefore, the idealizing assumptions of communicative ethics increasingly assume the form of actual content or meaning for discursive participants. Whereas convention binds by custom alone, here moral duties derive their force from discursive claims based on good reasons; a situation where moral feelings become aligned with postconventional moral standards, combining the aesthetic particularity of a culture with universal norms of justice. Rational development occurs within the cultural sphere not only in terms of a society's increasing ability to recognize a claim's cognitive rightness, then, but in the hermeneutic facility necessary to reconcile the universal and particular dimensions of justice.

Although the aesthetic-affective particularity of the cultural sphere is not universalizable, a learning process can nevertheless occur here, as in the moral and scientific. That is, the further the learning process of communicative rationalization proceeds, the more the particularism of a cultural language form evolves according to universal standards of communication, its orientation towards understanding and democratic processes of argumentation and will formation. The crucial point in a practical discourse ethics thus turns out to be the

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ethic does not admit, and in any case the attempt to achieve consensus would be either too unwieldy on a social scale or simply impossible.

substantive, context-sensitive evaluation of action, decisions about what interests will or will not be taken into consideration, what criteria will be deemed relevant, and whose needs will take priority, which in turn tends to reduce the central moral questions to ones of application rather than justificatory abstraction. Since participants will not be entering the discussion in symmetrical positions and the duty to take responsibility for problem solving will not fall equally on everyone, procedural norms may provide little *actual* assistance in problem resolution. At the same time the context of application never entirely overrides the principle of universality, since argumentation over the appropriate application of a norm requires reference to and the presupposition of universal principles, based around ideas of understanding, equity and openness: the exclusion of any voice, for instance, requires justification. Thus while our moral intuitive responses may transcend the need to rely on rules, certain rules are nonetheless required to prevent the assertion of particularist forms of violence. These two different focuses, the generalizability of interests on the one hand, and the particularity of a specific context on the other, constitute the notion of justice in discourse ethics.

Habermas can thereby see no contradiction between pluralist societies and a procedural ethics: the more diversity of life choices that exist within a discursive community, the smaller the possibility of agreement or consensus on aesthetic matters, or questions of value, and the more and more *general* agreements must become. In a pluralist society, increased universalization in fact encourages *greater* diversity of life choices: 'interests and value orientations become more differentiated', so that the 'morally justified norms that control the individual's scope of action in the interests of the whole become ever more general and abstract' (1990: 205). Increased abstraction means an increased chance of tolerance and greater *concrete* diversity: 'The more abstract the agreements become, the more diverse the disagreements with which we can non-violently live' (Calhoun 1992: 140). As fewer and fewer ethical choices are subsumed under social norms in a rationalized society, freedom and individuation are thereby increased. Greater

universality is not the enemy of individuality, the enforced unity of the many, then, but what makes difference possible. A discourse ethic therefore acts as a *framework* within which substantive disputes can be rationally worked out; its minimalism becoming especially evident when we consider that it is within the expressive-aesthetic sphere, that realm characterized by claims of personal truthfulness, dramaturgical and aesthetic authenticity and cultural integrity, that the negotiation and application of principles of justice occurs. Habermas thereby rejects Weber's notion that adherence to the procedural demands of formal-rational laws *alone* legitimates a social order, arguing that legality creates legitimacy only when 'grounds can be provided to show that certain formal procedures fulfill material claims to justice', showing, that is, 'how far they can promote types of deliberation and decision-making that take equally into consideration all relevant aspects of the issue and all interests involved' (Shelly 1993: 65-69). Discourse ethics then encompasses not only the interpretation of questions of justice but the motivational bases provided by contextual and emotional sensitivity, since questions of justice and validity can only be decided through on-going dialogical processes, not by abstract reasoning alone.

Such a conception of justice purports to answer a classical objection to universalist ethics, that it subsumes particularity under a universal concept: the particularity of any case is never irrelevant (Günther 1990: 200-202). The ability to distinguish between the universality of moral questions and the particularity of evaluative questions, or questions of the good, is essential if discourse ethics is to avoid on the one hand prescribing a necessarily culturally specific notion of the good, or an uncritical relativism on the other; it provides an external criteria, in other words, with which a life-form can be evaluated without attempting to determine its particular values. Thus it is precisely the principles of universalization which allow the 'extension of perspective structures' to consider the particular and specific elements of a practical situation. Habermas rejects the call to theorize the concrete *cultural* conditions of an emancipated individuality as

a dangerous prelude to authoritarianism. As we will see in the debate over justice and care in the next chapter, Habermas sees the key point of difference between his and Carol Gilligan's contextualist, care approach is her neglect of the crucial distinction between the right and the good: the problems Gilligan points to he argues are problems which occur *within* the larger framework of a universalist moral domain (1990b: 178). This is not a prescriptive universalism, then: justification can never occur *a priori*, but only through an open, actual process of discursive argumentation.[14] Thus Benhabib holds that communicative ethics has so far been wrongly considered as a variant of ethical *rationalism* – a restricted, rule-bound ethics – rather than an ethical cognitivism, which lends more weight to the art of *phronesis*, or moral judgment (1990: 357-9).

How the reflexive self is constituted clearly becomes of central importance to Habermas's formulation. The next section connects the subjective achievements of rationality with its social and structural formation.

v) Modernity's Unfinished Project

The process of rationalization is characterized on the subjective level as a *learning* process, and on the objective level as the development of new structures of knowledge. At the centre of both is the increasing reflexivity of the modern subject. Drawing on the developmental moral psychology of Lawrence Kohlberg, Habermas contends that the formal properties of the modern legal principles (positivity, legalism, formality and generality) are correlative to the structures of post-conventional morality, allowing the hold of convention over social knowledge to diminish as critical reflection and the ability to move between different 'ways of seeing' grows (Shelly 1993: 65). Habermas's discourse ethics indeed posits a strongly reflective model of subject identity, one conscious of its dependence on shared, discursive norms but able to distance itself from those

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14 Klaus Günther comments: 'Only if it were possible, at a particular point in time, to foresee every possible application situation with all its possibly relevant details, could the justification and the appropriate application of a norm be combined in one principle' (1990: 200).

constitutive norms and evaluate them from a variety of perspectives, not simply its own, subject-centred one. Changes in modes of thought that allow subjects to do this are not characterized by new contents, values or beliefs, but by changes in the system of basic concepts; different *kinds* of reasons are found convincing at different stages of the process (Habermas 1984: 169).

If the linguistic mediation of the world involves problem solving, which in turn generates learning processes that 'unfold an independent logic that transcends all local constraints' (1990a: 205),[15] this process is only possible within a structurally differentiated culture, society and personality, where worldviews are uncoupled from institutions. Once the process of rationalization is underway, discursive participants become increasingly able to differentiate truly universal principles of justice from claims to particular contexts of action; a move which separates moral questions from evaluative questions within the practical sphere (1990b: 178).

Habermas does not pretend that this is a purely formal process; interests *are* integral to evaluation, but discursive participants oriented towards achieving understanding and agreement are able to suspend particularism through a kind of 'internalization' of the principles of equality, reciprocity and role-distanciation in a way that reconciles substantive ethical assumptions with a universalistic morality. Progressive differentiation between spheres of knowledge and modes of argumentation indeed render the individual *less* vulnerable to the repressive and determining influences of ideologies and lifeworld norms; it is in this, intersubjective, sense that Habermas understands the notion of autonomy: a discursive community freeing itself from the bonds of convention. Increased autonomy is therefore only possible through an 'ever more extensive' web of intersubjectivity (1990a: 346). The decentering of the subject which has occurred through the process of modernization should not be viewed as an effect of

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15 While for Habermas the rational norms of communication are 'always already' binding in communicative speech for Karl-Otto Apel however only those who make the 'reflective turn' are bound by the norms of communication (Benhabib 1986: 295ff).

technical advances, then, but by the communicative, normative interaction which underlies this process (1984: 61-72).

The idealizing assumptions of communication advanced here are in no way meant to obscure the non-rational and strategic modes of language use which actually occur in social interaction, but rather are to be used to identify distortion in the relation between communicative and strategic reason (1987: 293-488). While social orders and norms are always legitimized through a community's reproduction and transformation of implicitly universalizable validity claims, in practice this process invariably involves less-than-rational processes of argumentation, ideological forms of discourse which prevent the discursive contestation of existing norms, and a non-general consensus.[16] Strategic reason is always 'parasitic' on communicative reason, but the former easily becomes hegemonic in rationalized societies where economies and state administrations have split off from the normative, legitimizing realms of communicative action (1984: 288). In so doing it gives rise to a paradoxical process, simultaneously freeing knowledge spheres from the fetters of tradition and allowing them to expand their specific logics, while at the same time creating the conditions whereby systemic spheres come to dominate the normative lifeworld. Thus when the course of communicative action and its legitimating, learning and integrative processes are disturbed by political and economic power primarily aligned to strategic interests rather than the achievement of understanding and consensus, described in terms of the 'colonization of the lifeworld' by steering mechanisms of social sub-systems, social pathologies and political conflict result. The primacy of language as a coordinating medium is lost, and social integration then proceeds via norms of domination which sublimate violence.[17]

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[16] Much critical attention has been directed towards the theoretical validity of the analytical distinction between system and lifeworld which cannot, as Habermas admits, be empirically demonstrated. Thomas McCarthy (1991a) provides a particularly incisive critique on this topic.

[17] Habermas has gone to some lengths to counter the flood of objections to what is frequently perceived as an overly-reductive dichotomies between lifeworld and system, communicative and strategic action; arguing that the lifeworld always contains elements of strategic action just as strategic action is always permeated with cultural norms and values (See especially Habermas

Like Weber, Habermas therefore recognizes that modernity is shot through with the tension that the breakdown of old communal forms engenders, symptomatic of the transition from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*. The reflexivity and the differentiation of value spheres characteristic of modernity does result in a loss of meaning for the individual, but this loss is dialectically understood, strengthening 'those communicative processes through which alone a sense of validity can be regained' (Benhabib 1986: 272). The loss of holistic forms of meaning in modernity transfers motivation from convention and custom to rational processes of argumentation; meaning is sought now in dialogue with others, rather than a prescriptive and unquestioned worldview. The isolation of increasing individualization therefore goes hand in hand with increased universalization, a universalization that implies a normative bond to the community, a rational rather than aesthetic bond: 'the individual...is only fully on [its] own under the presupposition that [it] remains bound to a universal community by way of a cooperative quest for truth' (Habermas 1990a: 346-7). Habermas thus does not require a *substantive* ethic to bring forward what is often seen as a necessary ethical orientation, the 'reaching out to make connections, and mutual and sympathetic understanding at the centre of moral problem-solving' (Chambers 1995: 166), for our motivation to engage in rational discourse is already embedded in structures of postconventional communication.

While the emancipatory force of communication relies on the preservation of the rationality inherent in the universal core of linguistically-structured views of the world, it is only within a fully rationalized, i.e. postconventional, society that this emancipatory force can be realized. It is not therefore a matter of communication *being* emancipatory, but of its emancipatory *possibilities*. Based on this structural model of rationality, the motivation to engage in communicative

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1982). As Steven White notes, Habermas's terminology adds to the empirical-analytical confusion here, portraying an *incursion* of system imperatives into a lifeworld context which interrupts an apparently natural orientation of (an innocent, normative) communicative action towards the democratic principles of symmetry and reciprocity (1988: 105ff).

action on the subjective level is not explained in terms of cultural conditions, appropriate worldviews or inner ethical states, but primarily by formal developmental processes and the universal pragmatics of speech acts themselves. As will become apparent, however, this account of rationalization as a universal, structural process is not sustainable. The cultural and aesthetic, as much as they trouble Habermas, persistently intrude.

2. The Tensions of Modernity

i) The Relation between Reason and Culture

The dialectics of modernity are seen by many critics not as a structural question, as Habermas would have it, but a cultural one, a view which undermines the distinction between form (procedural justification) and substance (contextual application), reason and culture in discourse ethics. Critics question just how the universality of rational procedure relates to different cultural contexts: if for instance we accept that how we understand the just application of a norm rests on an always *prior* world view or cultural interpretation, one, say, that may have generally agreed upon *reasons* for excluding women from certain areas of social life, how can procedural norms alone prevent this exclusion? Clearly, rules alone are insufficient to overcome entrenched cultural beliefs and practices. Even on Habermas's terms, non-generalizable questions of value will inevitably be fought over *as if* they were generalizable moral issues, and vice-versa; Habermas indeed admits that questioning the *very terms of debate* – the language used, the questions, data, evidence and reasons selected – is a characteristic common to pluralist societies (McCarthy 1991b: 185).

The tension between reason and culture in communicative ethics I argue relates directly to the ambivalent way aesthetics is connected to the moral-practical (generalizable) sphere. The universal pragmatics of communication are ostensibly derived from everyday moral action; yet at the same time these unavoidable

principles cannot be directly connected to the concrete ethics of everyday life, from which the empirical existence of conflict, ideology or misunderstanding must always be taken into account, but only from the more *general* structures of communication (Habermas 1991: 220-1).[18] For many, the distinction between a universal morality and a particular ethics becomes somewhat forced at this point: empirically, issues of justice are never separable from ethical, aesthetic or pragmatic issues. How the notion of equality may apply to different situations for instance may depend – or more probably, will always depend – on a culturally-derived idea of the good. While there are undoubtedly obscurities in the workability of this distinction, it can be argued that Habermas in fact presupposes a reconciliation between reason and culture as the condition for normative action.

This kind of reconciliation is evident in the notion that culture itself must evolve and adapt to the requirements of universal ethics in order to achieve a 'postconventional' morality: procedures alone are insufficient, in other words, to ensure the just application of norms. The universal validity of claims to *rightness* or rationality is possible even where lifeworld or cultural assumptions diverge because of the *form* of human communication at the postconventional level; the unavoidable pragmatic assumptions of orientation towards understanding and agreement, reciprocity and openness can be used to guide the terms of public, moral discourse without determining its outcome.

But here Habermas suspends or 'brackets' the *empirical* aspect of the subjectivity exactly where it must be problematized. If the 'ego' or 'individual' is a product of social and linguistic interaction, then the empirical character of that interaction, constituted through a complex of socially defined roles and discourses, is going to produce subject positions which will not and cannot fulfill their roles as *equal* communicative partners and moral agents. This is so even in an ideal sense, for subject positions are formed not simply rationally but by deep and ongoing non-

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18 Apel provides a thoroughgoing critique of Habermas's attempt to avoid grounding his ethics either in the empirical or the transcendental (1992: 150).

rational processes of identity formation. As Johanna Meehan points out, disputes about norms only arise *after* identities have been inscribed and secured, often in a situation of 'disparate power relations' (1995: 232).

For such critics rules of argumentation are not sufficient to ensure justice *or* motivation: in short, the requirements of a moral *community*.[19] Besides suspecting that Habermas's hypothetical rule construction is insufficient to ensure the bonding necessary to establish a truly rational community, many feminist and postmodern theorists are not so confident that difference or plurality in a Habermasian community will not simply be swamped by the same old reason in new garb. Reliance on institutions and other forms of moral legality merely renders the individual increasingly indifferent to the plight of others, while demanding quite unsustainable requirements of cognitive reflexivity, unity of experience, and suppression of the aesthetic and figurative dimension in discourse. Even sympathetic critics like Seyla Benhabib object that what may be conceived as universal in a given culture will be informed by cultural values and all the gendered, racial, and class assumptions that accompany them. In order to achieve rational understanding of the kind Habermas proposes, they object, a lifeworld must *already* have incorporated the ideals of equality, reciprocity and reflexivity into its cultural life, it must have already reconciled the 'good' with the critical ideals of the 'right' and the fair. His intent to *incorporate* the affective, motivational aspects of moral action into the ideals of justice is not ultimately persuasive because he fails to show how the practical wisdom required to do this follows from the commitment to universal principles. It is hard to see how rational discourse can replace the loss of the symbolic unity of meaning that has occurred in rationalized societies; how increased solidarity comes about through *cognitive* reflexivity, how empirical tolerance can arise through discursive abstraction.[20]

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[19] See Lash, Beck & Giddens, 1994 .

[20] Habermas perhaps cannot win on this score: overcompensating for the aspiration towards unity immanent in his theory communicative action with an equal stress on the difference or non-identity encountered in subject-subject relations (1992: 111).

Habermas presupposes the very norms he is trying to ground: they are no longer cultural matters, in other words, but formal, linguistic ones. Habermas's (or indeed Rawl's) proceduralist ethics finds its place explicitly within lifeworlds which admit such abstract moralities not as distinct but as already integrated, substantive elements of that cultural tradition, specifically, the rationality of advanced Western democracies (Benhabib 1986: 303)

Benhabib goes on to argue that if the need for discourse only arises out of conflict, where background consensus is challenged and ethical life is endangered; if communication itself is the motivating force for solidarity, Habermas can say nothing about how the rational processes of argumentation can restore that solidarity where the motivation for understanding and agreement has already been lost (1986: 321).21 Habermas's reliance on the intuitions of a postconventional moral agent is circular and unhelpful therefore: what is needed is a stronger conceptualization of moral validity which explicitly protects against any danger to ongoing conversation. She argues that the starting point of discourse ethics, the positioning of all concerned as equal discursive partners, should be taken as an *end*-point rather than a *precondition* of discourse (1990: 346).

If the rationalization process emerges *out of* a pre-rational lifeworld, shaped by an undifferentiated worldview, it is not difficult to see how critics might object that rationality can be seen as simply another particular version of human action and understanding, rather than *intrinsic* to human communication as such. As Benhabib points out, the motivation to act rationally *precedes* rational action, and that interest can be lacking even in rationalized societies. She argues therefore that Habermas's principle of universalizability – that a claim's validity depends on its being able to express a common interest of all those affected – is at best

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21 The absence of any deontological principles, Benhabib points out, leaves such an ethic too indeterminate, and open to the classic objections deontological theorists bring to utilitarian theories - the decisionism inherent in Bentham's doctrine that poetry is as good as pushpin (1990: 343). Benhabib in fact reverses the priority of the aesthetic, situated lifeworld and the rational discursive community: in her view, Habermas presupposes a 'reconciled intersubjectivity', one which is willing to suspend the *motivating* force of real conflict situations.

inappropriate and unnecessary for a discourse ethics, and at worst tautological: it is only possible on the basis of certain other, prior cultural assumptions and values; equality, respect for the other, adherence to the principles of discourse itself and so on (1986: 319). The principle of universalization is adequate as a test for intersubjective validity, but is insufficient for generating valid principles of action: it does not ensure that any action which has passed this test was the right thing to do under the circumstances.[22]

ii) Some Political and Social Implications of Communicative Action

The consequences of imputing universal norms as unavoidable presuppositions of speech acts also raise significant political and social questions. Instead of the problem of democracy being seen as a question of the substantive content of a community's discursive sphere, it now becomes a question of appropriate methods of justification through the logic of argumentation (Rasmussen 1990a). The imperative of abstracting the normative foundations of reason means that social pathologies are generally conceived as externally generated, arising within the mode of strategic action. Since communicative action is, as it were, the motor of social development, strategic action does not structure or constitute the modern lifeworld and its linguistic worldview, but the reverse: systemic structures of late capitalism are first made possible by rationalized learning processes in the lifeworld. Social pathologies are couched in terms of the *disturbance* of this universality of reciprocity, equal respect and tolerance between discursive participants, destroying the cooperative solidarity of a community and causing

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22 Benhabib and Wellmer query just what the principle of universalization adds to a discourse ethics: if the principle is not a norm we choose or rationally deduce, but is the pragmatic presupposition of speech, then it is not a norm in the sense of being discursively formed but a rule of argumentation (Benhabib 1986: 303,4). Agnes Heller rejects the universal status of Habermas' discourse ethics on similar grounds. She believes communicative ethics rests on the meta-norms of 'freedom and life', norms which can neither be discursively redeemed nor transcendentally grounded. The universalization principle can only be understood as a principle of justice, of political legislation, and is therefore universal only within a particular society. She suggests a kind of 'universal for us' reading wherein norms are conditioned in their origins but unconditioned in their application (1990: 151, 158).

irrational suffering.[23] Reminiscent of Marx's critique of bourgeois morality, a society free from domination does not call for a change in cognitive dispositions therefore but a transformation in social structures. Freedom from domination in late capitalism is, therefore, as Stephen White puts it, less a problem of:

> building a [Gramscian] collective, revolutionary ideology to combat that provided by capitalism, than it is one of overcoming the colonization and fragmentation of consciousness by creating enough slack in the system for the ongoing autonomous articulation of plural identities by the groups involved (1988: 125).

It is not so much a matter of whether procedural rationality is an idea on which everyone can *agree*, therefore, but of releasing the emancipatory potential of communication. On this view Habermas's faith in rationality leads him inexorably towards the dilemmas of a Rousseauian 'General Will', the presumption of some kind of common will that merely needs to be uncovered for the good of all, rather than worked towards as a social ideal.[24] In contradistinction to universal morality being shaped as Habermas argues from the 'bottom up', through the driving force of empirical processes of communication within the lifeworld, the foregoing criticisms suggest that the lifeworld is moulded to suit the requirements of justification from the 'top down', from the transcendental principles of communication to everyday lives. It is this kind of tension in the culture-reason

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[23] Related to this point, Habermas fails to show how strategic action (apparently inevitably) manages to gain the upper hand over communicative action, and thus also how material interests shape certain patterns of activity and not others (McCarthy 1991a: 135)

[24] Thomas McCarthy points out that Habermas does indeed retain a kind of general will (rational common interests) versus will-of-all (the sum of particular wills) distinction (McCarthy 1991b: 181), the former requiring not simply the generalizability of a given norm, but the adoption of an impartial standpoint on the part of discursive participants, where personal interests carry no more weight than any other: for Habermas this is in fact the only means to resolve conflicting interests. The burden of responsibility on reflexivity and the moral sensitivity to understand and empathize with others here is obviously weighty. What distinguishes Habermas's thought from the moral theory of a Rousseau or a Rawls however is that interests and needs are not brought to bear, pre-formed, into public discourse but are instead intersubjectively construed: formed and interpreted *through* the discursive process itself, 'building in' the principles of solidarity and mutual understanding, as it were, rather than attempting to inscribe them as volitional components of discourse. To adopt Nancy Love's point, to 'postmoderns' "subject in process", Habermas adds a 'solidarity in process" ' (Love 1992: 117).

relation in communicative action theory – in the premise that universal pragmatics are *idealizing* assumptions of *empirical* communicative acts – that gives rise to the frequent charges of rationalism in his work (Warnke 1995a: 133).

The lack of clarity in the thematization of culture (bracketing the complexity of this term in its own right) can also be seen as symptomatic of some troubling aspects of Habermas's dual systems-based social analysis. Feminists have pointed to the gender-blindness of Habermas's theory at every level: the descriptive-empirical, philosophical and moral within both systems and action-theoretic perspectives.[25] Although Habermas's notions of lifeworld and system, public and private, instrumental and strategic are useful analytical tools, they are also built around far from uncontestable *substantive* assumptions of the nature of such categories. Nancy Fraser for instance shows that Habermas's understanding of the lifeworld/system and public/private spheres is based on some conventional assumptions of the primarily private and symbolic, rather than (also) social and economic, role of child-care (Fraser 1989).

Habermas insists that he accounts for domination in the lifeworld not only in terms of the incursion of system imperatives but also in terms of a failure to achieve a post-conventional morality. But since communicative action is understood as the outcome of a developmental process of untrammelled communication, lifeworld interaction appears an intrinsically superior mode of action, normatively speaking. An effect of this stance is an inability to adequately capture the specificity of women's experience in western culture, as well as women's place in systemic, public and economic realms as well as private ones. We have seen, for instance, that for Habermas virtues, emotions and life conduct pertain to 'ethical life' and are therefore neither universalizable nor formalizable. For Benhabib such a segregation relegates personal relations to evaluative matters of the good life, thus removing them from the public sphere of justice and

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25 Nancy Fraser argues that from a feminist perspective Habermas's critical theory must be read from the standpoint of an absence: a feminist critique can only proceed through imaginative extrapolation and reconstruction of an unthematized gender subtext (1989: 114).

depoliticizing them. Habermas's neglect of the 'informal' structures of justice that operate between family and friends therefore effectively excludes gender-related issues from his theory (Benhabib 1992: 75ff).

In part Habermas's quite conventional conception of the family and the child-caring role is traceable to his implicit association of communicative action with existing lifeworld practices; domination assuming the forms of systemic incursions *into* that sphere rather than embedded within cultural practices as well.[26] As far as a feminist critical theory is concerned, however, the problem may be not norms *or* power but norms *and* power, of reconstructing 'the dialectics of enlightenment inside a theory of the social instead of substituting the one for the other' (Feenberg 1993: 89-90).

This point indeed lies at the heart of my critique of Habermas, for his apparent reluctance to consider the empirical question of how power operates through norms, how reason itself has been constructed as exclusionary and repressive, has significant consequences for any politics of emancipation. If we understand Habermas's notion of domination, with Jean Cohen, as that which blocks communicative action – uncoupling 'the coordination of action from consensus formation in language and neutraliz[ing] the responsibility of participation in the interaction' (Cohen 1995: 69) – gender may well be construed as a code through which power operates. For Cohen gender acts 'as a generalized form [or code] of communication' that acts to stop the questioning of conventions at a certain point: that point construed as 'natural' (1995: 70). Here the simplistic surety of such codes provides 'relief' from the lifeworld's complexity. If so, however, the truly

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26 Analysis of Habermas's views on the family suffers from a lack of any sustained discussion on the issue in his work. On the one hand, the nuclear family is a private sphere of symbolic reproduction to be protected from systemic incursion, on the other, its breakdown signifies a loosening of the ties of tradition, allowing greater autonomy and diverse life choices. The feminist attack on patriarchal structures within both system and lifeworld is symptomatic of this process (Love 1991: 110). It is also construed as an offensive, immanent critique of bourgeois ideals, demanding the actual fulfillment of the universalist grounds of ethics and law (Habermas 1987: 393). Habermas thus tends to reproduce the early Frankfurt School's analysis of the family, and its belief in the necessity of paternal/authoritarian and maternal/emotional familial bonds in the interests of a 'balanced' socialization (Love 1991: 109).

'postconventional' society appears increasingly hard to realize; escape from the reflexive complexity of discursive interaction, the purely *rational* life, will inevitably occur through recourse to simplified symbolic and aesthetic codes, whether linguistic or non-linguistic.

Habermas acknowledges the possibility that discursive processes marked by 'strategic' or dominatory influences may render one speechless in pursuit of one's own interests: but if resistance to hegemonic norms cannot take its place in discourse, but only in an 'inability to engender internal consent', it is unclear to what emancipatory strategies and interpretative criteria we could then turn. What then appears far more urgent for feminist practice is a more radical critique of the process of individualization, examining how women can forge public voices which represent their needs and aspirations as a precondition of engaging in communicative or discourse procedures. For feminism the institutionalization of public female voices may well be one end point among many others, or no end point at all. What may be of most immediate concern is how to fulfill the material and psychological conditions which would render an articulate female subjectivity *possible*. Such problems may represent a formidable difficulty in any discourse theory of meaning, which must take as its point of departure reflexively or non-reflexively achieved norms already given in language.[27]

In short, the prioritization of reason in communicative action theory comes at the cost of the figurative and aesthetic elements of language, a primacy which many see as issuing in an excessively rationalistic view of a subject capable of 'a purely reflexively informed change of perspective' between lifeworlds and their validity spheres (Seel 1991: 44). Although Habermas does not deny that domination and oppression reside not only in the incursion of steering subsystems

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[27] In any examination of the research into gender-related modes of language and thought, it becomes quickly apparent that the task of redressing the inequalities between men and women in communication is immense. For example, Mary Belenky's (et. al) study points out that whereas for young men the phrase 'its my opinion' means 'I've got a right to my opinion', for young women it means 'It's just my opinion' (cited in Harding 1993: 80ff). Clearly, these two different attitudes to discourse are not explicitly accounted for in Habermas's counterfactual formulation.

into the lifeworld, but in the often unconscious symbols, beliefs and values of the lifeworld itself, his faith in the ability of rational discourse to increasingly expose its embedded injustices by virtue of the general structures of communication itself, rather than any substantive commitment, say, to women's welfare, assumes for many an unworkably optimistic relation between rationality and aesthetic motivation. How can we be so sure that the subliminal forms, images and prejudices that shape our cognitive responses to the social world are always *potentially* transparent, able, ultimately, to be subject to the processes of our moral reckoning? The primacy of the scientific and moral modes of language use over the aesthetic ironically appears to align reason towards the very functionalism which the theory of communicative action purports to transcend; those modes of language use not directed towards the coordination of action are merely *derivative*, devaluing the creative aspects of human activity (White 1988: 32).

In the light of these objections, Habermas appears of use to feminist theory more as an end point or ideal rather than the means to overcome oppression or prejudice in the first place, for women can only take their place as discursive participants in the post-conventional domain of communicative ethics once their social identities have furnished them with the resources and opportunity to do so.

The impression of an overly harmonious, rationalistic subject and social structure is one that is easily gained by any superficial encounter with Habermas's accounts of rational action and subject identity. Conflict, misunderstanding, the unconscious and aesthetic expression appear not so much ignored or denied but reconciled under the unifying banner of the pragmatic assumptions of communication. While I do not want to claim that the dissonant, irrational aspects of social interaction are not problematic in communicative action theory, I nevertheless want to mount a qualified defence of Habermas. Discourse ethics should not be dismissed as a consequence of its overly-identitarian nature, as I hope to show in the following chapter, for in the face of a range of problematic ethical alternatives it provides a valid and highly suggestive approach to the

question of political action and judgement within pluralist societies. In order to explore this point further, I will take up the question of universalist versus particularist ethics. This will also entail a rather more detailed look at how Habermas uses the notion of aesthetics as such.

2. Justice as Care: Habermas and Universalist Ethics

The previous chapter raised a number of objections to Habermas's project in respect to its attempted reconciliation of reason and culture. Here I pursue the ethical and political implications of this attempt at greater length. The first section will examine the question of a feminist ethics of care versus a universalist justice. It establishes the need to incorporate both care and justice perspectives into a political ethics. The second section takes up the discussion of the relation between reason and culture I began in the first chapter, and unravels the implications of the role of aesthetics in communicative action. By expanding the notion of reason beyond conventional, instrumental, abstracted approaches to morality, detached from affective, aesthetic or relational concerns, Habermas intends to incorporate both universal and particular, justice and care perspectives in discourse ethics. He is adamant that this can only be done however by incorporating the specificity of care within a universalist framework, by reworking and expanding the notion of reason itself. I conclude in the final section that although discourse ethics provides a challenging and suggestive starting point in any attempt to transcend the conventional aporias of moral and democratic theory, it is hampered by its narrow and at times inconsistent understanding of aesthetics.While Habermas acknowledges that aesthetics is an important part of the social bond, it is only admissable in communicative ethics as an underpinning of solidarity; its heterogeneous, hedonistic, extra-discursive aspects tend to be written out of the rational community completely. I argue that it is not so much that the seeds of a more nuanced, dialectical understanding of reason and aesthetics are not present in his work, however, but that they remain undeveloped and inconsistent.

1. Universal Versus Particular Ethics

i) The Challenge from an Ethic of Care

The traditional terms of moral theory conceives moral action as rational *choice* rather than moral *responsibilities* which may not be chosen; the first conceiving interpersonal relations in abstract, general terms, as citizen to citizen, while the latter viewing social relations in terms of particular attachment, filial love, friendship and responsibility. In general terms we could say that these two moral viewpoints reflect the different life experiences of women and men in contemporary Western societies as, respectively, child-rearers in the private sphere and citizens, soldiers and workers in the public sphere (Thomas 1993: 61). The tendency for moral theory in the Kantian tradition to devalue needs and desires as fleeting and untrustworthy and valorize abstraction shows a clear masculinist bias and neglect of constitutive, affective bonds. Such bonds, universalist critics argue, appear far more likely to fulfill the utopian aim of dissolving antagonism between reason and desire than abstract reasoning alone, for they create the emotional conditions within which rational moral action is congruous with personal needs and life experiences.

Developing these kinds of critiques, feminist moral theorists, among others,[1] have attempted to show the paucity of the Kantian tradition of moral identity and action in terms of its understanding of the affective elements of moral action and sentiments. Iris Marion Young articulates a not uncommon feminist response to Habermas's universalist ethics. She agrees with Habermas that the ideal of a normative reason standing at a point transcending all perspectives 'is both illusory and oppressive' (Young 1987: 60), impelled under the 'logic of identity' to construct an abstract, disembodied self as the moral *ratio*, operating under

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[1] See Kittay and Meyers, 1987; Gilligan, 1982; Baier, 1985; Nusbaum, 1986 and the communitarian theorists Taylor, 1989 and MacIntyre, 1981.

universal, common laws. Within this monological schema, impartiality is possible only through the subjugation of particulars to the same unifying rules. The commitment to impartial reason moreover results in an opposition between reason and desire, an opposition carried over into social life in the division between public and private.[2] Young argues that Habermas's communicative ethics, with its commitment to openness, dialogue and mutual understanding, the absence of force and its rebuttal of a sovereign rational consciousness, provides a promising starting point for a conception of normative reason which does *not* imply this reason-desire dichotomy, but which assists 'feminism's search for a non-discriminatory foundation from which to elaborate its critique of the irrationality of the gender-relations inscribed in the institutions of bourgeois society' (Young 1987: 68). It attempts to avoid that 'smothering of the other' which threatens communitarian theories, retaining a liberal commitment to tolerance and plurality through its adherence to proceduralism, reinforcing the simple abstract equality of traditional liberal philosophy which 'refuses to differentiate between social subjects on the basis of the mere contingency of social context and group affiliation...' (Young cited in Johnson 1994: 80). But it overcomes this dualism only in part, retaining a faith in impartiality which reintroduces a reason-desire split. Rather than allow the full contextuality and particularity of dialogic reason – the plurality of situated perspectives involved in a free and open discourse – to function as the criterion of rational validity, Habermas reincorporates a transcendental unity to communication, engendering a tension between his attempt to uncover an impartial 'moral point of view' on the one hand and his critique of reason as univocal and monological on the other (Young 1987: 69).

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2 For Habermas this division was established not simply to legitimize market relations by rendering the civil sphere separate from the state and to regulate the moral order through the nuclear family, it was required to achieve a strong enough normative conception of social relations, as well as to secure the freedom to pursue one's chosen particular good without interference. It is particularly this last point which Habermas (among others) finds a worthwhile benefit of the public-private dichotomy: in the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* Habermas calls for a public sphere which can secure a realm of private autonomy (Coles 1992: 86).

Within feminist ethics this critique of rationalism has often been couched in terms of an ethics of care as opposed to an ethics of justice.[3] Within the context of this thesis, the recent proliferation of debates in this area can be viewed as further expressions of the tension between aesthetics and abstract, universalizable principles in the moral domain. The principles of an ethic of care, which finds support in much postmodern theory which looks to the non-identical, the contextual and the aesthetic as the source of moral action rather than legalistic, rational principles, are often sourced in Carol Gilligan's ground-breaking study *In a Different Voice* (Gilligan 1982). Kittay and Meyers draw the contrast between the two models as follows:

> A morality of rights and abstract reason begins with a moral agent who is separate from others, and who independently elects moral principles to obey. In contrast, a morality of responsibility and care begins with a self who is enmeshed in a network of relations to others and whose moral deliberation aims to maintain these relations (1987: 10).

The feminist 'care' approach takes a critical stance towards the reflexivity, realm of choice and the universality characteristic of liberal notions of justice, of which Habermas's theory forms a part, and proposes moving beyond abstract ideals and procedures by looking at moral activity as responsibility and involvement, rather than the expression of rational autonomy. The distinctive feature of an ethics of care therefore resides in its concentration on the activity of the carer, conceiving moral action within a framework of givenness; such a feminist morality sees the individual primarily as the *recipient* of duties and responsibilities, rather than one who chooses between them.[4]

Although Habermas redefines autonomy and identity along intersubjective lines, thereby connecting individuals in a radical way, he nevertheless aligns

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[3] On this theme see Kittay & Meyers's (1987) collection of essays .
[4] As Susan Mendus interprets it, the tragedy of Antigone resides not in a moral conflict between political and familial loyalties, public versus private duties, but between given and chosen duties. Antigone is 'the bearer of inconsistent obligations which she neither controls nor chooses, yet which she must honour' (1993: 25).

himself philosophically with the universalist stance of discourse ethics, rather than what he considers the particularism and relativism of the care perspective (Habermas 1990b: 175-181). Habermas contends that a universalizing morality is developmentally higher than ethical action dependent on a particular lifeworld (a Kantian 'right' over a Hegelian 'good' or *Sittlichkeit*), which he understands as pre-cognitive and non-reflexive: the conventional level of normative action as opposed to post-conventional, universalist morality. The ability to explicate everyday ethical know-how in terms of principles of moral action is seen as the first step towards moral maturity; a conception which privileges the cognitive, reflexive presentation of moral conflict and resolution over what is seen as a conforming, non-critical moral attitude characteristic of conventional morality. Habermas argues that Gilligan's objections to Kohlberg's scheme fails to differentiate between issues of justice, which are universalizable, and questions of the good life, which are not; a distinction that characterizes a rationalized lifeworld (1990b: 178). Women's frequent failure to progress onto the highest stages of the Kohlbergian scheme identified by Carol Gilligan means a regression to conventionalism or an earlier stage of self-centred ethical relativism (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1990: 255): the dominance of a particularist, conventional morality over a universalist, reflexive one.

It is, however, precisely the premises of universality and impartiality that are contested by an anti-cognitivist ethics. For Habermas issues of justice are never in practice separable from ethical issues: Habermas means the idea of justice to inhere in them, too, but in an abstract, reflexive form, in the over-arching question of how a society wants to regulate its interactions (Cronin 1993: xxiii). Postconventional ethics therefore 'stylizes questions of the good life...into *questions of justice*, in order to render practical questions accessible to cognitive processing by way of this abstraction' (Habermas 1982: 246). Habermas methodologically prioritizes the realm of justice only so that he can avoid the prospect of two competing and irreconcilable models of moral action.

Advocates of a care approach on the other hand argue that the Kohlbergian tradition overlooks and thus devalues the everyday moral know-how acquired through social experience. In this respect, a more intuitive, involved and less 'principled' approach to ethical dilemmas would not be seen as a less mature stage of moral development than the detached, universalistic typically 'masculine' stance of moral maturity, as the Kohlbergian scheme would have it, but as exhibiting greater expertise and familiarity in social interaction, and a correlative ability to diffuse and avoid instances of social conflict. Although on their account moral rules or principles may be required for unfamiliar moral dilemmas, they play a secondary role to ethical intuition, understood not as innate or natural but as but reactions and judgements which have become automatic through experience as opposed to cognitive mediation.[5]

Dreyfus and Dreyfus argue that it is precisely the need to cling to the demand for rational justification and rule following that *prevents* the development of ethical expertise. Both ethical relativism and rule following are transcended by those who develop an 'ethics of care': moral judgment requires deliberation about the appropriateness of our intuitive moral knowledge, a conception of ethics which combines judgement and experience, the Hegelian and the Kantian traditions. No principle 'grounds' expert ethical responses, since they are acquired only through numerous, actual instances of success and failure, emotional involvement in ethical interaction under always specific, non-identical conditions. 'The highest form of ethical comportment is seen to consist in being able to stay involved and to refine one's intuitions' – involved intuitive expertise – rather than withdraw from personal involvement and take recourse to principles (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1990: 256).

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[5] Steven Lukes has pointed out that stages four and five of the Kohlbergian scheme correspond to the ethical doctrines of a number of contemporary political philosophers, and are supported by very good arguments: an ethics of care and Levinasian ethics fall into this category (Lash 1990: 109).

Principles, then, in contrast to justice advocates, do not emerge out of moral experience, and nor do they produce moral 'expertise'; they can instead only 'buttress' our (expert) moral intuition in unfamiliar cases. From this view, 'the cognitivist move looks plausible only because the tradition has overlooked intuitive deliberation and has read the structure of detached deliberation back into normal ethical comportment' (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1990: 259). Moral principles on the one hand and intuitive responses on the other do not occupy a single developmental ladder, therefore, but are different modes of behaviour, as Carol Gilligan pointed out, capable of co-existing in the moral subject. Gilligan's work should not be seen as an alternative way of resolving the problem of the application of moral *principles* – it is in trying to articulate principles for their actions that her subjects are deemed morally immature – but as a more radical, anti-cognitivist theory of ethics.[6]

There are limitations as well as strengths on each side: questions of justice grapple here with often unreflexive communitarian notions of virtue embedded in particular community life, as well as the intuitive, unregulated morality postmodernists are beginning to elaborate.[7] From a care perspective, 'impartial justice' works to *prevent* personal attachment, solidarity, and trust, and thus is in danger of losing the moral responsiveness and involvement of the 'nobler virtues' of fellowship and friendship (Udovicki 1993: 54). On the other hand, the danger of an attitude of care *without* the principles of justice resides in the possibility of exploitation and suppression of the needs and development of the more care-oriented party; uneven expenditure of time, money, energy, and attention potentially leads to a loss of autonomy and personal opportunities. In genealogical terms, it is pertinent to ask just what it is about Western culture which assigns

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[6] Dreyfus & Dreyfus observe that Benhabib's reading of Gilligan makes the same mistake as Habermas's, assuming that Gilligan's point is to supplement Kohlberg's highest level of rational action leaving the application of principles as the uppermost concern: the moral agent merely takes into account the needs of the concrete rather than the generalized other in the interests of fairness and universality. What Gilligan is doing, however, they suggest, is far more radical: positing an alternative non-hierarchical schema of moral action (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1990: 258ff).

[7] This will be generally discussed at greater length in chapters three and four.

these kinds of ethical positions (those of an ethics of care and of justice) to different persons. What kinds of, if any, effectively hierarchical power relations underlie these configurations? To what extent does an ethics of care necessarily involve self-denial and the subordination of one's interests, and an inability to conceive social relations in terms of equality? Equally, does an ethic of justice inevitably suppress difference, an hence work in practice to sustain given distributions of power?

ii) Problems with an Ethic of Care

The historical basis of an ethics of care renders it a problematic model of moral action, and many feminists tread warily before advancing it as a viable or superior ethical alternative. While an ethic of care does correct the impersonality of justice oriented approaches as well as the latter's restricted conception of moral life, it must be careful not to hypostatize any necessary connection between women's identities and caring. It is not disputed that an ethic of care more accurately reflects women's historical life experience than a model of ethics as justice, rather the point is that it carries with it limitations and dangers for feminist practice. It runs the risk of naturalizing features of women's empirically observed psychology, ironically replicating the same kinds of arguments about women's difference that have been historically used – most infamously, by Rousseau and Hegel – to confine them to the private sphere (Mendus 1993: 18). As Susan Mendus observes, an ethic of care potentially adopts 'too unitary and static a conception of woman's identity' (we might add, gender identity as such) ignoring 'the conflicts inherent in women's lives' (1993: 18).[8]

Its limitations also become apparent on the political level. The focus on familial and affective relations is not suited to the nature or scale of political problems in

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[8] Virginia Held's claim that 'We give birth and you do not. This is a radical difference, and the fact that you lack this capacity may distort your whole view of the social realm' (Held quoted in Mendus 1993: 19) implies a rather essentialist notion of motherhood with which many feminists would not feel comfortable. It is surely not the act of giving birth but the *process* of caring that provides this alternative perspective.

post-industrial societies, focusing as it does on intimate, face-to-face encounters and the singularity of relations between people rather than any issue of equality or reciprocity. For Mendus, it is not so much the emphasis on difference that has historically served women's interests but the emphasis on our common humanity, providing standards of impartiality necessary in the pursuit of equality (1993: 20). She argues that both feminism and socialism proffer challenging alternatives to centralized, legalistic modes of government, calling for the decentralization of political power and increased democratic participation informed by 'actual relationships which invest people's lives with significance', but in so doing they often nostalgically appeal to some lost sense of community which can never be recaptured in large scale, anonymous industrial societies: if 'identity and morality are constituted by actual relationships of care between particular people, they will not easily translate to the wider political problems of world hunger, poverty and war, which involve vast numbers of unknown people' (1993: 21).

It is equally false, of course, to assume that a conventionally-conceived ethics of justice is sufficient to deal with such problems. Responses to crises and suffering amongst those we do not know is informed by an ethic of care which imaginatively extends to those we do not *personally* know but with whom we identify as human beings: the universality of the embodied self combines with the affectivity of our experience of particular relations to engender a motivational force which transcends the limitations of both ethics. A more fruitful conception of an ethics which incorporates both care and justice perspectives is one which can account for the diversity of roles, frequently conflicting, which individuals are obliged to assume in post-industrial societies: parent, worker, citizen, consumer and so on. That such response should involve more than simply personal charity and draw on abstract notions of rights and entitlements to engage with systemic causes of suffering and the structural means of alleviating it – for example, welfare entitlements – need not contradict but *augment* an ethic of care.

An ethics of care, therefore, once extended into the political domain of anonymous others, must have recourse to some idea of justice and universality, some mechanism of abstraction by which to evaluate moral action. This ethic would be distinguished from an ethics of justice in its recognition of the fact that many people, and (historically) especially women, are not independent choosers of their roles and duties but occupy such positions through circumstances external to the decisions of their autonomous moral faculty. Of course, the constitutive values and roles we inherit through our lifeworlds must not be accepted uncritically as always beneficial and valuable, but rather themselves the source of political conflict in as much as those values define what *is* political.

The misogynous devaluing of affectivity in moral theory through its association with the feminine cannot then be remedied by a simple categorical reversal which subordinates justice to care. The need to overcome any dualism in moral action is clear. If both spheres of morality are constructed by fundamentally patriarchal systems of social relations in which knowledge cannot be separated from power, *both* will be distorting and repressive: the masculine focus on justice may be said to historically produce or presuppose subjects unable to acknowledge interdependence on others just as an ethics of care will imply female subjects unable to distinguish adequately their own needs from those of others.[9]

While conceding the difficulties in translating the affective, particularist orientation of an ethic of care into the public, impersonal political arena, such feminist responses suggest that politics needs to forge a different kind of justice which avoids the repressive effects of universalism without losing its advantages.

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[9] Udovicki contends that in personal relations an ethic of care engenders expectations that if conflict occurs one's relationship with the other is not inevitably put in doubt, but rather that each occupies 'a place in the web' whose solidity is not endangered when conflict occurs. The moral focus can here be fruitfully shifted from the question of justice and rights, she contends, staking out one's own interests in conditions of conflict, to the principle of reciprocity. This expectation of reciprocity maintains both the autonomy of the person and the primacy of the relationship, sustaining without suppressing the tension between rights and the giving involved in a relationship, for without the 'condition of reciprocity the ethics of solidarity and care itself is distorted and violated' (1993: 56), aiming to allow the possibility of encumbrance without the loss of self.

A feminist ethic must indeed recognize our vulnerability to 'the inconsistent demands of different duties', thus overcoming the difficulties raised by both a traditionally conceived ethic of care and justice model. These tend to impose, in their different ways, unitary views of subject identity on moral agents as, respectively, autonomous or interdependent, chooser or recipient, universal or particular, actor or acted-upon. An ethic which can go beyond such dichotomies will be more answerable to the complexity of everyday lives and identities, to the subsets of local and global identities to which we may simultaneously belong and which may cut across a number of conventional distinctions. This will also enable a more fruitful interchange between feminist morality and politics (Mendus 1993: 25).[10]

Overcoming the dualism of universal vs. particular, reason vs. aesthetics in moral theory presents no simple task, and just what a more integrated version of rationality might look like is not at all clear. From the foregoing accounts, the relation between the cognitive proceduralism required of a discourse of rights and the affective-aesthetic realm of feelings remains implicitly in tension, and we might presume, following Habermas, that rights and principles ultimately take priority in the interests of a *social* ethic. That is, the question of justice, of an implicitly universal right to equitable treatment, remains at the heart of such revisions. So just how far have we departed from discourse ethics, with its insistence on the compatibility, or better simultaneity, of abstract normative rightness and empirical connectedness?

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[10] A feminist ethic must, according to Mendus, fulfill three criteria if it is to prove fruitful in generating a feminist politics:

> Firstly, it must avoid appeal to women's 'special' or 'different' voice, since the different voice is a domestic voice, and domestic virtues are deformed when they are translated into a public world. Secondly, and connectedly, it must reject liberal emphasis on the activity of moral life and concentrate instead on the extent to which moral obligations are associated with roles and are unchosen (in this sense, it must ally itself with the communitarian critics of liberalism). Finally, and most importantly, it must distance itself from communitarianism by insisting that the social contexts in which obligations arise are diverse and conflicting (1993: 26).

In the remainder of this chapter, I look more closely at the ways Habermas tries to reconcile these two modes of action, aiming as he does to transcend traditional oppositions between reason, desire and history by inhering motivational *and* rational elements of moral action in communication. The following section turns to the subjective level, and considers the role of aesthetics in forming the rational self.

2. The Foundations of a Postmetaphysical Justice

i) Collective Autonomy: The Process of Identity-Formation

Insofar as the concept of subjectivity is shifted from the ego to the relations between selves and the institutions that support them, Habermas avoids many of the pitfalls and originary dilemmas of monological, subject-centred philosophies. His conception of self is only established through others; the ego does not merely belong to the individual, but retains an intersubjective core. He understands the process of self-formation therefore to involve not the objectification of the other but a relation of subject-subject, of hearer-speaker which creates an affective bond at the same time as it enforces a recognition of absolute difference between subjects. Individuality is seen not so much as the product of given social types but as an active process of identity formation which emphasises the individual's 'own reflexive efforts to forge temporally stable and recognizable identities in the face of a plurality of role expectations' (Habermas 1992: 83): individuals do not own their identity like a possession but forge that identity over time through reciprocal recognition and the imputation of responsibility by others. Since each individual possesses the power of negation over the legitimacy of a validity claim, she justifies herself as unmistakable and non-substitutable (1991: 217). This self-identity as both distinct and indispensable yet also dependent on others is the precondition for speech acts and their claims to validity: both listener and speaker must assume the other to be a responsible actor before taking up a 'yes' or 'no'

position on an offered speech act. For Habermas, this much is assumed with the use of the performative 'I'; the structure of linguistic intersubjectivity encourages the speaker to remain herself 'even in the context of behaviour that conforms to norms' (1988: 11); she cannot, in other words, cast off her claim to be recognized as an individuated person, and hence is never simply reproducing social roles and expectations. The postconventional, decentred self required to fulfill the conditions of communicative rationality is only realized through dialogical process of argumentation over the validity of a claim, involving the imaginative projection of self not into some imaginary neutral or objective stance, but into the perspective of other discursive participants, allowing a cognitive learning process to occur wherein individuals can increasingly call into question their previously unexamined background assumptions, or, in other terms, to extend the horizon of their lifeworld.

On the level of subjectivity, then, the universal is redefined along the lines of a postconventional 'I' able to adopt a critical rather than conforming stance towards given norms (1992: xvii). The formation of this identity-stage hypothetically addresses a projected universal community of discourse: the unconditional moment of postconventional claims to validity – their transcendence of locality – is achieved through appeal to an unlimited community via the suspension of particular interests. Thus the non-identity of the 'I' of the other emerges *at the same time* as an impulse towards unity (Coles 1995: 25-6). Indeed, for Habermas the increased universality generated by a linguistically mediated consensus 'not only supports but furthers and accelerates the pluralization of forms of life...' (1992: 140). This understanding of the process of individuation offers a promising route out of archetypal science-culture, reason-desire, agency-structure dilemmas in social theory. Identity remains discursively constituted, but the requirement of general validity does not imply a totalizing identity; on the contrary it ensures respect for difference and individuality as much as it presupposes the commonality of shared meanings. Eschewing an idealized autonomous self as its

starting point, discourse ethics rather sees autonomy acquired through relationships: it thus understands autonomy as the right to detach ourselves from or question our cultural tradition, a chance to escape social dogma and prescribed roles, the *result* of a process of individuation, not its premise (Benhabib 1992: 72-4).

The advantage of this view of the subject is that its subversive strategies are not derived from any monological, Cartesian-self, any pre-discursive, libidinal impulse or the anonymous functioning of linguistic systems, but from rationally motivated social interaction. A discourse ethic which sees identity and will formation as a relational, communicative process avoids the hypostatization of subject positions in terms of identity and difference precisely because it sees subjectivities as fluid, multilayered and performative, and because the ideal of postconventional communicative interaction is self-reflexive and suspicious of convention and asymmetrical relations. Habermas thereby goes a long way towards overcoming the static individualism of many liberal moral theories.

He nonetheless demands much from the rational subject. The combination of universal and contextual judgement required by discourse ethics obviously calls for a level of 'hermeneutic skill' that must be supported by a high degree of critical reflexivity and flexibility of postconventional need interpretation (Habermas 1990b: 99-100). For these qualities to be fostered alongside our cognitive ability to recognize the procedural (generalizable) validity of claims, Habermas turns to the aesthetic sphere, where he invokes the creative and subversive potential of aesthetic expression, internally related but not reducible to (moral and constative) discourse as a means to challenge and transform culturally interpreted needs and values (White 1988: 83). Despite the apparent rationalism of his theory, here he reveals an acute awareness of the aesthetic-affective dimensions of the social.

ii) Subjectivity and Aesthetics

As we have seen, discourse ethics is part of a cognitivist, universalist tradition of moral theory based on the idea of equal treatment. It understands moral

experience in terms of judgement and justification, the *reasons* we are able to articulate in defence of our actions, privileging in Kantian fashion a cognitive, rational moral *right* over the more affective, practical action of an ethical *good*. Justice is not simply a matter of upholding the right of everyone to articulate their concerns and desires in public discourse, but to uphold only those claims that are *justified* through rational argumentative processes. Central to the universal validity of such justifications is the form or *modes* of thought opened up to us in modernity, rather than the *content* of that thought. The separation of spheres of knowledge and action in the modern era is viewed as the catalyst for the emergence of a postconventional society and the very possibility of critique. This is indeed an ethics which sees reflexivity as the keystone of modernity, a reflexivity specifically designed to counter anarchic, aestheticized approaches to ethics and critique, and to correct the earlier one-sided Frankfurt school view of reason as domination.

Aesthetics occupies a particularly important position here, for once freed from its moral and practical role in society it enables a creative, imaginative subjectivity able to play with social customs, detach itself from conventions and habits and disrupt the unreflective interpretation of lifeworld experiences. Following Peter Bürger's analysis, the increasing autonomy of aesthetics in the modern era in fact enabled the possibility of a reflexive political judgement in the first place (Jameson 1990: 178). Hence we can learn to become more self-critical subjects, to increase the transparency of our lifeworld and processes of identity-formation thanks to communicatively-generated transformations in the structures of social modes of thought. The motivation for morality doesn't merely involve cognitive reasoning therefore but experiential learning through communicative processes. On this account rationalization is emphatically not purely alienating; it is also liberatory, freeing the individual from conventional social bonds as well as instrumental imperatives. This is a process without which, Habermas points out, Derrida's

critique of reason as the myth of the western logos would not be possible (1990: 161-184).[11]

An autonomous aesthetics allows increased reflexivity and the imaginative ability to change perspectives, to forge access to non-discursive dimensions of experience and to loosen the rigidity of individual identity. It thereby permits the notion of 'ideal role taking' to function as a central motif of modern moral conduct.[12] Convention can then be increasingly questioned, particular and strategic interests become easier to identify, a hypothetical and distanced attitude towards norms becomes possible and agreement on procedural matters increasingly likely (1990b: 105). Aesthetic experience then accompanies a decentering which:

> indicates an increased sensitivity to what remains unassimilated in the interpretive achievements of pragmatic, epistemic, and moral mastery of the demands and challenges of everyday situations; it effects an openness to the expurgated elements of the unconscious, the fantastic and the mad, the material and the bodily – thus to everything in our speechless contact with reality which is so fleeting, so contingent, so immediate, so individualized, simultaneously so far and so near that it escapes our normal categorical grasp (1985: 201).[13]

Aesthetics opens us out, in other words, to the 'other'. Differing aesthetic interpretations alone cannot resolve any moral dispute, but can add to our body of interpretations and experience, our imaginative facilities which can then give us heightened insights into moral conflict (Warnke 1995b: 255-6).

Here we see a dialectical understanding of modernity, the implication of a permanent tension between aesthetics and reason, the lifeworld and modernity's reflexivity. Aesthetics participates in the process of rationalization both as an autonomous sphere and by permeating the everyday understanding embedded in communicative processes. But Habermas fails to develop this dialectics, nor

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[11] Kant's 'aesthetic disinterestedness' was the first form of aesthetic autonomy (Jameson 1990: 178).
[12] An idea which 'implies that subjects can reach communicative understanding only if they can put themselves in the role of the other' (Honneth 1995: 303).
[13] In modernist fashion, defamiliarization and detachment from everyday, instrumental concerns is seen as a formal effect of art, a form which is universalizable, in contrast to artistic *content*.

satisfactorily clarifies the role of aesthetics. Aesthetics either remains separated off from the moral-practical sphere, or is subordinated to it. The failure to endow aesthetics with a greater status in regard to discourse is problematic insofar as it continues to fulfill an integrative role, permeating everyday knowledge and providing the affective background conditions of moral action:

> We learn what moral, and in particular, immoral, action involves prior to all philosophizing; it impresses itself upon us no less insistently in feelings of sympathy with the violated integrity of others than in the experience of violation or fear of violation of our own integrity (1993: 76).

Reinforcing the objection we saw earlier, on this reading, solidarity gives rise to knowledge in a 'bottom up' movement, rather than emanating down to the everyday discursive level from higher principles, as at times implied in Habermas's emphasis on the unavoidable pragmatics of communication.[14] Another of Habermas's few passages explicitly devoted to aesthetics reinforces this point while at the same time demonstrating that despite his prioritization of reason over aesthetics, his work is not bereft of the legacy of the earlier Frankfurt School and its emphasis on the utopian and emancipatory potential of art:[15]

> If aesthetic experience is incorporated into the context of individual life-histories, if it is utilized to illuminate a situation and to throw light on individual life-problems – if it at all communicates its impulses to a collective form of life – then art enters into a language game which is no longer that of aesthetic criticism, but belongs, rather, to everyday communicative practice. It then no longer affects only our evaluative language or only renews the interpretation of needs that color our perceptions; rather it reaches into our cognitive interpretations and normative expectations and transforms the totality in which these moments are related to each other. In this respect, modern art harbors a utopia that becomes a reality to the degree that the mimetic powers sublimated in the work of art find resonance in the mimetic

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[14] As Thomas McCarthy suggests, 'the general idea seems to be that our wants, needs, feelings and emotions attitudes, sentiments, and the like are not normally shaped *directly* by the force of arguments' (1991b: 187).

[15] In the German Romantic tradition, art provides 'real cognitive value, while knowledge and morality are of secondary relevance. Art, therefore, facilitates the discovery of the frontiers of human knowledge' (Korthals 1989: 245).

relations of a balanced and undistorted intersubjectivity of everyday life (1985a: 202).

This passage emphasizes the cognitive function of aesthetics in discourse as well as its substantive, hermeneutic position in ordinary communication; aesthetics plays at once a sublimated role in everyday life, constitutive of our perceptions as such, yet also (recalling the previous quote) peculiarly oriented towards the marginal and the strange, the *non*-familiar. Implicitly, the imagination and the understanding are thereby able to assume a new and productive liaison, opening up possibilities for a more inclusive social integration and solidarity. But unless its hermeneutic powers can be *cognitively* retrieved it remains, implicitly, in the obscurity of an unreflective lifeworld. The lifeworld's moral and affective resources cannot be left in their non-cognitive, aesthetic-affective form; their emancipatory potential must be 'released' through formal, rational and reflexive theorization. In this light aesthetics becomes paradigmatic of a tension in modernity between the way communicative reason benefits from the specialization of expert spheres while at the same time such spheres become increasingly detached from everyday life. For Habermas this tension is constitutive of the paradox of modern rationality, the challenge to reintegrate dirempted spheres of knowledge with 'a tradition that continues to develop naturally in the hermeneutics of everyday communication' (Habermas cited in Piché 1991: 268).

On this understanding of aesthetics, Habermas appears to concur with a communitarian critic like Charles Taylor, for whom the motivation for moral conduct is not to be found in the structures of rational, postconventional discourse but in cultural values that are inculcated on a personal and subjective level (Taylor 1989: 51-52). Culture is the source of social values, affective feelings and morality; to attempt to derive these from ahistorical, universal principles is to deny the very wellspring from which they arise. Thus art and aesthetic experience becomes

central to the contemporary moral project: 'The great epiphanic work actually can put us in contact with the sources it taps' (Taylor 1989: 74). The motivational and aesthetic dimensions of action and thought are *there* in communicative action, but now in cognizable form: for Habermas, aesthetics also involves reflection and mediation, a reflexivity which cannot be divorced from cognition's universalizing faculties.

But this integrative role of aesthetics is unclear: despite his attempts to emphasize the *scientific* status of his theory, Habermas implicitly prioritizes the *cultural* conditions of postconventional morality. It becomes, in other words, rather ambiguous whether the learning process that occurs within a culture (wherein the particularism of a cultural language form evolves according to 'universal' standards of communication: an orientation towards understanding and democratic processes of argumentation and will formation) is propelled by the structures of communication or by culturally specific aesthetic and ethical forms. Morally antagonistic elements of aesthetics are subsumed within a lifeworld increasingly structured according to rational principles, a view that moreover increasingly diverges from alternative (postmodern) views of the aestheticization of everyday life.

More recently, however, Habermas's thought has appeared to undergo a change in regard to aesthetics, tending now to confine it to the realm of autonomous art, by-passing its integrative function. After Adorno and Derrida, he now claims that 'what can be accomplished by modern art can scarcely any longer be construed as "epiphany"' (1993: 74). Modern art has dissociated itself from any communicative function in society and even radically set itself *against* society, and can no longer therefore be 'tapped as a source for the moral' (1993: 74). Art's self-regarding, often elitist concerns become antipathetic to any *directly* moral or socially integrating role, therefore, and the antagonism of their respective ends means that Habermas is unable to conceive a coextensivity between aesthetics and rational discourse, any notion of a ready mediation between art and morality in

the modern era being illusory. In a postconventional society, discourse must replace iconographic cultural phenomena as sources of moral guidance. Contra Nietzsche, aesthetics cannot be used as a privileged, external perspective from which modernity can be viewed (White 1988: 149).[16]

In light of the pivotal role of aesthetics in everyday perceptive and hermeneutic functions, not simply in autonomous art, Habermas's exclusion of aesthetic content from rational discourse appears puzzling, if not downright at odds with its interpretative role. It may only be the highly conceptual, often self-referential avant-garde aspect of aesthetic activity that Habermas wants to exclude from moral discourse, yet he also ends up rejecting the mimetic-affective, that is, the physical, sensuous, figurative dimensions of discourse. Although the turn to discursive rationality does not mean to imply either a simple adherence to functionalism or universal modes of thought, non-cognitive, aesthetic-expressive modes of communication are extracted from and subordinated to the universal requirements of justice, and all that remains tolerable is a cognizable version of aesthetic action. Meanwhile, the vital constitutive role of aesthetics in everyday ethical and moral-practical interpretations is neglected.

The subordination and separation of aesthetics creates a tension that goes to the heart of Habermas's project. Habermas does not want to dissolve aesthetics and reason into one unified field, but insists on the specificity of philosophy's critical task quite distinct from aesthetic considerations. But because it is unclear whether art here refers to an autonomous avant-garde or the everyday aesthetics of communication, we are obliged to extrapolate Habermas's intentions indirectly. In general, discourse ethics attempts to mediate between the domination of instrumental reason on the one hand and a romantic rebellion against western reason on the other by presenting a rationality which succumbs to the rule of neither. In his critique of the 'colonization' of the lifeworld by system imperatives

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[16] For Nietzsche and his followers, consciousness in general is an aesthetic, corporeal effect, for which access to a universal mode of understanding is merely illusory.

and the role of aesthetics in expanding our moral imagination, we might say that he at least partially accepts the view, held by many critics of western rationality, that perception in modernity has been co-opted by instrumental cognition but that it retains subversive potential in its recognition of non-identity, achieved through non-universalizable aesthetic faculties of knowing rather than a unitary cognition. On this view, it would not be a matter of allowing art to remain distinct from morality, cognition and everyday life, but to marshall its reflexive forces in the interests of political judgement. Aesthetics would therefore hold a kind of relative autonomy, or, independent dependency with discursive forms of cognition. Neither purely aesthetic, communicative or instrumental relations among people and nature would suffice for a truly emancipated society, in other words.

Yet this effort to reintegrate aesthetics and reason in communicative rationality stands in tension with the separation of the universal right and the particular good. As we have seen, how a norm is justified is a procedural question of the right; how a norm is applied, on the other hand, or whether a norm is appropriate to apply, brings in the values, needs, and expectations of those involved. Empirically, therefore, what counts as the better argument also engages our aesthetic interpretations; the critical revision of our needs, dependent on 'intersubjectively shared evaluative languages', is guided or motivated by the transformative power of aesthetic experience (1993: 90). Needs and desires articulated in practical discourse must be evaluated according to universal standards of rationality, yet they are irrevocably linked to culturally specific values. Norms must therefore grapple with actual actions situated within an already interpreted cultural sphere: '...any universalistic morality is dependent upon a form of life that meets it half way' (1990b: 207).

Benhabib however has forcefully argued that issues of justice and those of care cannot be clearly distinguished in practical moral questions (Benhabib 1992: 178-202), implying that the strict separation of spheres of knowledge and moral action is *untenable* in the process of rationalization, a process characterized by the

challenge to *reintegrate* these spheres appropriately. Indeed, the 'mutual permeability' of different spheres of knowledge and experience which modern aesthetics makes possible is designed to avoid the dominance of any one mode of rationality and provide a critical space where interpretation and evaluation can occur on different levels, and according to different criteria (Wellmer 1991: 94). On this view, we might better retain Habermas's earlier understanding of aesthetics as a means to reach beyond the bounds of art or taste, to ideally lead to a model of reflexivity which can extend the bounds of *all* genres of reason. The strict distinction between justification and application becomes at best irrelevant, directing attention away from the ongoing struggle between tradition and reflexivity, or from the task of reintegrating conflicting experience and knowledge.

The tension in the status of aesthetics – and the cultural sphere *tout court* – indeed makes it difficult to sustain any stable distinction between the right and the good, or the moral and aesthetic-affective realms. On the one hand the aesthetic-affective is always already a dimension of everyday life and our interpretations of it; the solidarity engendered here fulfilling one of the conditions of modern reflexivity, and our experience of everyday social relations providing the hermeneutic knowledge required for the application of norms. On the other hand, in so far as social interaction in a post-conventional society permits the increasing contestation of conventions and norms through learning processes quite *autonomously* from cultural particularities, aesthetics is marginal to rational discourse, only coming to the fore in its formal ability to access the unassimilated and non-familiar. The motivational conditions of morality, solidarity, care, trust, and responsibility are forged through untrammelled, everyday intersubjective communicative interaction, Habermas admitting that the motivation to act rationally depends not only on cognitive but *affective* conditions, and that there is no direct motivating force, or at best a weak one, to be found within rational

argumentation itself (1993: 33-35).[17] Yet at the same time Habermas has always defended the cognitive rather than affective grounds of rational discourse: the institutionalization of a procedural discursive democracy is enough to protect against varieties of cultural and aesthetic oppression, eschewing the need for pre-existing high levels of civic virtue or other extra-discursive motivational grounds for communicative action.[18]

Clearly, communication is not simply a cognitive interaction, but incorporates the affective, aesthetic and hermeneutic qualities necessary for practical and ethical judgment. The emergence of an aesthetically autonomous, reflexive, transgressive subjectivity, a subjectivity with increasing sensitivity to otherness, plays no small part in this cognitive achievement (1985a: 201). But from Habermas's perspective, the primacy of the aesthetic-affective aspect of communication rationality cannot be admitted: if we were to accept that the ability to engage in moral action required a certain attitude disposing us towards such interaction in the first place, an attitude which itself depends on the aesthetic-expressive sphere, then the possibility of generalizing our moral actions and opinions through processes of argumentation *not* governed by particular aesthetic concerns would be lost. The problem here is that Habermas thereby tends to view aesthetics almost solely in terms of its functionality in regard to moral practical and cognitive discourse (Korthals 1989: 246); that is, as an extension of our cognitive faculties.

If we make a distinction, following Scott Lash, between the semiotic elements of aesthetics (signifying or communicating on Saussurian, linguistic terms) and the mimetic (signifying 'iconically', through resemblance) we can say that Habermas

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[17] Normativity and rationality alone cannot sustain an *existential* understanding of the self or world (Habermas 1993: 81).

[18] The paradox between increased technical-scientific-administrative rationalization and the concomitant oppression of lifeworld rationalization that Steven White points out can be extended to the aesthetic-expressive; precisely because aesthetic-expressive claims are not generalizable they are therefore not strictly part of social processes of communicative or strategic rationalization; increased rationalization within the lifeworld of strategic spheres might be seen therefore to lead automatically to the increased suppression of this dimension, pushed aside in favour of generalizable moral-practical and instrumental concerns (White 1988: 136).

is concerned almost exclusively with the former, an aesthetics more highly mediated by the subject than the latter (Lash 1994: 138): the figural and corporeal, ineffable, idiosyncratic, or non-reflexive aesthetic dimensions tend to be pushed out of consideration completely.

There is an alternative reading of Habermas's treatment of aesthetics which merits consideration, however. Habermas's relegation of aesthetics to a secondary position may not necessarily be a reflection of its importance in the scheme of things, but of the inherently *aesthetic* character of communicative action itself. I argue that his theory might usefully be understood as a kind of 'rational' aesthetic that is coextensive with a certain ethical view of the world. In this regard we might recall that Habermas's re-conceptualization of reason as communicative and not only instrumental aims to incorporates the affective dimensions of interaction in reason itself. The concept of communicative action purports to *transcend* the reason-desire dichotomy by encompassing both cognitive *and* aesthetic-affective faculties. Understood dialectically, as an autonomous but interrelated component of rational action, aesthetic experience itself becomes a rational motive for increased reflexivity. Indeed, Terry Eagleton even likens Habermas's ideal discursive community with the abstraction and autonomy of a work of art in relation to our everyday, 'interest-filled', purposive lives (Eagleton 1990: 405).[19]

To support this idea of communicative ethics as an aesthetic achievement in the broadest sense, I will turn now to a more general inquiry into the foundations of communicative ethics. This leads towards a conclusion to my extended discussion of Habermas.

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[19] Eagleton also comments on the parallels between Kant's notion of the commonality of the faculties, most apparent in the deep community of aesthetic judgement, and Habermas's principles of communicative reason (Eagleton 1990: 405).

3. A Rational Aesthetics

i) An Ontology of Identity

As I argued in the introduction to his thesis, questions of foundational premises, both epistemological and ontological, remain fraught for postmetaphysical critical theory, struggling to legitimize its critique of ideology without itself coming under suspicion. Postmodernists purport to avoid such epistemological dilemmas by privileging, in a both rhetorical and philosophical move, difference over identity, substance or presence, and by avoiding any substantive claims to knowledge. It is the relations between words and concepts that constitute meaning, not any object or state of affairs they 'represent'.[20] Communication is thus characterized as radically disjunctive, meaning does not exist in a disembodied form, waiting to be appropriated by, or passed between subjects. For Habermas on the other hand meaning is produced in conjunction with other speaking subjects; those subjects produce themselves through this interactive process as much as they produce meaning. Iterability also produces meaning, in this case, but it is does not inevitably disperse it; rather meaning is *confirmed* by transmission.

This fundamental difference between a modernist unity and postmodern dispersal is underpinned by quite disparate views on the nature of 'reality' and our relation to it, an opposition that forms a recurring theme in this thesis. What is at stake in these debates is an ethics that, on the one hand, implicitly favours the abstract, universalist ideals of enlightenment thinking – the reciprocity, symmetry, telos of understanding inherent in communicative processes and the critical, 'forceless force' of the better argument – and on the other an ethics which suspects

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[20] Derrida thus argues that all ideas are representations of another idea, and that therefore all ideas are already 'outside' themselves (1994), while Lyotard argues that language is an agonistic system of competing phrases, phrases which *must* differ from each other as they link onto the preceding one. See chapter 3: 123-125.

the unifying impulse of such procedural norms and celebrates diversity over unity, the quasi-anarchic play of an *unregulatable* moral impulse. As Scott Lash comments, what might assume the form of freedom of agency in Habermas's theory of 'reflexive modernization' may be 'just another means of control for Foucault, as the direct operation of power on the body has been displaced by its mediated operation on the body through the soul' (1993: 20).

What are the philosophical grounds of this opposition? For those on the 'modernist' side, questions of empirical truth and truthfulness cannot be bracketed out of moral discourse 'without robbing it of its substance' (Wellmer 1991: 203). Moral problems are indeed only resolvable if there is possible agreement on interpretations, which in turn depends upon a unified or common experience of the empirical world, and an *a priori* agreement on moral assumptions and criteria.

In modern societies, this common experience is mediated through a number of different genres of knowledge. Communicative action prioritizes certain kinds of these genres over others: the primary, 'normal' use of language in public discourse is that oriented towards understanding and is characterized by clarity and sincerity, while poetics, humour, irony – aesthetic expression generally – is secondary and derivative, suspending clarity and sincerity in some way. For Habermas 'normal' speech carries a binding force in so far as actors are expected to defend the claims they make, a force suspended in fictive speech, but one that accords language its ethical status.[21] If the primacy of communicative over strategic or fictive speech is lost, then that binding force is no longer an automatically given function of language, and communicative ethics loses its claim to a *universal* pragmatics (White 1988: 30-35).

This 'normalcy' of language use is correlated with the notion of a basic unity and communicability of our experience of the world and our mimetic relation with nature. Objective experience – objectivity describing the realm of empirical

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[21] See Habermas, 1990: 185-210.

sensations and the objects that cause them – is not the same as truth, which requires intersubjective consensus on claims made about objectivity, but can make claim to truth if it is intersubjectively shared, and able to be articulated (1984: 9):

> Only against the background of an objective world, and measured against criticizable claims to truth and efficacy, can beliefs appear as systematically false, action intentions as systematically hopeless, and thoughts as fantasies, as mere imaginings (1984: 51).

What becomes contentious here is the assumption of the unity of our experience, a unity or commonality that is required even for the minimal requirements of a discourse ethic, the orientation towards consensus necessary to agree to basic *procedural* norms. This then feeds into a suspicion that Habermas's theory privileges existing meaning, representing an inherent conservatism which upholds the norms embedded in language. If all meaning and validity is intersubjectively construed, how can resistance to internalized norms be articulated if it is not accepted as valid by hegemonic forms of understanding, or if there is no commonly accepted form in which it can be expressed? We might then ask whether the reflexive flexibility and imagination of Habermas's postconventional subject adequately ensure against the strategic use of power.

As far as Habermas is concerned, if language is seen as working with contexts and meanings which 'shift endlessly without limit' (Coles 1992: 74), and if meaning is seen to reside not in a more or less stable, shared understanding but in particular, individual interpretations, then the conditions of communicative reason could not hold. Crucially, linguistic meaning generates *sufficient* unanimity and temporal continuity between discursive participants to animate the norms of communicative action. This affirmation of the 'real' is tempered by a critical reflexivity that puts distance between what is true and is what is *held* to be true. For Habermas, this is a universally valid distinction that arises from our ability to challenge the supposedly 'given' nature of beliefs as well as assume situated perspectives, to exchange discursive roles from participant to observer (Brand

1990: 125). Under these rational and reflexive conditions a truth claim can gain universal validity. A 'post-conventional' morality is reciprocal in just such a fashion, allowing us to rise above the confines of the particular realm of specific cultures to a (still of course situated) perspective which (hypothetically) makes claims to universality.

Universality in this sense does not imply *sameness* as much as a general validity that derives from a norm's openness to critique, empirical testing and transformation. It then becomes easier to understand how norms can be empirically and historically tested through the method of 'rational reconstruction' to examine whether they are more universal than previous ones, whether cultural tradition is open and renewable, whether judgements are justifiable; in this procedural sense trans-historical and cultural claims *are* commensurable (Kelly 1990: 153). Meaning is thus not equated – in postmodern fashion – with the 'manifold of possible self–consistent interpretations' of a claim; it must convince us in its *particularity,* the context which directs us towards the 'author's intended meaning' (Soffer 1992: 251) on the basis of our own experience of first-person intended meanings, meanings which are at least *in principle* intersubjectively determinable.

It is important for critical theory to retain separable categories of knowledge, validity and their appropriate modes of argument. Categorical distinctions have, for instance, proved indispensable for women's historical struggle against patriarchy. Feminist critiques of science reveal the hidden patriarchal values masquerading as scientific claims to objectivity by unravelling the illegitimate transgressions of constative, regulative and expressive spheres of validity they contain (Longino 1993). The political and ideological intent of a statement such as 'women are better suited to child-rearing than men' may be clarified by explicitly unravelling the complex interconnection of cultural, scientific and political claims it contains. Such critique demands interrogation of the kinds of distinctions assumed between validity spheres in question: deconstruction of the

interpenetration of science and contingent, culturally-dependent beliefs. It must show that meaning does not simply hold an *arbitrary* relation to material reality, but is bound up with objectively experienced conditions and social relations of power.

An advantage Habermas holds over poststructuralist theories for feminist critique therefore is that it is able to keep open the connections between meaning, validity and the objective world of experience, retaining the material grounds of 'reality' and 'truth' which gives sense to the notion of ideology critique. While in actual public disputation participants are often unable to isolate questions of instrumental efficiency, political symbolism or moral desirability, we can nonetheless admit that public discourse obliges participants over time to critically examine and thematize their moral beliefs, developing explicit positions supported by reasons. Discourse about the triangular relation between meaning, validity and the objective world is after all unavoidable for a feminist critical theory. Retaining some notion of realism in politics – contra Lyotard, Foucault, Baudrillard et. al. – does not mean surrendering that reality to a homogeneous system: the empirical remains on the contrary 'proof' of the falsity of unifying systems of thought.

In his affirmation of the normative conditions of knowledge, therefore, Habermas differs radically from his postmodern counterparts. Discourse ethics is certainly deprived of its force if all social interaction is reducible to relations of power, if the possibility of communication without domination is denied. For Habermas, this is, in reverse, another totalizing gesture, and he is certainly right to object to any construal of the ethico-political as an irredeemably agonistic field. The principles of communication now take priority over conflict in so far as the commonality of shared meanings and the specificity of our relation with 'things in the world' – what could be seen as the trivial presuppositions of communication – is what makes disagreement *possible* (1992: 142). There can be no disagreement in other words without the basis of at least some shared meanings – including an

objective experience of the world – which makes that conflict significant. On this view, both agreement *and* dissent requires understanding. Dissent then is not a sign of an unworkable political system, but of a healthy discursive community: destructive political conflict occurs when one party considers the disagreement not in terms of a performative perspective, that is as a problem of failed processes of reaching understanding, but rather as an occurrence which can be empirically influenced. Language then loses its primary mediating role, and violence replaces it (1982: 246 & 1987: 277).

Habermas admits that the various genres of language use both enable the production and critical analysis of knowledge and set down the 'Law' in Derridean terms, suppressing the emergence of non-meaning. But he insists that this violence is inevitable; the best we can do is continually invent ways in which we avoid being bound by the very categorical, *a priori* restrictions we impose on ourselves, and open discourse is one of the best forseeable alternatives.[22] The tension between communication's orientation towards agreement and modernity's parallel orientation towards fragmentation and dissension is not therefore suppressed. Habermas does not pretend that rational discourse contains an opacity which always prevents perfect communication, nor that different genres of language do not have blurred if not overlapping boundaries, and hence we may assume that even a fully rationalized lifeworld must continue to grapple with its unconscious, affective and experiential memories and associations.

Far from being repressed, then, a cultural or aesthetic plurality of interpretations on any given issue is a condition of the legitimacy of any resolution achieved:

> The intersubjectivity of any linguistically achieved understanding is by nature porous, and linguistically attained consensus does not eradicate from the

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[22] Neither Habermas nor Derrida disagree in absolute terms on this point; Habermas does not argue for instance that the genre of any speech act is 'pure', nor that any expression does not also contain traces of the other or exceeds its intention or meaning, while Derrida admits the specific effects of different genres, and the 'relative purity' of performatives (Coles 1992: 80).

accord the differences in speaker perspectives but rather presupposes them as ineliminable (1992: 48).

Violence, exclusion and transgression are elements that must be confronted by rational discourse, but they are problems with society itself, rather than the concept of communicative reason. Habermas argues that for the time being rational processes are the best means we have to reduce violence, 'an attempt to exclude violence, if only to reproduce [it] internally again but in criticizable fashion' (Calhoun 1992: 479). While our available mode of representation may well be a tool of domination, therefore, we have little choice but to make the best of it. The admission of exclusion and particular interests in rational discourse need not contradict the norms of communication, but rather constitute an interpretative perspective which attempts to incorporate conflict, not to prioritize it, but to demonstrate its susceptibility to rational processes: the coordinating effects of language are after all *problem*-solving achievements. Presuppositions of rationality do not therefore 'impose *obligations* to act rationally; they *make possible* the practice that participants understand as argumentation' (Habermas 1993: 31). There is certainly no guarantee – or at times even hope – of consensus, but there is always the possibility of a rationally motivated agreement, an agreement to differ, to accommodate the 'other'. As Habermas's observes:

> Nothing makes me more nervous than the imputation...that because the theory of communicative action focuses attention on the social facticity of recognized validity claims, it proposes, or at least suggests, a rationalistic utopian society. I do not regard the fully transparent society as an ideal, nor do I want to suggest any other ideal... (1982: 235).

On an empirical level, at least, Habermas might just be able to agree with Foucault's comment that communicative reason is not a 'prediscursive providence which disposes the world in our favour' (Coles 1992: 82) The point is that Habermas does not view the opacity, misunderstanding and conflict which

permeates ordinary language to be a *sufficient* obstacle to achieving rational discourse; discrepancies, slippages and silences in communication should not be allowed to predominate in any analysis of language. Moreover, communicative ethics is not intended to prescribe substantive answers to political or moral dilemmas, but provide guidelines as to how arguments over them proceed. In this light, the presupposition of conflict as well as understanding becomes evident in Habermas's thought.

ii) Contested Foundations

In the face of a barrage of critical objections, many of which I have presented here, Habermas has progressively weakened communicative ethics's claims to transcendence, removing its status as an inevitable *empirical* outcome of social interaction. But many critics nonetheless find the *necessary* status of these pragmatic principles – as abstracted as they are – untenable. There remains in particular a tension between the 'metacritical' status of reason and its empirical grounding, especially problematic in the light of Habermas's claim that, since first principles have been rejected, the empirical is to be used as a testing ground for communicative action. Critical theory is now 'grounded' by putting 'rational reconstructions of supposedly basic competences on trial and [testing] them indirectly by employing them as input in empirical theories' (Habermas quoted in White 1988: 130). This testing results in the conclusion that the normative grounding of his theory ultimately resides in everyday moral action, in the ethical life of communicative action in the lifeworld rather than in any transcendental justificatory argument (Apel 1992: 134). But as Apel points out, this grounding in empirical ethical life is inconsistent with Habermas's defence of the 'primacy of morality's function of setting universalistic standards' (1992: 150ff) for this conclusion cannot be gleaned from empirical evidence alone. Tellingly, Habermas provides no clarification of the kind of empirical testing he envisages as justification of his theory, but continues to rely on its philosophical, rather than

empirical arguments, trying to avoid recourse either to metaphysical reasoning as a foundation for his ethics, as Apel believes would be more consistent (although itself problematic), or the contingency and particularism of empirical experience (1992: 150).[23]

For those sympathetic with Habermas's project, this objection to the 'scientific' status of the justificatory foundations of Habermas's theory does not necessarily present a difficulty: the moral imperative of the *ought* now simply comes to the fore in place of the *is*. However, it no longer becomes possible to point to the distortion of discursive interaction premised on the ideals of equality and reciprocity, merely to argue for the desirability of those ideals (Rasmussen 1990a: 45). As might be expected, Habermas strongly fights against any reduction of philosophy to the arbitrary struggle between vocabularies, attempting to preserve the force of his 'rational reconstruction' in what *must* be presupposed to make sense of the world. The analytical and critical force of his theory need lose little however if his reconstruction is read as interpretative, following the line of Kant's third critique: in such a case, 'reason must conduct itself *as if* such ideas could be embodied as possible objects of experience, and hence such ideas, though counterfactual, are not mere fictions' (Power 1993: 39).[24] This admission does not entail renouncing the idea of universality or rationality in ethics: such categories can now be viewed as a particular kind of *cultural* form rather than transcendental or ahistorical. As such they need not 'cast us adrift in a sea of mere conversation' (Power 1993: 44), but rely on reasons which must stand up to critical examination. In light of the *practical* importance of application in moral action, where

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23 The issue is an age-old one; whether Habermas can sustain a moral code without recourse to actual practice *or* metaphysics (Rasmussen 1990a: 66).
24 Michael Power's discussion on the nature of Habermas' transcendental argument suggests an alternative way to interpret the principles of communicative action which avoids any problematic claim to prove the necessary conditions for any experience. Habermas's transcendental arguments cannot be sustained as 'strong' (logically demonstrable) claims but more modestly as 'deeply hermeneutic', read as a response to philosophical scepticism. Reinterpreted in this way, they are comparable to Kant's 'regulative ideas', carrying an 'as if' status which define the argument's worldview, as it were, providing the *intelligible* rather then necessary conditions for a claim rather than any absolute delimitation of those conditions (1993: 29).

procedural, rule-guided principles may become secondary (but not irrelevant) considerations, 'intuitive' moral responses, or what Wellmer terms perceptual judgement, need not be deemed irrational: they may not be dependent on rules but are nonetheless able to be defended by *reasons*, based on experience which has transcended the need to rely solely on principles as moral guidelines (Wellmer 1992: 183). Moral structures are not transcendental but historical, implying an *ethical* aesthetic of a particular, modernist form rather than any necessary moral motivation or fixed rules of moral action.[25]

The absence of transcendental foundations does not reduce discourse to a relativistic renunciation of argumentation and criteria of validation, but implies a continued reliance on good reasons we can bring to bear to convince others through appeal to individual and intersubjectively shared experience. This approach goes some way to resolving the polarity of the transcendental and the empirical in Habermas's thought, as transcendental arguments are seen as contextual interventions in domains of inquiry which are themselves open to critique and reflection. Rational reconstructions, being the outcome of interpretation, position the practical and the ethical prior to the theoretical, in accordance with Habermas' rejection of theories of consciousness. They are never merely descriptive but posit critical revisions of their object.

If the metacritical status of transcendental arguments hold no necessary or binding force, we might then go on to admit that Habermas's position is ultimately an *aesthetic* one in so far as it is a matter of ethical preference and cannot be grounded in any transcendental or *a priori* unity of experience. This historical dimension is already an important component of discourse ethics. In

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[25] Ultimately, as Benhabib observes, viewing the normative principles of communication as 'universal pragmatic presuppositions' of speech acts corresponding to the know-how of competent 'moral' agents at the postconventional stage cannot hold, as there is more than one way of depicting such moral reasoning (1990: 338). His reconstructive science can hence claim no special philosophical status in regard to hermeneutic or deconstructive narratives; what distinguishes Habermas's from the latter is its 'empirical fruitfulness in generating further research, [its] viability to serve as models in a number of fields, and [its] capacity to order and to explain complex phenomena into intelligible narratives' (1986: 269).

contrast to a common view amongst critics of western reason that modernity increasingly *circumscribes* experience, reducing it to a 'mere idiosyncratic feeling of emotional intensity', divorced from any general structures or social forms (Schulte-Sasse 1984: xxxi-x), Habermas insists that it also expands experience, enabling heightened sensitivity to sublimated forms of communication. If we take up this dialectical understanding of reason as both instrumental and communicative, the rigidity of communicative principles breaks down even further. The cultural achievement of an extension of perspective structures, combined with the idea of equity, now underpins the notion of universality in discourse ethics, rather than any ahistorical or totalizing unity.

4. Ethics and the Dialectic of Reason and Aesthetics

Where do the foregoing arguments leave Habermas's discourse ethics in relation to the critiques raised throughout the last two chapters? On the positive side, communicative ethics possesses significant affinities with feminist critical theories, sharing with the latter an intent to overcome the normative and conceptual deficiencies of previous Marxist critical theories (Johnson 1994: 99). The advantages that inhere to Habermas' position are not insignificant. It avoids the possibility of a Stalinist or fascist appropriation by rejecting any Althusserian-style epistemology: the idea of a science/ideology split or external vantage point makes no sense where knowledge is construed intersubjectively, truth/falsity connotations giving way to the idea of distorted or blocked communicative interaction wherein democratic *process* replaces *outcome* as the criteria of truth and rightness. It nevertheless retains a materialist foundation in as much as justice is not purely procedural but depends on the interpretation of needs and interests in the application of moral principles. Feminism as a new social movement for instance is not construed as purely an 'identity-oriented' or interest-based

movement, a purely cultural or economic phenomenon, but a complex mixture of strategic, normative and expressive-aesthetic modes of action (White 1988: 124).

Philosophy can no longer legitimately prescribe any notion of the good life, a stance which would be unacceptable in terms of the degree of autonomy demanded by the 'I' of a mature, postconventional, yet intersubjectively constituted individual. Individuality is hence seen not so much as the product of given personality types but as a social process which allows space for individual agency; its 'own reflexive efforts to forge temporally stable and recognizable identities in the face of a plurality of role expectations' (Johnson 1994: 66-67). Far from provoking repression increased universality and self-reflexivity is seen to *increase* sensitivity to asymmetrical power relations between discursive participants. Habermas thus offers us a view of community which strives to achieve a balance between individualism and commonality: the individual must be protected from 'complete absorption' into its particular context, wherein the commonality of social life is lost, just as much as it must be protected from submersion into universals (Habermas 1992: 48).

The mutual recognition of subjectivity does stem in a sense from the breakdown of meaning, but this is not only an alienating event: it is also *liberating* in so far as it frees subjects from pre-modern, pre-reflexive, conventional modes of thought which cannot be questioned. Meaning now must be continually created, challenged and confirmed through discourse, admittedly privileging cognition over pre-modern, non-conceptual, iconographic modes of being, but at the same time allowing space for those mimetic modes of being to co-exist, even multiply, since it is only within a rational framework that their potentially repressive aspects can be guarded against

Dreyfus and Dreyfus's critique of rule-following in a universalist ethics can also be answered. The fact that rules may frequently be transcended or broken in actual ethical action does not mean that they are not needed in unfamiliar cases, or to provide guidelines in broader, more abstract (often political and social) moral

questions. It is not a matter of discourse ethics *neglecting* Carol Gilligan's[26] classical objection to traditional malestream moral philosophy that it does not account for the traditionally feminine moral voice: one of contextual, personal relations of support and emotional involvement rather than a detached, rule-oriented masculine orientation. This 'other' voice is incorporated via the immanent norms of communication oriented towards a more 'caring' personal ethics, one which takes as its starting point participation in an intersubjective process of understanding, revealing, and defining ourselves and our cares, responsibilities and commitments *at the same time* as it involves establishing standards of argumentation and the limits of particular discourses. The moral expertise which comes from involvement in social interaction still requires the capacity for self-reflective thought, the reversibility of perspectives, the ideals of equality, mutual respect and responsibility, or else the capacity to evaluate the rightness of the individual's ethical intuition is lost, and there is no way to distinguish between repressive particular responses to a situation and emancipatory ones: '[o]nly one who is able imaginatively to represent to herself the variety and meaning of the human perspectives involved in a situation can also identify its moral relevance' (Benhabib 1990: 362).

The requirement of consensus also becomes increasingly irrelevant. This loosening of the imperative for consensus as a foundational principle of communication is important, for without the flexibility to challenge existing norms which are based upon historically embedded consensus and to forge a new value which may be, for a while at least, held only by a few, *rational* social change is impossible to envisage. If it is to be coherent, communicative ethics must suspend the immediate, realizable demand for consensus, allowing a high degree of rational conflict-in-process as norms are challenged, defended, rejected, and transformed.[27] What a community agrees is true, therefore, is not necessarily

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[26] Among others – see Margaret Urban Walker, 1993.
[27] On this weakening of the demand for consensus, see Habermas's writings on the struggle for rights carried out by 'new social movements' (1985).

accepted as universally warranted; the claim must first fulfill the rational requirements of finding a possible agreement within an extended, universal community. There is a distinction in other words, between *meaning* and *validity* which differentiates Habermas's theory from other liberal accounts, and gives it its critical edge.

His refusal to enter into theoretical discourse about the substantive outcome of normative discourse is a refusal to prescribe needs and values which can only be formed, challenged and transformed through public dialogue. Habermas seeks only to establish those formal structures through which all members of a community might gain a public voice, sustaining the function of critique without succombing to the prescriptive dangers of substantive concepts of subjectivity. Critique can no longer occupy any external vantage point, but can only be carried out through the self-understanding of participants: how else, he asks, can exclusion and repression be critically assessed except through 'procedures that all parties presume will provide the most rational solution at hand, at a given time, in a given context?' (Calhoun 1992: 467). That these procedures stabilize substantive, cultural and aesthetic principles is not contested. Habermas's project may indeed be viewed as a challenge to the 'bad' aestheticism of Nietzsche and his followers, who see taste as the sole organ of knowledge (Bernstein 1991: 207), leaving themselves open to the reactionary, conservative side of aesthetics, to a narrow patriotism, nationalism, and an uncritical reverence for traditions.

At the same time, however, the weaknesses in Habermas's theory should not be downplayed. Returning to the ethics debate with which we began this chapter, a number of incisive commentators have argued that Habermas cannot convincingly demonstrate how the affectivity engendered by personal relations is translated into far more abstract, universal moral conduct through discursive structures alone. Axel Honneth points out that relations of care cannot be universally assumed since they presuppose a particular value community, a presupposition which cannot consistently support the supposedly ethically *neutral*

framework of discourse ethics (Honneth 1995: 318). Habermas can neither explain how the affective experience of common concerns and responsibility translates into a cognitive universalism, nor how, if any common ethos of modern life has been lost, this solidarity can be purely cognitively forged (Benhabib 1986: 321). The moral sensitivity accompanying aesthetic autonomy on this reading is indeed a cultural rather than structural accomplishment. Habermas confuses the empirically given with the normative, sliding between the *ought* and the *is*: what *should* be in a postconventional society, the reflective and integrative use of different knowledges and experiences, is transformed into an implicitly already existing condition, ignoring the potentially ideological, figurative dimension of aesthetics in modern society by shifting the level of analysis onto a higher plane of abstraction: general rather then concrete structures of communication.

More than this, however, any solution to antagonistic strategic and aesthetic social forms indeed appears to be hampered by his neglect of the aesthetic realm. If aesthetic content can no longer play any directly emancipatory role in modernity, its destructive potential within discourse is simultaneously ignored, and it becomes difficult to see how aesthetics can emerge from the shadow of a universal reason to participate with the moral-practical in any emancipatory function. Although Habermas does not deny that domination and oppression reside not only in the incursion of steering subsystems into the lifeworld, but in the often unconscious symbols, beliefs and values of the lifeworld itself, his faith in the ability of rational discourse to increasingly expose its embedded injustices by virtue of the general structures of communication itself, rather than any substantive commitment, say, to women's welfare, seems to assume an unworkably optimistic relation between rationality and aesthetic motivation. How can we be so sure that the subliminal forms, images and prejudices that shape our cognitive responses to the social world are always potentially transparent, able, ultimately, to be subject to the processes of our moral reckoning? Despite his attempts to theorize a contextual and non-metaphysical self, the suspicion here is

that Habermas presupposes and conflates the universal desirability, possibility and actuality of its reflexive subject which many see bearing a striking resemblance to a hegemonic, white, Western, traditionally masculine subjectivity.

Despite his attempts to incorporate expressive and affective elements into his theory of individualization, Habermas's ethics privileges cognition, viewing corporeal, performative, 'irrational' elements of communication and representation as always potentially communicable in discursive form. These elements may not so easily be subordinated to cognitive processes, but may in fact be intrinsic to rationality itself, indeed be constitutive of the very preconditions of subject identity. Admittedly, communicative ethics does not presuppose that participants will bring to bear pre-formed, discrete 'wills' to the discursive process but rather that the process of will-formation occurs *through* discourse. Benhabib pertinently objects however that his theory overly restricts the moral domain to self-*other* virtues, neglecting self-regarding virtues and self-interpretative aesthetics by understanding self-identity as intimately linked to judgements of self-other relations, rather than the integrative processes by which different social identities are formed (Benhabib 1990: 349). This tends to elide the aesthetic, dramaturgical and figural elements of discourse, distorting the dimension of perception and aesthetics as an alternative paradigm of identity formation by refusing to admit the significance of those aspects which *cannot* be translated into propositional form. If subjective responses, feelings and attitudes can always be measured against an intersubjectively-shared, linguistically-constituted materiality, rather than being dispersed through a more radical heterogeneity of forms, then the field of valid claims risks being narrowed to what is potentially always intersubjectively intelligible and thus articulable in a rational claim, exhibiting an intrinsic bias away from the idiosyncratic. By extension, analysis of cultural forms of domination may also be restricted to an overly narrow type, that characterized by the colonization of communicative reason by strategic or instrumental action, action conceived in primarily rational terms, cognizable,

unitary and communicable. Habermas's emphasis on communicative reason as *inter*subjective therefore sees him neglecting the possibly heterogeneous experiential and interpretative dimensions of self-identity, as well as the private, aesthetic domain of sense and pleasure, those realms not immediately accessible to symbolic representation or communication: can the subliminal elements of politics, the 'moral panic', or the enthusiasm of the crowd, be purely *cognitively* regulated?

It is when we consider the possibility of knowledges which can only be shown, perceived and not said, that the overly narrow focus of communicative ethics is revealed (Dalmiya & Alcoff 1993: 241). This perspective points to Habermas's failure to incorporate the insights of Adorno's critique of 'identity thinking'[28] and his – as well as, more recently, feminism's – emphasis on the body as both site and origin of knowledge. The collective symbolic representation of a cultural tradition alone may not be adequate to express the felt needs of its community, or the communities it contains: as Levin pertinently asks, 'so long as the body of needs is ignored, how can "internal nature" be "moved into a utopian perspective?"'(Levin 1991: 127). His cognitive ethics does not in the end appear able to generate the emancipatory ideals needed to overcome these systemic forces: 'Habermas, like Hegel, simply forces aesthetic rationality into the mould. For him, there will always be something unintelligible about a form of reason which does not fit with science and morality' (Rasmussen 1990a: 100).

Habermas's is primarily a critical theory of cognitive reflexivity; the point is to incorporate a theory of *aesthetic* reflexivity – mimetic as well as conceptual – which links onto social structures and systems; onto administration, commodities, or the reification of life-forms (Lash 1994: 140). But it must also account for the *limits* of

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[28] Whereas for Kant reason, principally required to engage in cognitive and normative judgement, is characterized by the subsumption of a particular under a universal, his notion of aesthetic judgement, relying on intuition and imagination, subsumes a particular under a particular (Lash 1993: 9). Kantian aesthetic judgement already begins to approach Nietzsche's notion of textuality or Derridean écriture, in that the subject loses powers of subsumption in its particularization. The object, for its part, for Nietzsche and for Derrida, is never found in its pristine form as particular, but is always already partly universalized – as text or écriture – and hence is unsubsumable.

reflexivity; non-reflective, corporeal and mimetic experience which exceeds discourse. Symptomatic of a failure to pursue the dialectical insights his work already contains, Habermas cannot easily move beyond the cognitivism of universal/particular, reason/poetics dichotomies to posit a more radical integration of knowledge and experience that incorporates the figurative, the body, or the emotions. As it stands, therefore, no really satisfactory defence of discourse ethics can then be given to such observations as Lash and Friedman's, which contends that although Habermas has provided 'a necessary point of reference for resistance to the excesses of postmodernism's onslaught', his high modernism 'of the ought' nevertheless reproduces Weber's thesis that we are 'fated to be free', privileging cognition and judgement over a 'low modernism' of perception, sensation, aesthetics and the culture of everyday life (Lash & Friedman 1992: 2-5). This is not so much an attempt to conceive the non-conceptual, but to recognize the inevitable non-identical elements of social categories. The question now becomes how aesthetics can be more fully incorporated into a universal concept of morality, to account for *all* the ways of knowing, experiencing or representing that constitutes human communication.

The solution is not to abolish the concept of reason entirely, nor the abstractions and distinctions it involves, but to focus instead on its dialectical character; its intersubjective, aesthetic-affective, historical as well as instrumental dimensions. As a faculty which is both hermeneutic and ethical, mimetic and discursive, rather than metaphysical, reason must recognize the ultimate arbitrariness and dialectical identity of the boundaries it delineates *without* collapsing different modes of experience and genres of knowledge into an indistinguishable artifice.[29] The distinction drawn between reason and aesthetics (or philosophy and literary criticism) then become analytical categories, hermeneutic tools based on historical

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[29] Derrida, indeed, does not go so far as to collapse genre distinctions entirely, claiming that Foucault's equation of power and knowledge is deeply flawed in as much as it necessarily has 'resort to a different order of language, logic and validity claims' in order to make its critique of historical discourse (Norris 1992). Lyotard's agonistic politics is also centred on the incompatibility between different genres of representation, as we will see in chapter three.

contexts and culturally constructed modes of experience rather than universal structures of thought.

Even on Habermas's own terms, as generalizable norms lose their immediate relevance within a pluralist society, the importance of a high level of compatibility between cultural values and a postconventional morality increases. Procedures alone are not enough to ensure justice, but a concrete ethos permitting democratic, open discourse. This is not to say that the notion of universality can be relinquished, however. The ethical framework of a community participating in discourse on a Habermasian model must contain a high degree of tolerance for difference, but it cannot be rid of all universal moral prescriptions, or else political conflict would be irresolvable, and discourse itself constantly endangered. Universal principles remain at the background of moral action, but they are now understood more in terms of a meta-principle to ensure the conditions of discourse, conditions which cannot be separated from a practical reason which combines cognition, empathy and *agape* (selfless love) in a context-sensitive manner.

Insofar as they do not call into question the universalist framework of reciprocity and equal treatment, then, the foregoing criticisms do not necessarily oppose an intersubjectively-revised Kantian ethics (Honneth 1995: 301).[30] To emphasize the heterogeneous and homogeneous, literal and figurative, reflexive and non-reflexive dimensions of language within this framework can *supplement* the universalist framework of discourse ethics, rather than dismantle it. Habermas indeed insists that his theory does not rule out cultural analyses or a critique of contemporary social institutions. His theory is simply operating on another level: its categorical distinctions remain ideal types and not empirically verifiable, and cannot be directly translated into sociological analyses. Cultural critique then becomes complementary to communicative ethics, working within a certain

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[30] Honneth goes on to point out that even Lyotard's call for the coexistence of a multiplicity of local narratives cannot be understood outside the Kantian universalist paradigm of an implicit equal treatment for all.

methodological perspective (Habermas 1991: 247, 254).[31] On this view those who contest the status of Habermas's pragmatic presuppositions of language need not be caught in a 'performative contradiction', nor be seen to deny the possibility of consensus and unanimity, but rather trying to show how they eclipse the agonistic and dramaturgical dimensions of social interaction (Coles 1995: 34).

Only an anti-juridical approach along the lines of a Levinasian ethics wholly moves outside this universalist paradigm by eschewing the requirement of reciprocity *tout court*, looking towards the particularity and contextual embeddedness of the moral impulse (Bauman 1993a). This approach encounters substantial problems however when any attempt is made to apply it beyond the intimacy of ethical conduct to the structural domain of social action, and the need to transcend the dualism of an ethics of justice versus an ethics of care, with all their respective shortcomings, is clear. For women, especially, the danger in the loss of self associated with the encumbrance of asymmetrical relationships of caring must be countered, at least for the time being, by some condition of equity and reciprocity. Habermas's discourse ethics, with its emphasis on the coextensivity of abstract normative rightness and empirical connectedness, provides a safeguard in the form of a standard of reciprocity from which a social ethic might proceed; a standard which acts (as Habermas admits) more as a starting point than an end principle.

My critique of Habermas does not entail the reduction of language to aesthetics, then, nor the rejection of categorical distinctions within knowledge and experience; rather, it implies a recognition of the instability and dialectical nature of their identities. Whether inadvertent or not, the dualisms of universal and particular, freedom and unfreedom, mimesis and expression, understanding and the unknown all indeed remain in dialectical states of tension in Habermas's

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31 Bernstein points out that in Habermas's 'subtle dialectical interplay' of philosophical speculation and critical social science he has *practiced* what one would think ought to be a consequence of Derrida's own deconstructive strategy; in Derrida's work, however, there is no supplementation with critical empirical social research (Bernstein 1991: 224-5).

discourse ethics. It can be argued in fact that Habermas at times exhibits *more* dialectical sensitivity than either Adorno and Horkheimer or many postmodernist theorists, who are receptive almost solely to the negative movement of the Enlightenment (Bernstein 1991: 207). Habermas's dialectical understanding stops too soon, however, in the implicit faith in the unity and transparency of communication, failing to respect the specificity of non-linguistic aesthetic-affective dimensions. Although he largely acknowledges the non-identity within language, its simultaneous strategic *and* communicative character, there is an absence of anxiety or paradox in marked contrast to Adorno's earlier critical theory. Whether or not this is a rhetorical move, his formulation nonetheless allows us to 'read in' a state of tension between the aesthetic and the moral-practical realm. The tensions between these spheres, as we will see, is dissolved entirely in postmodern theories. Whereas in Habermas's case an 'aesthetic of oppression' might be overcome or at least acknowledged by its discursive articulation within a community, this appears far more difficult from a postmodern perspective, which refuses any non-aesthetic criteria to ground the moral-practical.

If in the end aesthetics and morality are neither as readily separable nor reconcilable under the framework of a procedural ethics as Habermas imagines, if he indeed cannot avoid presupposing a version of ethical particularism as the conditions of a rational discourse community, his theory has nonetheless preserved a space wherein the relations between these two categories can be articulated, rather than, as we will see in Lyotard, consigned to the sublime. Emphasis on the discursive, reflexive possibilities of aesthetics provides some important advantages over communitarian and Heideggerian critics who want a 'subjectivity increasingly freed from the realm of discourse and reflexivity and more fully acting from the lifeworld, of background assumptions, of habits of the heart' (Lash 1993: 14), or a Lyotardian poststructuralism which refuses the possibility of consensus and translatability between language games, wishing to

extend the particularist principles of aesthetic judgement to the sphere of morality at the expense of universalist judgements. Here, both parties wish to *restrict* the realm of reflexivity. For Habermas this is a regressive and dangerous move, signalling the abandonment of social order to irrationalism. That his formulation does not necessarily imply a totalization of the social and suppression of difference has been one of the primary aims of this discussion. Ethical reliance on an ungrounded, prudential 'art of judgement', itself dependent on the hermeneutic starting point of some particular, parochial context (Warnke 1995a: 130), may rest on far more utopian faith in the individual than any attempt to reconstruct a communicatively-based society.

The following chapter turns to the postmodern response to the dilemma of representation in critical theory, namely, Lyotard's aestheticized and agonistic politics. Where Habermas might be accused of an over-theorization of identity, Lyotard's emphasis on difference might evince a similar objection.

3. A Politics of the Sublime: Lyotard's Postmodernism

If, as I argued in the last chapter, Habermas's theory can be characterized by its subsumption of aesthetics into rational discourse, Lyotard's might be characterized by precisely the opposite manoeuvre, the displacement of rationality to a secondary position to the aesthetic-affective. His confrontation with Habermas is illuminating, therefore, especially since he eschews the apolitical orientation of much postmodern theory and directly confronts the pragmatics of difference in the social sphere. Lyotard directly addresses *ethical* and *social* questions, that is, and not simply textual and philosophical ones, in his consideration of how difference and multiplicity function under social conditions. This political stance provides a fruitful encounter with the issues I have dealt with over the preceding chapters. I hope to show that Lyotard's work also has much to offer a feminist critical theory, for his insistence on the fundamental role of feelings in discourse stands as a powerful corrective to the cognitive bias of communicative ethics. Indeed, Lyotard's critique of Habermas has been influential in framing the terms of debate between modern and postmodern politics; the notion of the 'differend' and its accompanying understanding of the non-rational, aesthetic basis of morality and language directly addressing Habermas's attempt to salvage late modernity at the hands of what he sees as an anti-rationalist onslaught.

This chapter will first examine the theoretical basis of Lyotard's thought, specifically the idea of justice articulated in his later 'philosophical' works, *The Differend* and *Just Gaming*. I will then put forward some critical responses, leading into a more general critique of postmodern ethics in chapter four. I conclude that

while the basis of a postmodern ethics lies in the political recognition of an aesthetic-affective basis of difference, its *emancipatory* aims can only coherently lead back to a more cognitively understood version of aesthetics, a reflexive, imaginative subject: towards, in short, a more dialectical understanding of reason and aesthetics.

1. The Logic of Difference

i) Lyotard, Discourse and Aesthetics

For Lyotard and many other theorists today the turn to postmodern theory represents not, as Habermas would have it, a political and moral retreat into irrationalism, but a means to move beyond modes of thought which have not proved able to satisfactorily respond to contemporary issues. Postmodern theory not only disputes the notion of language as a vehicle of communication, meaning understood as some unitary thing that passes between speakers, but questions the very notions of judgement and rationality in moral action.[1] From a postmodern perspective, Habermas's faith in the ready translation and compatibility between aesthetics and morality is an illusory one. He imputes an untenable homogeneity of discursively articulable needs, interpretations and experiences participants bring to bear to rational discourse, implying a unity and transparency between the world and language that merely represents another utopian grand narrative. Where Habermas views 'normal' language use as primarily functional communication, if not always instrumental – the mode of social organization, action and cohesion possessing a telos which lies outside itself – Lyotard argues that this interpretation cannot fail to reify the relation between language and the world. This is not the only form of language, but one that unduly privileges the system's own interests and point of view (Lyotard 1984: 16). Lyotard contends

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[1] Zygmunt Bauman, as we will see, suspends the act of judgement altogether, presenting an ethics not of toleration but of 'friendship' in the sense of a responsibility to towards the other (Lash 1993: 17).

(not entirely fairly, as I hope to have established in the preceding chapters) that discourse ethics entirely misses the agonism and heterogeneity of language and the social, exemplified in the supposition that the modern logos is able to separate out myth from rational discourse, a notion Lyotard views as not only mythical itself but dangerous. The danger here lies in an inability to accommodate the silence and incommensurability witnessed in the differend, the painful feeling that women, among others, have experienced, that 'what remains to be phrased exceeds what they can presently phrase' (1988a: 13).

Despite somewhat overstating the dangers of Habermas's position, Lyotard's notions of the unpresentable constitute an important defence against the tendency toward representational transparency and consensus in any understanding of communication. Postmodernism's anti-cognitivist stance has the advantage of rejecting any narrow view of moral agency as realized through linguistic, 'assertive' acts of judgement, and potentially opens up a far wider field of moral action and motivation which incorporates the affective body, not just a rational *cogito*. Neither does it lose its emancipatory focus; justice now has to find its way 'around' consensus (Lyotard 1984: xxv), for the totalizations of consensus do violence to the plethora of social realities which do not fit into any pre-determined structures. There is no question here that philosophy already knows its projects, questions, and modes of judgement; rather, philosophy must be constantly prepared for the 'differend', the point of disjunction, untranslatability and injustice between phrases.

It is in regard to aesthetics, as my previous discussion has foreshadowed, that the differences between the two become most apparent. In this respect Lyotard's position is almost directly opposed to Habermas's. The latter's subsumption of aesthetics into communicative structures contrasts with Lyotard's neglect of the intersubjective and symbolic dimensions of aesthetics. As one critic argues, putting Lyotard's case,

it is precisely the question of the aesthetic that reveals most clearly...the limits of the theory of communicative action, inasmuch as it is a throroughgoing philosophy of the concept. If, as thought by Adorno and Lyotard (following Kant), aesthetic feeling is irreducible to any conceptual and argumentative procedure, to any communicational activity whatsoever, then the pragmatic theory of communication remains, in spite of everything, partial, and even suspect of doing violence... (Prado 1992: 358-359).

On these terms, Habermas does not consider aesthetics in terms of the sublime, which allows space for the unknown and the unspeakable nature of art, but conceives of art in terms of beauty, which judges and determines its substantive content according to pre-existing criteria (Lash 1990: 109). The logic of propositionality is in this way extended to the aesthetic.

From the standpoint of communicative ethics, Seyla Benhabib also points to the aesthetic as the site of difference between the two approaches:

> The issue...is not whether Habermas privileges the metagame of truth but which view of language is more adequate: one that sees language as a *cognitive* medium through which norms of action coordination, patterns of interpretations of cultures, and frameworks for the exploration of our needs and desires are generated, or a view that regards language as an *evocative* medium, in which validity and force, reasoned belief and manipulated opinion, can no longer be distinguished? (1990: 114).

Indeed, for modernist critics, Lyotard's turn to aesthetics is characteristic of an era of lost hope (Bürger, C. 1992: 75), which sees a kind of reductive identity working to dominate the concept, wherein representation cannot help but do violence to its singular referents. Where I agree with such critics that Lyotard's emphasis on heterogeneity at the expense of commonality often leaves his thought ambiguous, if not contradictory, unable to conceive of justice on any collective, social or intersubjective level, this must be balanced against the central weakness of modernist thought, namely, the failure to adequately accommodate heterogeneity within the social. Central to my discussion then is the manner in which Lyotard uses aesthetics as an ethical foundation for the heterogeneous.

ii) Phrase and Affect

Habermas's and Lyotard's differences on aesthetics are made particularly amenable to comparison by their mutual – and mostly quite conventional – appropriation of Kant. Their common debt to Kant lies in a fundamental problem of modernity, the question of how to judge.[2] Both Lyotard and Habermas retain the Kantian quest for *a priori* laws governing our conduct, yet at the same time both wish to ensure that thought's task is always ahead of it, to uncover the suitable rule or application for each particular case of ethical judgement. On my reading, Lyotard is despite himself also bound by certain universalizing and rationalist assumptions, undermining his ontology of difference. In contrast to Habermas however Lyotard sees the present crisis of judgement as a symptom not of a deficit of reason but the irreducible plurality and heterogeneity of language and society (Clarke 1994: 139), a plurality which renders any attempt to impose rational unity all the more repressive through its inadvertent reinvigoration of 'differends'.

In its intent to expose the radical heterogeneity suppressed by our system of representation and to establish the differend at the centre of politics, Lyotard's characterization of justice as the contingent, even anarchic, play of singular desires, imaginations and marginal skirmishes offers a far less comforting prospect than Habermas's rational discourse oriented towards consensus. Both positions appeal to different kinds of criteria of evaluation – transcendental and empirical norms of communication on the one hand, and the groundless pragmatism which asserts the justice of contextual judgement on the other.[3] Habermas conceives the non-identical as part of the realm of intersubjective linguistic practice; art is either held apart from moral considerations, or seen as a

[2] Indeed, Lyotard's Kantian-postmodern philosophy stands out as one of the few attempts to confront the problem of political judgement in the wake of modernity since Hannah Arendt (Clarke 1994: 135). Lyotard's debt to Kant is most fully elaborated in Lyotard, 1988a: 118-127.

[3] Although Lyotard's appeal to invention and the rejection of convention marks him off from the rather complacent Rortyan version of pragmatism.

special kind of speech-act, 'expressive' as opposed to cognitive or normative, which makes claims to validity through an aesthetic-practical rationality ultimately dependent on a pragmatic logic of argumentation. The ability to name those injustices committed through representation indicates that we are able to solve them *through* representation, to allow the particular to 'come into its own' (Prado 1992: 359). But the idea that aesthetics can provide the unifying force between political, ethical, and cognitive discourses presupposes a unity of experience anathema to Lyotard (Lyotard 1984: 285ff). Habermas is guilty on this view of committing a series of transcendental illusions, an illegitimate privileging of the rational applied to phenomena (Beardsworth 1992: 46ff), subsuming the non-identical under the identical, transforming the heterogeneous in language into a litigation or blockage within language, and thus neutralizing and violating it (Lyotard 1988a: xi). For Lyotard the question is one of *untranslatability* rather than blockage, for the latter implies a strategic interference in an otherwise homogeneous realm of communication. Whereas 'successful' communication on Habermas's account is the means to remedy injustice, for Lyotard this is achieved by an aesthetic opening up to and letting-be of radical difference. Habermas's restriction of the question of justice to procedure on the one hand and ethics to actual application on the other is thus rejected: given the irreducible plurality and unknowability of the world, justice cannot assume any one form.

Lyotard weaves a complex argument in defence of the heterogeneous, a combination of quite conventional Kantian arguments, Saussurian, Wittgensteinian and Lacanian notions of language and representation. His thought is particularly indebted to the 'linguistic turn' in philosophy that these critiques initiated, a turn characterized by a rejection of the paradigm of consciousness as the organizing point of knowledge production and a concomitant shift towards the speech-act or phrase as the focus of representation (Benhabib 1990: 111-112). In this view language cannot be understood as a private system of 'marks' but a system of differential relations. The subject is replaced by

a system of structures, oppositions, and relations which, to be intelligible, need not be connected with any human or anthropological criteria at all. From this view there is 'only one option, namely, a recognition of the irreconcilability of language games and the acceptance that only local and context-specific criteria of validity can be formulated' (Benhabib 1990: 112).

Ethically speaking, Lyotard shares with other postmodern theorists a marked debt to the Judaic 'messianic' tradition of justice via the thought of Emmanuel Levinas (Lyotard 1991: 74). The ethical imperative here is to remain open to moral questions, to resist identification and judgement, and to allow the unspeakable other to 'be' without interference – whether that be naming, domination, or reciprocal obligation. Naming or representation reduces materiality to meaning, and this is oppressive because so much material falls *outside* the representable (Cornell 1991: 113). Lyotard likewise rejects the reduction of justice and ethics to equality, distributive justice and calculable proportion, and is drawn to the singularity of the call of the 'Other'. Resisting the reduction of the world to language, crudely understood, he attempts to preserve a space of difference which remains unnamed and unknown, in deference to that which cannot be named in and seized by language.

This project forms the political dimension of Lyotard's work, characterized by a critique of the totalizations he finds fundamental to most concepts in politics (Sim 1992: 83). If politics is indeed founded on such overarching, totalizing narratives, then the unsettling and radical quality of Lyotard's thought comes more sharply into focus. For it is not simply the particular narratives we have at present which are found lacking in legitimacy, but the very idea of a universal explanatory framework: the idea of consensus becomes not simply inadequate but dangerous as a political goal. The practical implications of this schema are a cultural pragmatism that replaces any reference to a meta-ethics with a political aesthetic of the sublime and of the local. Justice is now realized by allowing the multiplicity of local narratives, which constitute the social, to co-exist, flourish or founder in

the absence of over-arching norms. Importantly, he does not reject judgement, as more Levinas-inspired postmodernists do, but it is now understood to be without rational or universal foundations, depending instead on the imagination, feeling and contextually applied understanding. Yet it also conflicts with the postmodern ethical injunction to let the other 'be', one of a number of tensions which I argue are never resolved in his work.

The premises of this ethics can indeed be characterized by two quite distinct theoretical approaches: the first proceeding from a subliminal and aesthetic standpoint, typified in his writing on art, the sublime, and in such works as *Discours, figure*. The second, represented in his *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, is primarily analytical, couched in terms of relations between phrases. His ethical project has remained the same, however, to protect the non-discursive, mimetic-affective sphere from the violence of cognitive modes of knowledge. Both approaches represent a fundamentally anti-humanist position, rejecting any view of language as a transparent tool of communication, and seeing language instead as a medium which both constitutes subjectivity and which operates beyond the control of subjective intentions. This is an anti-humanism directed against the Cartesian and romantic self, but not one that refuses to talk of the body, for it aims to overcome the mind-body dualism that gives rise to totalizing modes of thought. Knowledge should instead be construed as the 'co-operation of sensibility and understanding' (Lyotard 1992: 7): the body, its sensations and affects become the grounds of ethical action as well as knowledge in general.

This grounding of knowledge in the body is supported by a basic distinction between the 'it happens' of the event, perception or experience, and the 'what happens' of representation, interpretation, or meaning. The possibility of being 'affected' by an event, or experiencing it on a sensual level, is conceived as independent from the possibility of representing that event, a faculty of immediate perception and sensual reception that Lyotard terms 'passibility' (Tomiche 1994: 53). Passibility marks the distinction between the singularity of the

'pure' event, the 'it happens' as opposed to the conceptually mediated and thus pre-determined 'what happens'. Affect or sensation cannot be assimilated to representation, but nevertheless 'structures' it, providing the necessary 'there is' before the 'what is' (Tomiche 1994: 59). The question of communication then properly concerns, contra Habermas, not cognitive sentences (which operate within an already commensurable semantic system) but sentient experience: those 'phrases that are not properly speaking sentences but above all feelings' (Lyotard 1988b: 43). Lyotard's essay 'A Memorial for Marxism' for instance is a personal anecdote about the role of feelings – constituted by background forms of sensibilities, schemas of imagination, rhetorics of affections, as well as analysis, the will, reason – and the differends they create, 'embodied in incommensurable figures between which there is no logical solution' (Lyotard 1988b: 61). The realm of the political, as ethical activity, is therefore quite distinct from cognitive knowledge, the world of demonstrable statements and facts: it must instead grapple with the inexpressable. There can in fact be no necessary or determining link between feelings and cognition (Lyotard 1988a: 100-102). Critical value judgement, lacking any universal rule or criteria, becomes an aesthetic-affective activity, an 'art and practice' (Sim 1992: 1).

Concerned to overcome the aporias of the philosophy of the subject and metaphysics implied in his earlier texts, in his later work Lyotard turns to a pragmatics of language to articulate the gap between feeling and the understanding (Caterino 1994: 242).[4] Heterogeneity is now understood in terms of phrases, phrase regimens and genres rather than energies.[5] The switch to a more

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[4] For a critique of Lyotard's earlier Freudian-influenced psychoanalytic work, see Dews, 1987; Bennington, 1988 and Carroll, 1988. Lyotard however rejected this Nietzschean strategy – aligning power and will – in favour of a Kantian one (Caterino 1994: 242). Tomiche also observes that 'The phrase has the merit of being less metaphysical than the force/figure, conveying no naturalistic notions of energy' as did his earlier texts (1994: 49).

[5] In *The Differend* the phrase comprises both linguistic acts, words or sentences, and non-linguistic gestures, silences, or signals. A phrase is not defined in terms of meaning but by the relation of its four 'instances' (the referent or case, a meaning attributed to that case, an addressee to whom that meaning is addressed, and an addressor, that which does the addressing) to each other. This constellation of instances is the phrase 'universe' or regimen. Whereas articulate phrases present a universe, inarticulate phrases do not; they are instances of 'pure' presence, the 'it happens' of

analytical, less libidinal approach remains consistent with his earlier critique of representation and discourse as secondary in ego formation, lending primacy to intuitive experience and sensation. In his later work, each phrase is understood to inhabit its own particular universe or context, a particular mode of signification which is unique and which cannot be translated into *another* kind of universe without its specificity being destroyed. That is, every sentence or phrase occupies a position structured by four distinct and interchangeable poles: sender or addressor, recipient or addressee, meaning and referent (Lyotard 1988a: 70,25), none of which can be altered without possibly changing the phrase entirely.

Each phrase is moreover governed by a regimen, game, or genre, a set of rules which constitute its particular function or role (1988a: 17-18) and is necessarily followed by another phrase, in fact an infinite series of phrases (words, gestures, silences). A phrase *must* entail a linkage, whether articulated or not; not to link is impossible, but the *mode* of linkage is arbitrary (1988a: 29). The kind of linkage made is decided by a multiplicity of possible modes of organization: any discourse contains a diversity of modes, regimens or genres of presentation – cognitive, prescriptive, interrogative, exclamative and so on (1988a: 128) – which direct the mode of linkage between phrases, and whose 'universes' are incommensurable.

> Incommensurability, in the sense of heterogeneity of phrase regimens and of the impossibility of subjecting them to a single law (except by neutralizing them), also marks the relation between either cognitives and prescriptives and interrogatives, performatives, exclamatives...For each of these regimens, there corresponds a mode of presenting a universe, and one mode is not translatable into another (1988a: 128).

Genres or regimens function as narrative wholes, passing over 'the abyss' which separates heterogeneous phrases, while suppressing alternative genres or ways of linking (1988a: 29). Thus genres are linguistic modes of organization, the

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feeling or affect, in the absence of, or before, signification and representation. They are the instance of Lyotard's idea of 'passibility', implying experience prior to any symbolic representation or understanding of it, prior to the 'subject' (Tomiche 1994: 44-45).

linkages between which inevitably wrong the 'genres whose possible phrases remain unactualized' (1988a: xii). This competitive contingency of linkage always raises the possibility of a differend, 'a radical point of dispute as to the genre of linkage' (Readings 1991: 117). The notion of the differend attempts to capture everything within a logic of phrases; the semiotic and affective as well as verbal communication, and is signalled by silence, the feeling of frustration at the inability of language to articulate something, 'the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim' (1988a: 9).[6] The differend then is the clash of incommensurable modes of presentation, one of which will suffer injustice if arbitration of the dispute is carried out in the other's inappropriate idiom:

> ...the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot *yet* be...In the differend, something 'asks' to be put into phrases, and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away (1988a: 13).

It is because there are more kinds of genres than the cognitive and propositional that differends arise; all kinds of levels of meaning and understanding which cannot be captured by the representational name and which are necessarily suppressed by it (1988a: 55-6). The differend is thus inherently ethical in its support for the counter-hegemonic and the silenced, that which is not intelligible under the dominant (i.e. capitalist, cognitive) idiom. 'Reality', Lyotard writes, 'is always the plaintiff's responsibility' (Lyotard 1988a: 10), to provide the proof that something happened, that there *was* a wrong suffered. But the experience of suffering does not readily translate into cognitive form. Being inarticulate, the linkages affectivity demands never adhere to the rules of any genre of representation, and thus disrupt and intervene in established modes of understanding. Hence Lyotard can argue that all grand narrative is of the same

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[6] Such a feeling can exist even when reparations have been made on other levels (Lyotard 1989: 351).

prescriptive genre; no matter what society it belongs to, it remains a cognitive attempt to unify and account for the world under one normative and conceptual system. While all such narratives are therefore commensurable, the differences between them 'litigations', differends on the other hand can never be resolved by reason, concept or language alone. For Lyotard there is at best a 'transitivity' between cognition and feeling, a manoeuvre which installs sensation as the ontological grounding of the 'truth' of non-identity and incommensurability. Thus he argues that the 'foundation of critical reason...resides neither in logic, pragmatics, nor subjective evidence, but in the initial liability [*passibilité*] to the event which is given' (Lyotard cited in Prado 1992: 363). The differend then works at the junction between Lyotard's two mode of analysis, feeling and understanding: '...as a kind of limit case of the analytical and the affective' (Carroll 1987: 183).

Incommensurability or untranslatability between phrases is not meant to be understood absolutely, however, as blocking the possibility of communication or understanding entirely (Lyotard 1988a: 13-14). Rather it is to be understood in the sense that the same criteria cannot be used to govern, evaluate or interpret two phrases in a different mode or genre, and in the sense that no two phrases occupy precisely the same four set of poles. Political resistance indeed consists in exposing the violence inflicted when the suppression of heterogeneity, which is inevitable, causes suffering or injustice. Justice then entails finding that point of incommensurability or untranslatability embodied in the differend and bearing witness to it, either by instituting a new phrase or genre or testifying to its unpresentability (Lyotard 1988a: 136). Politics does not become everything, but the threat of the differend; the problem of relations between phrases.

Lyotard is adamant that this is not a humanist reading of political conflict, one tainted with the 'philosophy of consciousness' and which pits intentions, meanings and wills against each other, but an inevitable conflict of phrasing. Phrases are what concern him, and the manner in which they work, not meaning

and its use. A phrase 'comes along', and 'is put into play within a conflict between genres of discourse'; it is *phrases* which clash, and are wronged, and not human wills (1988a: 136). Indeed, any non-human object can occupy one of the four instances of the phrase: addressor, addressee, referent or meaning (1988a: 77). Every linkage is a kind of 'victory' over other possible ones, and 'there is no need to adduce some will or some intention to describe that' (1988a: 136). Politics becomes a de-anthropomorphized conflict, a 'systemic agonistics', not between people but between incommensurable phrases, a question of the linkages between the 'multiplicity of genres' (1988a: 138, 141). This is after all not the language game of anthropology, or sociology, but philosophy, the genre which has for its 'rule' that it must continually seek its rule, giving it an implicit function as meta-discourse. Philosophy's 'stakes' are found in a rule which 'remains to be sought'; to which the discourse cannot be made to conform until the rule has been found (1988a: 97): in other words, philosophy can never have *given* rules at all.

This pared-down, formalist approach to language – there is no 'language' or 'Being', only occurrences (1984: 181) – often sits uncomfortably however with his theory of justice, which brings in precisely those anthropological, sociological and semantic questions he wishes to exclude. Why we should be concerned at all about the fact that *phrases* are silenced inevitably reintroduces an anthropological dimension: without the human (rather than humanist or Cartesian) fact of suffering, Lyotard's purely phrasal approach is nonsensical. The formal category of the differend, after all, works precisely as a strategy to keep open the 'uncertainties and complications of *sensible* experience' (Carroll 1987: 33; my emphasis). Politics clearly must come to terms with the non-discursive, non-propositional dimensions of knowledge, a realm that philosophy alone cannot understand, and the idea of the sublime is designed to perform this task.

iii) Sensing the unknown: Lyotard's sublime

Lyotard's political aesthetics is not confined to a melancholy powerlessness in the face of heterogeneity, as we see at times in Adorno, but a celebration of our creative potential, exemplified in the mixture of pleasure and pain that accompanies the idea of the sublime. Following Kant, the sublime is that feeling of pleasure and pain experienced in the disharmony between the faculties of the imagination (the capacity to form images) and the understanding (the capacity to unite these images into a whole) (Drolet 1994: 262). When the senses are confronted with something beyond reason's synthesizing abilities, or when reason conceives of something beyond what can be sensed or imagined, we experience both pleasure and pain: 'the pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that the imagination or sensibility should not be equal to the concept' (Lyotard 1988a: 166). Judgements of incommensurability, the inability to think the particular under any rule, give rise to this sensation of sublimity, presenting the *unpresentability* of a common ground, or universal rule. Thus the sublime is instigated by pure feeling, an absence of mind or cognition, and can only be known from its effect, the feeling that what is before the mind exceeds its synthesizing powers.

It is this feeling, situated beyond the limits of our understanding and thus arising from the heterogeneity between experience and representation, that reminds us of the 'fact' our obligation before the moral law; the gap, abyss or silence that occurs before an event which demands an ethical response (Dalton 1994: 236). The feeling that underlies our recognition of injustice is therefore inextricably related to the body: it is the experience of pleasure and pain that 'impels us' to judge (Lyotard 1985: 48). Lyotard indeed proclaims that ethics is 'born of natural suffering' (cited in Dalton 1994: 238). No logical or discursive argument alone in other words can induce us to respond to the call of justice, an absence epitomized by the silence surrounding the event of Auschwitz. This silence demands not silence in response, but recognition and remembrance; either

the creation of new genres and phrases through which to articulate the silence of suffering, or the recognition that they cannot be adequately represented, only indicated through art and writing). It is wrong then to look for some logical or demonstrable 'proof' of the justice of multiplicity, or imperative to respect difference. For justice differs from cognition, and discourse, and goes beyond a simple respect for diversity as such. Ethical relativism is overcome precisely because Lyotard looks to an unnameable and untraceable ethical 'call' which forms our moral feelings, rather than depending on any cognitive argument as a justificatory base.

The idea of the sublime, the feeling of *un*knowability, counters any positivism – any notion of a direct link between experience, knowledge and perception – implied by the immediacy of feeling. The critical function of Lyotard's aesthetic of the sublime is found here, in the constant reminder of the limitations and unfulfilled condition of our knowledge. The feeling of the sublime is the sign of our 'right' to judge in the absence of laws, and such a sign is the only 'proof' of our access to nature (1988a: 135). It also implies a certain *independence* of the phenomenal self from historical and linguistic structures, calling for an approach to politics which does not privilege the faculty of the understanding and cognition, but the imagination. Freedom becomes something akin to avoiding the domination of cognitive thought, letting the event and the giveable come to us in an undetermined form, an 'opening oneself to' forms given to the imagination and sensibility (1991: 32-4). This does not imply passivity, however, or the absence of agency or invention: it is rather that any understanding that sees everything in terms of concepts and language remains caught in a completely secondary position, concerned with action which occurs only *after* the event.

The unity of the political as ground of authority and field of meaning is therefore disrupted by the construal of representation in space-time as always split between the singular (synchronic) moment of happening – the event, something which we are at a loss to explain in pre-existing terms without

'neutralizing' it or destroying its singularity – and its representation, 'the spatialization of that event as a moment within a discourse of meaning, or a diachronic network of history'. The temporal disjunctions of politics are moreover seen in the serial form of phrases, the linkage of phrases one after the other, all of which point to the paradox of justice, the necessity to represent in a way which respects the 'eventhood' that representation suppresses (Readings 1991: 104-105). The gap between faculties, genres and phrases then provides the philosophical evidence on which Lyotard bases his ethical stance on heterogeneity, both in terms of the dis-unity of the subject and between different discourses on an intersubjective level, signalling the need for an eternal vigilance when crossing the boundaries between cognition, politics, ethics, and art (Beardsworth 1992: 48).

The need for such vigilance is well illustrated in Bill Readings example of the differend between Aborigines and the Australian government (1992). The conflict between the two parties is such that neither recognizes the other's case as an 'argument' at all: the difference between the two sides cannot be explained in terms of blocked communication, but of incommensurability between experience, affect and representation. It is not moreover to be seen as a limit case, an example situated at the end of a continuum of communication, but a demonstration that 'ethical responsibility demands a quasi-aesthetic experimentation if justice is to be done to an Aboriginal claim that can only be evoked as irrepresentable' (Readings 1992: 173). Their difference can only be attested, evoked, represented indirectly through recourse to the sublime, those modes of indeterminate expression that resist *a priori* forms of representation, like art. Politics becomes 'the threat of the differend'; political struggle is precisely this deconstruction of the representational space of politics (Readings 1991: 87). Politics is thus not *a* genre, it is the 'multiplicity of genres, the diversity of ends, and par excellence the question of the

linking [of sentences]' (Lyotard cited in Morris 1988: 238),[7] a matter of finding the right linkages or determining the right genre of the phrase at hand.

iv) An Ethics of Local judgement

The important political question here is not only how Lyotard might envisage his evocation of the incommensurable to proceed, but how we judge the wrongs suffered through the hegemony of a particular genre *as* wrongs in the absence of general or common criteria. Lyotard indeed sees this question as *the* question of politics. The problem of judgement is, as we have seen, to find the linkage, the next phrase, which will not destroy the singularity of the event, or damage the differend by silencing it. Here Lyotard takes as his starting point Kant's third critique of judgement, and in particular Kant's focus on reflective as opposed to determinate judgment. We follow Kant's division of thought into the cognitive (incorporating such spheres as the legal, scientific, economic), the aesthetic, the speculative, the ethical and so on, each sphere or faculty possessing different, indeed incommensurable procedures of synthesis, modes of presentation of its object, and validation of its judgements. The problem with these different spheres is the way in which judgment acts to determine the right mode of presentation of its objects, and how it determines the 'transitions' between them, or the different modes of evaluation appropriate to them (1988a: 130).

The distinction between reflective and determinate judgment is crucial in this regard. Cognition's dependence on representation necessarily excludes the particular's dimension of *specificity* by prejudging its object by virtue of the structuring and systematizing effects of the symbolic. The cognitive is broadly concerned with descriptive phrases of experience or knowledge whose referent is determinate objects of cognition; 'the subsumption of intuitions under concepts' (1988a: 163). Here, following the paradigm of inquiry in the natural sciences,

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[7] Not all political conflicts are differends, but only those that involve the clash of two or more genres; litigations are those disputes which follow a single determinant rule of judgement (Readings 1991: 117-8).

referents or objects of judgement are presented and evaluated according to pre-established rules or criteria, namely, examples or schemata. The cognitive therefore represents a mode of deriving the particular from the pre-existing universal concept of it, a question of the *application* of particulars to given universal rules.

Reflective or indeterminate judgement on the other hand has no pre-given object in the natural world: its criteria of evaluation cannot be grounded in any order of instrumentality or telos. Ethics, politics and art fall under this same 'rule'; that is, their rule cannot be prescribed in advance (1989: 398). Reflective judgement remains open to the non-cognitive, the figural, since it refuses to apply given taxonomic and hierarchical categories of understanding: we are dealing here with particulars for which there are *no* given universals (1988a: 48), and which can proceed only by *analogy* with the procedure of determinate judgement. This is a call to protect the mimetic-affective basis of existence in an ethical relation that connect with its other through particular, sensuous contact, rather than abstract concepts: the feeling that connects two bodies unmediated by the discursive. In reflective judgement then the criteria or standards of evaluation for such cases must be found, case by case, from our faculty of judgement itself, from the self, and not from any external source.

In the 'competition' between the determinate understanding and the reflexive imagination, the former can only 'determine the schematism, only the form which is already determined and prepared for the object'; it cannot conceive the immediate, intuitive sense of the object under its formal synthesis. The reflexive syntheses on the other hand happens without any *I think*, 'In a different light, in a different time'. The aesthetic activity involved in actually perceiving an object can never be known by the subject, the distant 'I think', but disconcerts it, disrupting its own concert; the subject always finds itself *after* the synthetic judgement (1992: 21-22). Since reflective judgement has no objective referent by which it can claim validity, it results at the same time in a determination or affirmation of the

subject's faculties and a feeling of 'radical division or cleavage' within the subject (Tomiche 1994: 49). It is this feeling which provides the conditions for judgment, and which makes knowledge possible, so that judgment comes *before* the concept, and not the other way around, as modernist thought assumes (Lyotard 1992: 4). The *lack* of a unifying law under which political and ethical events can be judged underpins Lyotard's theory of justice, purporting to show the futility and ethical dangers of any attempt to close the gulf between different modes of presentation, conception and understanding. Lyotard's conclusion that cases for ethical judgement are singular and cannot be justly decided according to *a priori* principles therefore both begins and ends with the premise of the inherent justice of plurality. Politics does not admit of any determinate, cognitive knowledge which necessarily determines judgement, and in the absence of any homogeneous law to unite different realms of thought its principle ethical task is to resist the reign of cognitive representation.

We can understand now why in light of the fundamentally affective basis of postmodern politics any fixed idea of justice as a tool of political struggle becomes a 'dubious, interested, and derivative notion' (Weiss 1989: 76). Justice is instead conceived as a local, fluid, context-dependent idea, rendering it unable to do violence on any grand scale through its representation in any fixed or unitary world-view. Implicitly, law acts to authorize terror over its citizens, blinding them to the evidence of bodily suffering (Phelan 1993: 614). The realm of politics is properly lawless, subversive of grand narratives's efforts to homogenize and totalize experience. Social existence is instead constituted by a multiplicity of fluid, overlapping and open-ended small narratives, we are always-already told in a number of interwoven and overlapping, sometimes contradictory, narratives. Lyotard therefore calls for a politics based upon narratives, which are social elements, and not upon some mistaken idea of a transcendental knowledge: a politics that will 'bear witness to the differend' (1988a: 181).

Such a politics affirms minority and local narratives that erode the totalizing claims of reason, transforming our view of everyday life, as Lyotard puts it, into 'a sort of "civil society" which has little to do with Hegel's, but is simultaneously informal and active, and continually eludes the instances of power' (Lyotard cited in Bürger, C. 1992: 77). These local narratives are not social groups but 'territories of language', several of which we simultaneously belong to, none of which prevails: 'it is only then that we can say that the society is just' (Lyotard 1985: 95).

Lyotard's recourse to a pragmatics of local narratives is both a strategy to undermine the totalizing effect of grand narratives and an account of the way meaning works. Local narratives moreover form the glue that binds the social together; the medium through which the intersubjective social bond is cemented. We are always already within a narrative, our stories having already been told (Descombes 1979: 186). Here the form of legitimation differs from modern or pre-modern models in so far as it is the very act of story-telling itself, and no ultimate authority in the form of person or law, that lends the narrative legitimacy. Because local narrative does not ask after its own legitimation, it is free of the potentially violent and illusory act of trying to legitimate or 'ground' itself universally. It is also endowed with a tolerance of difference, resisting the temptation to universalize its claims, and demanding no 'proof' from other narratives, seeing them as just another 'variant in the family of narrative cultures' (Lyotard 1984: 26-27).[8]

But in light of the fact that for Lyotard local narratives work as sites of creativity, subverting dominant narratives, and more or less rational in their tolerance of difference, there is a danger that this simply recasts the critical project into one indistinguishable from a radical liberal individualism. What is there exactly within the local that ensures the refusal of universalist claims and

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[8] It is just this form of knowledge, moreover, that provides the foundation for scientific, 'rational' knowledge. This need not imply an anti-realism, however, as such a narrative and aesthetic understanding of knowledge has underpinned the philosophy of science at least since Thomas Kuhn, if not before.

tolerance of multiplicity? Why does the rejection of universal standards of argumentation and proof *increase* tolerance rather than merely entrench convention, as Habermas argues?

Here Lyotard partakes of radical philosophy's traditional use of the aesthetic and the mimetic as an emancipatory vehicle. For Lyotard small narratives embody 'the quintessential form of imaginative invention' (Lyotard 1984: 60). The act of recounting a narrative releases the imagination; as the expression of cultural and aesthetic plurality, to adopt a Marxist theme, narrative becomes the form of our 'species-being'. But it is also their *smallness,* their self-referentiality, that appears a subversive factor. Quoting Lyotard: 'Why *little* stories? Because they are short, and consequently are not extracts from grand history (la grande histoire) and resist absorption into it' (Lyotard cited in Kearney 1991: 200). The absence of unity and overarching telos therefore seems to prosper freedom by allowing people to 'fill in the details as they go along, using whatever pragmatics seems appropriate to the situation at hand without being committed to any predetermined pattern or conclusion such as grand narrative inevitably enforces' (Sim 1992: 89).

Yet the small narratives to which Lyotard refers – the subversive tactics of women, prisoners, conscripts, students, alternative teaching methods and so on, skirmishes which 'gnaw away at the great institutionalized narrative apparatuses' (cited in Sim 1992: 94) – are themselves fed by the grand narratives of the enlightenment subject, Christianity or Marxism. For Lyotard grand narratives are in fact local narratives, whose self-professed atemporality has been put in question: 'In my opinion, theories are themselves narratives, but disguised; one should not be deceived by their claim to omnitemporality' (Lyotard cited in Descombes, 1979: 185). Grand narratives are only different from local narratives in as much as they claim an illegitimate universality; thus Lyotard does not imply that we are somehow *independent* of cultural hegemonic grand narratives, but rather that they too are ultimately only local. The logic of the grand narrative is only a particular case of the logic of the local, but the latter is not meant to be *truer*

or more universal than the former: The relation between grand and local narrative therefore can not be conceived as one of origin or authority to its example or instance in Lyotard's schema; the site-specificity and repetition of the local event assures its singularity, its resistance to appropriation by grand narratives. Little narratives are not ultimately retraceable to some originating narrative, then; on the contrary, they effect a deconstruction of the 'metaphysical privileging of a Transcendental Narrator – called Being, Arche, God, Truth or Party...in the name of a plurality of independent narrators operating in endless relay' (Kearney 1991: 200). It is not therefore a matter of ridding local narratives of grand narratives, for this is impossible. Rather the very expression, listening to and appropriation of grand narratives in the *local* prevents the terror of the 'One'. We are thus enjoined to 'Struggle for the inclusion of all Master Narratives, of theories and doctrines, particularly political ones, within the (little) narratives' (Lyotard 1989: 132).

We might object of course that any narrative, no matter how small, contains a multiplicity of genres and phrases which are inevitably silenced by a pre-determined story, telos or set of rules. And in fact Lyotard at no stage argues that the threat of the differend can be overcome, that any particular form of narrative can ensure justice *a priori.* Local narratives may be subversive of meta-narratives, undermining the latter's *a priori* and ahistorical claims by revealing their incommensurability with lived reality – feminist practices for instance reveal the gap between women's lives and abstract meta-narratives – but they are not free of historically mediated prescriptions and determinations. It is the terror of the 'one' that Lyotard most fears: the subversive nature of local narratives resides therefore in their spatio-temporal specificity: by referring to *this* time, *this* place and *this* people, the violence of universal claims is negated. Local narratives are legitimated by their very existence as a form of social life, that is, by their function in a specific context, and not by any abstract idea or prescription which goes beyond that context. The task of judgement in local narratives remains, but in the

absence of any over-arching prescriptive narratives, it is freer to apply itself reflectively and singularly.

What are the implications for community in this network of local narratives? Is the solidarity that constitutes community possible in the absence of any over-arching narratives or norms? As we have seen, judgements are confined to the singular and to the indeterminate in an effort to escape the terrorism of universal prescription; justice remains always in the future, lacking a model and criteria. Lyotard's refutation of the norm (as generalizable) and his embrace of the singular instead presents us with a version of epistemological 'grounding' (as we will see, somewhat akin to Adorno's strategy of mimesis in the idea of a 'passibility' or 'transitivity' between event and feeling), a pre-cognitive affectivity which gives us access to the world unmediated by conceptuality. There is however no such easy passage between feeling and cognition, a disjunction which establishes the centrality of the differend at the heart of (what appears to be a decimated) community.

2. Justice and The Postmodern Community

i) The Signs of History

The consequences for any idea of community are indeed immense. In his essay *Sensus Communis* Lyotard contends that the faculty of judgement is not a *common* sense in so far as it cannot be shared through communication. On the contrary, judgement arises from feeling: it is incommunicable because immediate, singular because imperceptible, unable to be perceived by the understanding *as* common sense (1992: 2, 5). For Lyotard 'common sense' between individuals therefore remains an 'Idea' for which there cannot be no experience in reality (1992: 17). The *sensus communis*: 'a universality that is anticipated in its undetermined form but never present in any determined form' (Carroll 1987: 181), can instead only be

indicated by the feeling of the sublime, the pleasure and pain that accompanies the disjunction between presentation and concept.

Community becomes not an intersubjective network of shared meanings but the 'desire experienced by diversity' (Lyotard 1992: 6), the desire to create order and unity out of chaos, and not the precondition for knowledge, as we see in Habermas. This desire is translated into an order structured by determinate judgements, based not on rational reflection but a negatively conceived sentiment; the desire that comes from lack or absence. An affirmatively-conceived community works to suppress reflexive judgement, establishing its rules *before* the fact, as it were. What is required is instead a reflexive, mimetically-based reflection that, because it is grounded in heterogeneous world, cannot establish a pre-determined, unified framework. Unanimity of *reflexive* judgement within a community on this view would then be impossible. The collective 'has no interior which needs protecting' (1992: 22). The unified, ethical community is indeed dangerous because it must be mediated by some concept of practical, determinate reason which posits itself as lawful; but at this level the community only *is* a community through the obligation created by the law, the rules it has arrived at for establishing 'true' judgement (1992: 8).

Community retreats to, at best, a kind of political unconscious; harmony can exist between faculties, mediated by judgement, but there can be no such unanimity for feeling, which provides the condition for conceptual understanding and rule-making, and thus no *rational* consensus is conceivable. What binds the community for Lyotard then is neither cognitive (empirical) nor ethical, but aesthetic-affective in as much as it can only be experienced and felt. The social bond is indeed rather tenuous:

> ...the people does not exist as a subject; it is a mass of thousands of little stories that are at once futile and serious, that are sometimes attracted together to form bigger stories, and which sometimes disintegrate into drifting elements, but which usually hold together well enough to form what we call the culture of civil society (1989: 134).

Ideas of the social still persist, despite its merely sentient existence; they continue to have purchase in our thought and feeling as somehow substantial. The question is just how then can they be 'presented' as objects of knowledge in an ethical manner. For Lyotard the 'Ideas' of practical reason – freedom, unity, harmony and so on – can only be known however indirectly, through signs and feelings, always merely *analogous* rather than identical to natural, scientific modes of understanding. Lyotard intends such feelings to be used as a warning against mistakenly presupposing an adequation of reality with ideas of community or universality which can never be presented. In 'The Sign of History' Lyotard speaks of just this impossibility of presenting an intuitive object for conceptual, metaphysical 'Ideas' such as history, society, revolution and so on, since they are never contained in unified temporal or spatial events. Any attempt to do so is inevitably illusory, he argues, and results in totalitarian and possibly violent outcomes. He points to Kant's example of the enthusiasm manifested by the spectators in the French 1789 revolution as a sign that demonstrates the existence of a feeling of universality within a community, a sign, in fact, of moral progress, for that common feeling of enthusiasm is a response to a general situation experienced by individuals whether or not their particular interests are being furthered, or promise to be furthered. But the collective also has its dark side, witnessed in the 'moral panic', the scapegoating of a certain group, phenomenon or minority within society as the cause of some perceived threat or injustice. The actual form of the republic supported by the participants in the French revolution for instance was mistaken for the *Idea* of the republic; its ensuing terror demonstrating the danger of a reified universal.

The sublime as a 'sign of history' can take the form of historical universality, demanding or anticipating disinterested, universal agreement, but a universality

which must remain *unpresentable*.[9] The task of critical politics is to attempt to present this unpresentable as the as yet *un*formed future of the community. The 'aesthetics of the sublime' thus acts as a kind of critical safeguard against the 'dogmatism of the theoretical in general' (Carroll 1987: 178-182).[10]

We might conclude that Lyotard's critique of grand narratives of universality and progress is aimed not so much at commonality and universality themselves but the objectified forms in which they are expressed. It is not that collective aims cannot be pursued, but that they must not be objectified. Ideas of freedom, justice and so on can never be fully realized, and remain incommensurate with their concept. Thus the silence surrounding Auschwitz is a sign of history, *felt* but not *known*, indicating a differend that can never be subject to litigation (Carroll 1987: 173).[11] It also indicates the fact that there will always remain a phrase not yet made, the feeling of the unpresented in the presented.[12] Grounding the basis of political conviction in the singularity of perception and feeling rather than cognition activates reflective judgement, one that better serves justice because of the *absence* of *a priori*, socially prescribed law. Politics calls, therefore, for an approach to politics that does not privilege the faculty of the understanding and cognition, but the imagination.

ii) Modern Versus Postmodern Judgement

It is the radical disjunction between faculties and their respective modes of judgement and presentation that distinguishes postmodern judgement from modern. For postmodernists, it is not simply a matter of acknowledging the

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[9] 'Disinterested' is here meant in the Kantian (and Habermasian) sense of non-instrumental, rather than impartial or lacking personal involvement. The *indifference* of aesthetic pleasure, its irrelevance to exterior function or purpose, is often seen to create an opening for impartiality, and possibly a means to sensitize ourselves to the community's 'transformatory possibilities' (Crowther 1992: 203).

[10] Paul Crowther describes this aesthetic in terms of a sublimicist sensibility: 'fundamentally a kind of vigorous 'play' between two aspects of cognition [sense and reason]...' (1992: 202).

[11] This sign is not a matter of inventing allusions to the unpresentable but to 'the unpresentability of the unpresentable' (Steuerman 1992: 114).

[12] As Carroll argues, 'The sublime sentiment in the historical-political is, thus, a case of analogy at its most extreme point, the point where the differences separating the faculties are most intensely felt at the same time as the links between them are precariously postulated' (Carroll 1987: 182).

excluded and the absent, but the pain of this absence; something the modern can never acknowledge because the unpresentable is construed as the 'missing contents' of representation, betraying a nostalgic hope of reconciliation. Lyotard's postmodernism however 'denies itself the solace of good forms' (Lyotard cited in Drolet 1994: 262), disputing the possibility of reconciliation and consensus between the presentable and the unpresentable. Community cannot be empirical, it cannot 'be rendered in a cognitive mode' (May 1993: 276), but only in the realm of the sublime; that which points to, but does not exhaust, its object. In contrast to the harmony evoked by beauty, the sublime therefore evokes heterogeneity, the basis of a more ethical community (May 1993: 277). Ethical and political judgements, being bound to feelings, can be properly subject to no set of rules or criteria (Lyotard 1988a: 41). Similarly, there is no need to defend or justify judgements.[13] Politics nevertheless becomes an unavoidably ethical and aesthetic project: it can no longer rely on predetermined criteria of truth or rightness, but on singular judgements or choices, a matter of creating the right linkages out of nothing but its own rules (Carroll 1987: 163).

This 'phrasal' approach aims to rid thinking of its humanist illusions: in Cartesian fashion, Lyotard contends, we mistakenly valorize the act of intervention and categorization over the reception of sense-data; the belief that we do not simply 'receive' the 'given', but transform it, affirms our subjectivity: 'What we live by and judge by is exactly this will to action' (Lyotard 1991: 117). How we receive the world, then, determines our ethical relation to it: to reestablish our ability to (mimetically) receive the other, to privilege the 'passibility' of sense-data, opens us towards the world and allows 'jouissance': it is this immediacy and singularity of experience which allows a *community* of feeling – not understood intersubjectively, but rather as a community between the faculties of the senses and the understanding. To fail to separate the event itself from its meaning or given representation implicitly reduces politics to 'real meanings'; thus Marx, in

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[13] Foucault displays a similar reluctance to defend his ethical position (Schatzki 1993: 51).

'thinking matter as the *meaning* of historical representation' betrays just that materiality he claims to uphold (Readings 1991: 156ff). Justice is therefore not reduced to nothing, as relativism would have it, wherein justice is simply anything *used* as judgement; it is real, but indeterminate and singular, the ever-present but unrepresentable protest against suffering.

From his obvious ethical concerns, one of the central questions for Lyotard is how to understand the relation between historical reality and the political ideas we have of it without lapsing into idealism – the hypostatization of aesthetic-affective ideas as true or universal – or aestheticism, a relativism which enthrones taste as the ultimate, arbitrary criteria of judgment. Politics becomes an infinite activity, there is no just state or system in which a society can settle, for the threat of the differend can never be eradicated; the danger indeed lies in believing it *can* be eradicated. Theory does not become redundant, but no one theory can ever be sufficient to account for all possible differends. It is clear that the emancipatory project is not abandoned; on the contrary, Lyotard believes that the abandonment of grand narratives is the best way to instigate change. Thus the narratives of Marxism and feminism may still be required to articulate the injustice of social inequality, or of women under patriarchal assumptions, as long as such narratives are applied locally. It is not therefore the case that structural analysis, or an orientation towards consensus or solidarity cannot be used where appropriate, it is just that such political strategies cannot be valid for all times, but must remain temporally and spatially specific.

There can be no 'just' closure of meaning, no final word in the sphere of politics and morality, no unifying moral code or law which can escape perpetrating violence on the particulars it subsumes. The prescriptive role politics must nevertheless play can only be fulfilled by keeping it sharply distinct, following Kant, from the *descriptive* function of cognition: no 'ought', in other words, can be derived from the 'is'. This intends to free ethics from the tyranny of the 'true', which, for Lyotard, leads inevitably to terrorism; judgement need no longer be

subject to the *a priori*, universalizing regimes of cognition, instead, all 'just' judgements can only be of singular cases or events, a matter of finding the appropriate rule of judgement *after* the event. It is in this sense that Lyotard rejects the universalizing narratives of liberalism, Marxism, and communication theories and embraces the local; there is no unity of language or of being which can verify their claims, there are only events or occurrences, 'phrases' which resist the pre-determined ordering and naming such narratives commit. Dialogue over ethical matters is likewise not redundant, but cannot produce any correct answer or criteria for judgement: the most it can do is 'hone[...] the capacity to judge' (Schatzki 1993: 50). For Lyotard it is in the nature of injustice, or wrong, that it cannot be established by consensus (Lyotard 1988a: 56); the quest for unanimity in judgement is coextensive with imputing an epistemological status to politics, which inevitably has authoritarian consequences. His lifelong critical engagement with Marxism therefore sees him enjoining us to treat Marx as a 'work of art', merely another local or context-specific narrative, thereby opening the possibilities of the figural, imaginative and utopian elements suppressed by its purely theoretical-political reception (Carroll 1987: 47).

Now, while Lyotard's ethical aims may be worthy ones, on a practical level his theory appears to raise more questions than it answers. How can the idea of rules and regimens be understood along with the anarchic possibility that every phrase potentially presents its own universe, and how are we to understand the distinction between description and prescription? Can the specificity of the local provide sufficient ethical protection to sustain a justice of multiplicity? Does his formula become relativistic in its formality, residing in the respect for incommensurable difference without being able to differentiate between the positive moments which constitute that difference?

There is an individualism inherent in Lyotard's work – by which I mean an over-emphasis on the self-identity and integrity of concepts such as the self, phrases or genres – that undermines its force as social critique. This overly-unitary

view of identity is the flip side of the coin of difference, and results in one-sided notions of the social. The equation of injustice with narratives that speak for the whole is an example of this reductive approach, for not all such narratives are equally dominatory. The delimitation which inevitably accompanies social norms may be construed as an at times beneficial social process insofar as community and identity depend on forms of inclusivity that need not be hierarchical or repressive to otherness. Lyotard's notion of genres as overriding difference to impose a unity of intent – suppressing the differend by weaving unity 'between the gaps' of heterogeneous phrases – on the other hand comes dangerously close, as Clarke observes, to suggesting that consensus always means 'terror' (Clarke 1994: 146). The challenge confronting social critique then becomes one of conceptualizing the collective and identical elements of social being – the anthropological inquiry Lyotard eschews – at the same time as its heterogeneity, its systemic causes of suffering *as well as* the irreducible particularity and agency of individual lives. The recognition of difference in the interests of social transformation in other words also rests on a consensual element, and not simply an individually-conceived reflexivity.

An emphasis on difference at the expense of identity also undermines the possibility of an ethical community, whether cognitive or sublime. Todd May suggests that Lyotard's attempt to portray community is to 'introduce absence without losing the community wholly to a transcendental realm outside all empirical experience' (May 1993: 277). But the ethical basis of this approach depends for its sustenance on an ethical sharing whose possibility it denies (May 1993: 280). Clearly the ethical as a social norm or law is impossible because it would then be universalized, and inevitably suppresses differends. It would, moreover, lose its ethical status insofar as it involved other – legal, cognitive – genres: the authority, rightness and origin of any ethical law would have to be explained and interpreted, undermining its prescriptive force by revealing it as arbitrary, only ethical through an infinite regress of prescriptive claims which can

never be finally explained or grounded, for prescription cannot be derived from description without some mediating or *a priori* value (Lyotard 1988a: 117). The very foundations of Habermas's morality, giving *reasons* for justifying moral positions, is anathema to this justice. Ironically, the implicit question behind Lyotard's concerns, 'how are we to (justly) conceive of community?' is itself ruled out as truly ethical in as much as it is a cognitive question. Given the irreducible specificity of experience, the common can only exist between faculties of perception and judgment, and not between experiencing and judging selves. Valuable as his critical approach may be, therefore, it is too narrow, and offers no means by which to conceive a more positive, emancipatory notion of collective action.

In light of his separation of phenomena and subjective experience from the symbolic realm, just how we interpret the 'is' of our social, material and subjective worlds requires closer examination. The following section will pursue a number of issues that cluster around the notion of representation in Lyotard. This is an enterprise which, given postmodernism's general reluctance to address such questions, is not always straightforward. Ultimately, I want to show that Lyotard is obliged to fall back on some rather modernist premises to defend his justice of multiplicity.

3. Postmodernism and the Dilemmas of Representation

i) Truth and Justice

Central to Lyotard's ethics is the premise that judgment is unconnected to the nature of being and truth (1985: 22). Ethics can justly have nothing to do with description *a priori*, with ontology (which is the same as saying that prescription cannot be derived from description) in order to ensure that the specificity of a case is not subverted in advance (Beardsworth 1992: 56). But if the task of philosophy is to 'develop strategies to keep discourse open to the uncertainties and

complications of sensible experience' (Carroll 1987: 33), how are we to judge without knowing the circumstances of any ethical case? In an early work, *Discours, figure*, discourse is seen to approximate art 'when its regulation of negation and meaning is disrupted by figural language and discontinuous spatialization' (Carroll 1987: 157). Here, 'radical poetry' and critical discourse have the project of radicalizing the distance of reference – the pre-existing distance between language and the world – with the aim of 'recasting designation rather than eliminating it'. Discourse must be disarranged in order to reveal the figural it already contains. Carroll indeed argues that 'Lyotard's entire critical project is rooted in this "poetic" or "aesthetic" opening at the very (non)foundation of discourse' (Carroll 1987: 35-36).

In his later, more ethically-oriented works it becomes clear that Lyotard does not sever all links between the truth of representation and justice, but rather any causal relation: that judgement cannot avoid consideration of questions of truth is implicit in his defence of the differend and in his invocation of Auschwitz as the symbol of the terror of the unity of truth and justice.[14] For Lyotard has not abandoned the 'economy of truth', as Baudrillard would put it, despite his claims that reality is marked out by the particular phrase regimen under which it falls (Lyotard 1988a: 47-51), but the kind of criteria used to *establish* truth (Ingram 1992: 140). Although justice must certainly be freed from the shackles of pre-existing systems of meaning, to argue that the criteria of justice and truth are incommensurable cannot mean that they remain separate in judgement, but refers rather to the idea that the cognitive criteria required in determinate judgement is not the same as the reflective or indeterminate judgement that occurs in ethical matters. If any absolute difference were posited, the task of reflective judgement to

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14 *The Différend* begins with a referral to a revisionist historian's denial that concentration camps ever existed because there are no surviving witnesses. Lyotard's resort to ontology, politics and history as the ultimate defence of his ethical ideas is puzzling given the transcendental level of his argument. It does attest however to the persistence of the problem of ontology, of temporality and origins, which I would suggest feminism cannot too easily escape either. At least, no theory should dismiss these questions as ones it can do without, as Lyotard does. See Bennington, 1992: 164.

mediate between cognition, perception, and signification would be impossible. Crudely understood, his notion that 'Nothing can be said about reality which does not presuppose it' leads to an ethical relativism which starkly conflicts with his attempts to uphold the 'truth' of Auschwitz. It is the *concept* of truth and the real that is under question, we might assume, and not the phenomenon, which may remain inaccessible to representation. If truth is denied on the grounds of its unity, then it must be admitted as multiple, contextual and particular, always exceeding our representation of it. It must be concluded therefore that he severs not any link, but any *necessary* link between truth and justice. Lyotard does not in fact shy away from notions of the real:[15] reality, he affirms, is always underdetermined by language, and we are therefore '...always in opinion, and there is no possible discourse of truth on the situation' (1985: 82). It is just that we can only pay homage to the *idea* of the truth of an event, the truth can never be unmediated by some (underdetermined) representation of it.

Lyotard is not neutral in regards to the good, insofar as judgement upholds a kind of 'common good' negatively, by eschewing its representation, unification and hypostatization (Clarke 1994: 137). But more than this, justice can never be reduced to an undifferentiated relativism in which anything goes, since justice is never what someone *says* it is; rather it is regulated by respect for difference founded on the irreducible specificity and unpresentability of the truth. The 'is' cannot be abolished, any more than the meta-principle of multiplicity, or the representational dimension of justice, even though the law can only be 'known' *after* the fact of judgment. The 'wrongs' suffered by those unable to represent their suffering are wrongs because they are unrepresentable, and therefore silenced; the *kind* of wrong experienced is not so much irrelevant as undecidable before the event. Implicitly, all that is repressed by a hegemonic system of representation will carry potential political import in that its case will be unknown until it can

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[15] The problem with the revisionist historian Faurisson, he argues, is that he may not have a 'stake in establishing reality' (1988a: 19).

find a way of representing itself. Only once its suffering or its claims can be heard can judgement take place; even if that means an inability to understand, simply allowing the other to be.

But in light of his obvious ethical concerns, as well as his example of Auschwitz, Lyotard's refusal to explain the need for justice in terms of the suffering of human beings is strange: justice translates as respect for differences among *phrases* rather than human beings. For him it is not the embodied experience of suffering that indicates the differend but the silence that surrounds the phrase (Lyotard 1988a: 57). But it is not after all *phrases* which decide what is right, but what happens in experience, to 'Being', and this *'what* happens' cannot be interpreted in just *any* way (Ingram 1992: 139-40). Auschwitz can only be distinguished from any other act of silencing, of neo-Nazi groups in contemporary societies, for instance, by the fact that the principle of respect for heterogeneous phrases must be upheld, a principle which fascists clearly flaunt. But how can *this* act of silencing be judged worse than any other in the absence of humanist criteria? The scale of its crime, being objectively presentable, is not sufficient to account for its horror; only the experience and recognition of actual bodily suffering can do this. Feelings of sublimity and the suffering engendered by it are the 'sign' of the differend, or of reason's inability to fulfill its constant referrals to universality; but something more 'human' is required as a motive to protect the differend than phrases alone.

The refusal to supply a criteria of judgement is consistent with a pagan pragmatics which is context-specific, and consistent indeed with deconstruction's insistence on the irreducible contextuality of meaning. But with the example of Auschwitz representation is again reductively opposed to materiality. Language is unable to convey the truth of experience, or the figural, poetic and other non-empirical, non-functionalist levels of signification. In positivist fashion, we cannot speak of such events, because we cannot speak their truth; Auschwitz is in fact *betrayed* by its representation, which can only relay the quantity of its crime, not its

reality (Lyotard 1988a: 56). On this reading representation does not complement aesthetic sentiments, imaginative interpretations or ethical judgements, nor is it *required* to communicate aspects of reality not immediately present or experienced, and thus plays no part in expanding our moral imagination and sensibilities.

ii) Genre and Identity

The separation of representation and ethics also stands at odds with Lyotard's insistence on the possibility of forging new modes of phrasing, an activity that clearly requires a synthesis of sensibility and understanding, a faith in the ability of language to respect the hitherto 'unspeakable'. For Lyotard neither envisages the linguistic constitution of the world, a kind of identity of text and reality, nor a positivist mapping of language onto a given reality, but tends to disconnect language as representation from the world as materiality through his principle of heterogeneity. Yet at the same time he insists that the differend can be resolved by the institution of new phrases and genres, reinstating a bridge of translatability between feeling and representation, and implying that non-instrumental, ethical ways of representing the specificity of the event are possible. In the first case, the difference between the two realms appears irreconcilable; in the second, language regains a connection with the world in its creative, interpretative role. The non-cognitive or aesthetic-affective may be unpresentable, but if a politics of the sublime is to succeed, it cannot be untranslatable.

Lyotard's attempts to distinguish description and prescription, cognition from ethics, is similarly ambiguous, and ultimately untenable. This step intends to reject the deduction of prescriptive statements from descriptive statements: the illegitimate claim to rightness from deriving an 'ought' from an 'is'. The event of giving birth for instance can be linked with a number of various prescriptive phrases, none of which can rightly claim superiority over others merely on the grounds of the facts involved. This is not a relativist stance, since certain linkages can be deemed better than others in the light of specific situations. It is indeed

difficult to see how a just political discourse could proceed at all without some distinction between fact and value. It remains important to be able to distinguish between factual or normative aspects of discourse; or indeed whether a claim is an hypothesis, an opinion, or principle (Cameron 1995: 227). If these distinctions are lost, thought risks dissolving the world into idealism, constructed solely through language as pure normativity on the one hand, or positivism on the other, values deriving from a fixed and natural order. But many beliefs (and most politically contentious ones) do not fit into any simple fact/norm dichotomy, and Lyotard draws this distinction rather too unproblematically, implying that the prescriptive genre can be confined to a particular kind of discourse, politics, while the discourses of science and law are restricted to the cognitive. He thereby neglects the inextricable dependence of any interpretation – even local, sublime ones – on a world-view perceived as factual, the entwinement of historically fluid 'facts' and values on which the ethical depends. The danger in drawing any clear distinction between prescription and description is that it implies that the latter mode language can function in a neutral, objective, non-prescriptive way, simply describing what is, whereas description itself often rests on *a priori* values. There is, instead, no language without normativity: 'Description prescribes by describing' (Cameron 1995: 10). Political discourse may be primarily normative, as Lyotard insists, yet this normativity goes hand in hand with the descriptive. In light of his insistence on heterogeneity and specificity, the homogeneous self-identity of these distinctions is surprising. If, as I argue, genres are radical entwined, whether justice can be served by confining prescription to the local, preventing it from interfering in other language games, becomes doubtful.

It is indeed difficult to reconcile the fact that Lyotard at once recognizes the inherent dangers of the 'realm of opinion', and that 'reality' itself never escapes this realm, and yet continues to defend the description-prescription distinction. But the admission that there is no truth unmediated by opinion undermines any such distinction. We might certainly concede that it is in recognition of the

unavoidable entwinement of different modes or phrase universes within discourse that leads Lyotard to impose limits on narrative, confining it to the local. But the refusal to allow the possibility of interaction between scientific and narrative knowledges (or between different genres in general) on the basis of their incommensurability implies a denial that they occupy the same 'epistemic space' or that science and narrative or cultural norms do in fact engage in argumentation and clash (Benhabib 1990: 119). On Lyotard's interpretation, there is no 'self-correcting mechanism', no critical exchange between say, science and narrative which has shared the same socio-cultural history. His strictures on heterogeneity are at risk of producing a political quietism sustained by the idea that intervention in genres in which we are not involved, an environmentalist's critique of economics or science, for instance, is both impossible and unjust: 'All we can do is gaze in wonderment at the diversity of discursive species' (Lyotard cited in Benhabib 1990: 119). As Benhabib pertinently notes, 'You cannot respect the otherness of the other if you deny the other the right to enter a conversation with you', a denial made on the need to uphold the integrity of genres which may place the other 'outside of the pale of our common humanity and mutual responsibility' (1990: 119, 122).

In part these difficulties are based in Lyotard's efforts to exclude 'anthropological' criteria from his phrasal analysis. This is a symptom of his resistance to looking at their function as meanings in language use. Lyotard's insistent avoidance of the intersubjectivity of communication and any semantic content accompanies a general distrust of representation, a reluctance to confront the way meaning *works*. Semantics and the social enter the scene via the notion of genres or language games; the common resides *there*; but since these concepts are themselves ambiguous, we are left with an inadequately theorized understanding of the performative dimensions of intersubjectivity. Genres are not the isolated 'regimens' Lyotard implies precisely because linguistic practice – or the linkage of phrases – constantly crosses the boundaries between genres, activating more than

one 'way of seeing' without losing participant's understanding; evoking the aesthetic and the moral-practical for instance in the same context as functionalist, cognitive statements. In Lyotard's approach, the complexity and synthesizing facility of language tends to be lost. Instead genres appear to be regulated according to some autonomous and anonymous telos, reducing subjects to a kind of Althusserian ideological 'support' whose meaning is somehow apparent despite the absence of 'subjective' signs. Phrases are not incommensurable in themselves, however, according to some anonymous telos they happen to possess, as Lyotard's formal arguments suggest, but only according to the intersubjective context of signification in which they are employed.[16]

4. A *Post*modern Justice?

How do we translate the sublime recognition of differends into political action? Clearly politics cannot remain on the level of the unpresentable, but must assume a representable form. This much is supported by Lyotard's insistence that the silenced 'must be allowed to institute idioms which do not yet exist' (1988a: 13). This, arguably, puts as much weight on a reflexive rationality as communicative ethics: and indeed, with the combination of an anarchic individualism and Kantian rationality pervading his ideas of justice, it is the high modernism of his thought, rather than its *post*modernism, that becomes increasingly evident. But at the same time Lyotard contends that there can be no 'proof' of oppression in the form of an intuitive or sensible object, but only a 'feeling' of its effects, feeling which ultimately rests on the validity of corporeal experience and intersubjective structures of meaning validation. We then proceed 'as if' the object of our critique

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16 That Lyotard finds himself caught in a kind of rationalist paradox is due perhaps, as one critic points out, to an idiosyncratic reading of Kant which attempts to appropriate the latter's critique of judgement as 'pagan', while rejecting the 'piety' of his dictum that the critique of judgement cannot be separated from the preceding critiques of pure and practical reason, critiques premised on the ultimate unity between reason and nature (Drolet 1994: 266).

was intuitive, to construct our object (patriarchy, capitalism).[17] Whether the 'feeling' of injustice and the 'as if' status of knowledge provides a robust enough basis on which to construct an emancipatory politics is questionable at best. Numerous examples of the continued purchase of grand narratives on meaning and identity formation persist: gender stereotypes, patriotic ideals, rationalist myths of the individual and the market place, which may demand equally predetermined and universal narrative strategies in response. Lyotard's ontology of difference however can never understand the aesthetic-affective as anything other than ineffable and singular; and reason as anything other than totalitarian.

The ensuing ambiguity between reflexive rationality and intuitive aestheticism in his work undermines its political effectiveness. While on the one hand he insists on a postmodern heterogeneity, on the other the distance that separates his work and Habermas's is narrowed by the idea that a resolution for the differend can be instituted through the creation of new idioms, by the insistence that differends are potentially resolvable through new forms of communication. It is also narrowed by the fact that Lyotard too enjoins us keep dialogue open, albeit a dialogue that is creative, sensitive to difference and to the unpresentable. Like Habermas, Lyotard wishes to maintain distinctions between different genres of knowledge, but unlike Habermas, he furnishes no clue as to how (reflective) reason might re-connect with different genres. The lack of a rule to cross over the 'bridges' between the faculties – in particular those grouped under the rubrics of cognition and aesthetics – means that there is no rule to mediate between the spheres of the political, ethical, and cognitive, and equally there is no rule to mediate within them. This does not mean that no bridge is possible; on the contrary, it is up to reflective judgement to find the right one.

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17 James Weiner's comment is apposite in this respect: 'social life as the anthropologist understands it lies in the contrast between the stories we tell in order to represent it to ourselves, and the observable behaviour of those same story-tellers that is often at odds with, or contradicts, such accounts': the contrast between what 'language avers and what behaviour reveals' (1995: 21).

The modernism of his work becomes increasingly evident if we read the absence of criteria in judgment not as the absence of prejudices and prior beliefs – which is impossible – but to the absence of a prior, universally applicable knowledge of how to proceed. Judgement is dependent on a modernist, reflexive subjectivity, for it requires the creation of new sets of rules, an openness to otherness, and willingness to challenge conventional cultural or historical contexts.

It might finally be pointed out that Lyotard's ethics ultimately rests on a *universal* principal. For all its emphasis on multiplicity, Lyotard's notion of justice must nonetheless be structured by a regulative 'Idea', that there be no universal prescription. This is linked to the incommensurability between cognitive and prescriptive modes; as we have seen, ethics is undeducible from our perception of the determinate world. With his insistence that we cannot look to the cognitive for ethical criteria, and the admission that aesthetics 'cannot discriminate the just from the unjust' (1985: 90), there is no *a priori* basis on which a 'just linkage' can be made or recognized. It remains, nonetheless, our ethical duty to protect the differend. But since a politics of reason (and *giving* reasons as justifications for decisions) is denied, and remaining purely within the realm of opinion is 'extraordinarily dangerous', a Kantian position – a kind of universal prescription outlawing universal prescription – is required as a 'safekeeper of the pragmatics of obligation' (1985: 76). Geoff Bennington expresses the paradox well: prescription 'must intervene in all language games to make sure it does not intervene on other games' (Bennington cited in Haber 1994: 33). Justice and prescription are, we might conclude, genres which are permitted to intervene in other genres, not simply in the guise of a negative imperative to refrain from encroaching other genres, but as a substantive, regulative ideal.

Lyotard's recourse to a Kantian universal as a regulative principle resolves the dilemma of how to reconcile 'a multiplicity of justices with a justice of multiplicity' (Kearney 1991: 196). But it is also indicative, as Haber notes, of the

difficulty he encounters linking his aesthetics of multiplicity with a politics premised on a non-relativist, non-universalist justice, one that is, that still implicitly refers to non-contextual standards of moral rightness. In other words, Lyotard's 'pagan' politics does not *of itself* provide the foundations required for justice, but the introduction of a Kantian universal it appears to need sets up an irresolvable tension with the radicalism of his theorization of heterogeneity. As we saw with Habermas, this universal turns out to be substantive and cultural, for it implies the Kantian 'Idea' that morality is founded on a 'horizon of reasonable beings...that can exist together and form a totality' (Haber 1994: 36-37). The ethical community is implicitly based on an general rationality, a (sublime) common sense.

Lyotard's willingness to tolerate the realm of opinion – the inescapable *a priori* intrusion of description which enters into the process of judgement – becomes more coherent once the implicit assumption of a community of reasonable, self-governing beings is articulated. For this view posits a common vision of justice which can be ultimately relied upon to mitigate the excesses of individual judgement: the dangers of the realm of opinion can therefore be seen as safer than universalized, coded moral systems which cannot accommodate the specificity of the event. We can see then that the 'meta'-critical status of Lyotard's prescription that there be no prescription breaks down insofar as it posits not simply a negative proscription: decrying the repressive nature of affirmative universalizing practices; but, implicitly, an affirmative vision of a just society, a plea for tolerance and reflexivity required for the co-existence of a multiplicity of narratives. The purely philosophical, that is, ahistorical status of both Habermas's and Lyotard's claims cannot be sustained.

Lyotard clearly intends a quite different form of subjectivity than Habermas, however. Like Habermas, questions of 'social ontology', the nature of social being, remain largely unacknowledged, yet central to his work (Schatzki 1993: 41). The gulf between perception and cognitive representation begs the question of how

'feelings' are understood: might not the circumstances which give rise to a differend be constituted by the over-arching idiom of capitalist exchange and consumption, an idiom which penetrates into *every* realm of experience? In other words, might not feelings of suffering be the result of perhaps ideological notions of what a self should be in a consumer oriented, competitive society? Can we trust perception as somehow a 'true' indication of wrong? How are to escape the vicious circle wherein human needs and suffering are themselves only expressions of – perhaps the unfulfilled promises of – a dominatory idiom, a dilemma which is especially acute for feminism, where the suspicion that woman as a subject position is an effect of patriarchal discourse gives rise to Irigaray's melancholic notion of *'dérèlection'*?[18] Through the categories of rationality and aesthetics the following chapter will look more closely at these questions of the postmodern ethical self, ideology, and the possibility of autonomy .

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[18] *Dérèlection* is Irigaray's notion (Cornell 1991:82).

4. Freedom and Difference: Issues in Postmodern Ethics

I concluded in the previous chapter that despite a valuable critique of identity, Lyotard's insistence on the primacy of heterogeneity occurs at the expense of a more dialectical, synthetic understanding of reason and aesthetics, the cognitive and the affective. Here I will examine the implications of postmodernism's alliance of ethics with aesthetics, focusing in particular on its concept of the self and its social relations.

The first section briefly re-examines the role of aesthetics in political theory in order to more clearly locate the postmodern project as well as revise the course of my argument over the last three chapters. The second section provides a contrast to the care versus justice debate considered in chapter two, this time in an anti-humanist version. It looks at the work of Zygmunt Bauman, whose postmodern ethics sees the problem of modern ethics inhering in the notion of judgement itself. The third section considers the social and political implications of Lyotard's and Bauman's ethical self, and shows that their understanding of aesthetics is insufficiently grounded in the social. As quite autonomous from the discursive and symbolic spheres, I argue that the moral realm is also dangerously removed from the political. Thus although their understanding of the self encourages new ways of ethical thinking, it relies too heavily on tacitly naturalist accounts of the libidinal self. This leads to a number of deficiencies in social analysis: at best, it renders any response to the question of how identities and local narratives relate to the social whole ambiguous and under-theorized. At worst, it leads to an understanding of the social purely in the restricted terms of subjectivity and its affects, a private morality and subjectivity which cannot be understood in any

relational sense. The ensuing individualist, masculinist orientation of postmodern theory is the effect of a dichotomy between the phenomenal, mimetic-affective world of being and the symbolic world of representation, where the former constitutes the primary grounds of knowledge, relegating the cognitive and rational secondary. Detached as this self becomes from any presentable notion of intersubjectivity, it is difficult to reconcile with any *social* understanding of subjectivity. The question is whether, as Dana Polan comments, the call to feeling, enthusiasm and the sublime, about which nothing can be said, and from which no social power or logic ensues, proves to be no more than an ideological disenfranchisement of subjectivity (1988: 53).

1. Aesthetics and the Politics of Emancipation

As I noted in my introductory discussion on aesthetics, the meaning and use of the term in political theory is far from straight-forward. Wolfgang Welsch argues that aesthetic referents may not share a single identifying common trait, but that they are nonetheless related to each other in such a way that the term retains meaning, a relation structured around an absence of external ends and an opposition to law and necessity.[1] Aesthetics can therefore stand, depending on how we wish to understand them, for objects as various as the sensuous, beauty, nature, desire, art, judgement, illusion, fiction, virtuality, play, even knowledge itself (Welsch 1996: 8).[2] As Welsch shows, in fact, the deeper we look into the basis of our knowledge, the more we discover aesthetic factors: since it is now nigh impossible to defend knowledge on any absolute grounds, that knowledge is in some way a creation or artefact of human life means that it is in a broad sense *aesthetic* (1996: 16). The question then becomes one of understanding the

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[1] These traits also identify, in crude terms, the opposition between a modernist universalism and a postmodern particularism.
[2] This is not to say that the distinctive meanings embraced by the term should not continue to be acknowledged as distinct (Welsch 1996: 11).

distinctions between different *types* of aesthetic knowledge and experience. Kant for instance developed an important distinction between the cognitive (perception) and the emotive (sensation) in aesthetics, distinctions which I also draw upon to support my argument. These differences within aesthetics are crucial: Habermas's distinction between an instrumental, ends-oriented and a communicative reason for instance can be read as a call to preserve and strengthen the *cognitive* dimensions of aesthetics against the onslaught of instrumental thought, while Lyotard's aim to defend the silent 'other' of discourse might be seen as a call to protect the *mimetic-affective* dimensions of aesthetics.

The implications of their modernist versus postmodernist disputes – imprecise as these terms are – are worth retracing. While the first two chapters were concerned with the modernist, 'humanist' response to the challenge of postmetaphysical representation, here I am interested in postmodernism's *anti-humanist* stance. I have argued that both Habermas and Lyotard expose the dangers in either flattening knowledge into *one* kind or isolating its various categories from each other. Most importantly, in the context of my discussion, this means resisting any narrowing of aesthetics to refer solely to art, or reason to refer solely to an instrumental cognition. I have argued that Habermas is guilty of an overly-narrow reading of aesthetics, despite his efforts to integrate affection, experience, *and* cognition. The notion of communicative rationality strives to recuperate the aesthetic elements of mimesis, affectivity and morality – against instrumental reason – in a representational form. This enables its use as a political tool, but in so doing, the specificity of the non-discursive is denied.

Habermas's attempt to separate aesthetics from discourse ethics becomes impossible, for aesthetics cannot be confined to art alone, but provides the grounds of politics, morality and science as well. On this view, it is misleading to extract a single dimension of aesthetics as the object of one's focus without referring to the other spheres of life in which it resides. I argue for a dialectical understanding of knowledge that recognizes the distinctive nature of categories as

well as their interrelatedness. Thus, the autonomous aspect of art cannot be ignored, but must be recognized as being grounded in a larger social context. As Adorno (among others) has shown, 'autonomy always has a precise societal function as its reverse side' (Welsch 1996: 21).

Whereas Habermas believes he can afford to eschew substantive norms because rationality itself is substantively oriented towards democratic decision-making and respect for difference, Lyotard rejects substantive norms because justice cannot assume any one form; justice is instead local, context-specific and embodied, irreducible to symbolic representations. Since the body, its experiences and desires exceed discourse, reclaiming it from the repressive effects of the social order becomes the first step against domination (Boyne & Lash 1990: 120). On this premise, and taking Levinas's ethics as paradigmatic, postmodern justice rests on an unmediated feeling of care for the other demanded by the face-to-face encounter. The command felt by the other's need and suffering is prior to the ego's identity, to self-interest, and outside of dialogue and judgement; the relation it demands is instead pure affect. The ethical relationship can no longer depend on the realm of representation, or conscious symbolic forms: the modes of judgement they comprise destroy particularity by subsuming it under an appropriate universal. Substantive discourse is assiduously avoided, therefore, for this would precisely destroy the spontaneity of the ethical response. Aesthetics is at the centre of postmodern ethics, for it is an *aesthetic* impulse that underlies the primary response to the ethical call, relegating the rational-cognitive response to a second-order.

That postmodernism looks to the aesthetic as the source and centre of a 'new' subjectivity is not surprising in light of the fact that, as Lyotard points out, this realm has conventionally been conceived as free from purpose, will, desire and exogamous ends (1992: 19). This indifference of aesthetics, that is to say the absence of any pre-determined purpose or telos, is what protects the ethical response from pre-determined, hegemonic influences. Since aesthetics is

characterized not by fear of but attraction to the strangeness of the other as experience rather than instrument, fascination rather than objectification, its alliance with an ethical being-with the other becomes clear.

Postmodernists have, moreover, almost by definition, been critical of any overly-narrow view of aesthetics. Postmodern feminists might advocate an aestheticized political community over a masculine, propositional one in order to better accommodate women into the political community; not on the grounds of any essential – or even historical – excluded feminine, but on the grounds that an aestheticized political community breaks down the dichotomies of masculine and feminine, propositional and affective, and thereby represents a more ethical position in regards to the diversity of identity.[3] There is no clear divide between modernists and postmodernists on this score, however. Both Lyotard and Habermas for instance construct *formal* theories of rights: for Habermas this is expressed through a 'right to language'; for Lyotard, 'a right to desire' (Boyne & Lash 1990: 117). But, as feminist theorists, among others, have long pointed out, does not purely procedural moral theory merely perpetuate reactionary politics, a politics based on white, male, heterosexual individuals?

Judith Butler's critical theory rejects the language of rights completely, as we will see in chapter six, more thoroughly aestheticizing knowledge than either Habermas or Lyotard. She refuses the implication of a given, communicative or libidinal self as itself ideological, but thereby tends to be equally reductive as Habermas or Lyotard, implicitly equating the symbolic with domination. As Michèle Barrett notes, the tendency to reductivism in regard to aesthetics on both sides of the political spectrum is an outcome of a common suspicion of the essentialism associated with humanist notions of creativity and emotional response (1992: 40). Thus although it is on the one hand conceived as the basis for knowledge in a postmetaphysical age, its association with a 'philosophy of the

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[3] Judith Butler's postmodern politics is an example of this approach. See also Iris Marion Young, 1995.

subject', as Habermas might put it, tends to push theorists into construing knowledge in terms of linguistic structures and relations, rather than the product of egos. It is not surprising then that aesthetics becomes such a central, if contested, organizing category for theory.

We can also begin to see how carefully aesthetics must be aligned with the moral. Postmodernism's 'new' aesthetic-ethical focus prompts Richard Kearney to conclude it gestures 'towards an ethics of alterity by re-inscribing ways of imagining which elude both the prison-house of mirrors and the cheerless conformity of Grand Theory' (1991: 210). But for others postmodernism's appropriation of the aesthetic burdens it with a central tension; its demands for a heightened reflexivity cannot be forged through collective, normative or rational means, implicitly abandoning politics to an implicitly free-floating intuition and impulse.

It is easy to understand why postmodern ethics gives rise to concern over its potential individualistic, apolitical tendencies. Welsch rather disparagingly characterizes the postmodern aestheticized subject as 'sensitive, hedonistic, refined and, above all, of discerning taste'; who knows: 'you can't argue about taste'. The refusal to engage with ethical and aesthetic issues on a discursive or substantive level paradoxically 'affords new security amidst the insecurity which exists all around. Free of fundamentalist illusions, casually distanced, he enjoys all life's opportunities'. In this realm of 'superficial narcissisms', morals 'pass as constructs of a near artistic order', of fluctuating rather than of binding validity (Welsch 1996: 6).

The aestheticization of the social is not a wholly negative process, however. A strong case can be made that the loosening of spheres of knowledge and experience from absolute and totalizing belief structures has proved, in net terms, beneficial in liberating the individual from various forms of oppression. But neither is the process wholly benevolent, at least not as much as postmodernism's often celebratory tones imply. Aestheticization also tends to impose a new set of

limitations: on the one hand it dissolves the distinctions between modes of knowledge, inviting us to interpret objects as created works of art, thereby reducing different modes of representation and signification to one. On the other hand, it forces a sharp distinction between explicitly self-referential aesthetic modes of thought and those modes that refer to some external criteria, such as law or science. Thus moral judgement, invoking closure and carrying with it the taint of natural law, tends to be removed from processes of argumentation completely. By default, discourse is aligned with a functionalist and cognitive mode of knowledge which cannot safely handle the uncertainties of value judgement.

Zygmunt Bauman's postmodern ethics addresses the relation between ethics and contemporary subjectivity in an illuminating way. He provides a useful contrast to Lyotard insofar as although both reject universalist, cognitivist ethics, and for similar reasons, Bauman more thoroughly rejects a Kantian, universalist paradigm of moral action. He also explicitly addresses the ontological self, which Lyotard often appears reluctant to do. Compelling as much of Bauman's argument is, I argue, it clearly reveals the difficulties of a non-cognitivist ethics, highlighting particularly its highly individualist notion of the moral impulse. In this regard, Bauman offers a suspiciously androcentric view of the ethical self.

2. Bauman's Postmodern Ethics

i) An Autonomous Morality

For Bauman, postmodern ethics does not mean abandoning characteristically modern moral concerns but the characteristically modern way of approaching them: 'The great issues of ethics...have lost nothing of their topicality. They need only to be seen, and dealt with, in a novel way' (1993: 4). His solution offers a non-systemic concept of morality premised on the absence of any fixed notion of identity between individuals, language and the world, thought and its referent. Much indebted to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, justice involves the infinite

right of the Other for sanctity, without the intrusion of reciprocal duty, equal reward or gratitude. Instead of an abstract, calculated, *a priori* system of justice, Levinas proposes the ethical relation as immediate, 'face to face', asymmetrical, and not determined by the other's relation to me. Bauman therefore understands the ethical relation with the Other outside of any framework of equality, reciprocity and proportion, premises that ally his approach to an ethic of care. But where an ethics of care tends, if anything, to embed identity too deeply in relations with others, blurring the distinction between self and other, Bauman's ethics is predicated on (an all-too-clear) distinction between the two.

Bauman distinguishes between postmodern and modern ethics on the grounds that the former insists on the ambivalence of morality and the moral self, in contrast to the perceived predictability, order and universality of modern concepts of justice. Historically, he contends that modernity has increasingly moved the moral domain from the autonomous to the heteronomous. Modernism's structured and abstract justice – which he terms ethical – is heteronomous, determined by principles of action deriving from outside the particular concerns of actual cases. In contrast, postmodern justice is moral; sensitive to specificity, and independent of predetermined codes or generalized social rules, it places the moral burden back on the individual rather than institutions or practices. Yet he also admits that the postmodern injunction to be *for* the other, without reciprocal concerns, must move beyond the moral party of two and include the third party – society – even though this inevitably moves the ethical relation out of the realm of morality to that of a rule-bound, *a priori* justice. The third party remedies the contingency and uncertainty of the face to face moral relation, but it also destroys the singularity and spontaneity of moral action. This is the paradox postmodern ethics presents us: there will always be a gap between justice (autonomous) and law (heteronomous).

Modernity then is characterized by the clash between increasing demands for individual autonomy on the one hand and the heteronomy of rational social

management on the other. Contemporary social organization is increasingly emancipated from the workings of individual moral impulses: the state and the market act as heteronomous criteria of moral action, depriving the individual of the chance to exercise and develop moral autonomy through the injunction to obey procedural norms rather than their own intuitions (1993: 182-3). Such obedience substitutes 'heteronomous ethical duty for autonomous moral responsibility' (1993: 46). Coercive institutions are seen to saturate contemporary life, setting the criteria of rightness and thereby rendering the individual in principle untrustworthy (1993: 29). Individuals themselves are fragmented and torn between conflicting and competing duties and choices, the integrity of the moral self disrupted by the fragmenting effects of state, market and technology, unable to 'confront the totality – of the world, or the other human' (1993: 198).

The attempt to regulate ethics through structural socialization is doomed to failure, as modern morality is riven by the contradictory logics engendered by, on the one hand, the separation of the ethics of business and of the private sphere – a separation which keeps two irreconcilable criteria of action, efficiency and caring, from ever meeting on the same ground – and on the other a general (Protestant) injunction to act morally in *all* spheres of life, economics included (1993: 5). Postmodern ethics therefore demands the withdrawal of the state from the field of 'sociality' the pre-socialized, spiritual, unstructured, anarchic impulses of the *communitas*, the realm of non-instrumental, aesthetic sociality (1993: 130-2). Again, Bauman suffers no illusions of the innocence of this realm: it is not the source of any pure and uncorrupted communitarian ethics but a site where the other is potentially smothered, subsumed into a faceless crowd. Society must steer a delicate path between the dangers of socialization (the structural mode of social organization) and the sphere of sociality (the counter-structural element of community), but a path that cannot be controlled or regulated by compulsion. Social space is simply not amenable to 'moral husbandry': 'socialization, because of disarming and invalidating moral capacities; counter-cultural sociality, because

of confiscating, expropriating, and channelling off the emotions which used to animate moral actions' (Bauman 1993: 143).[4] Social organization is innately neither good nor bad, but it does not and cannot promote moral action through enforcement.

Far from working towards a moral system or code of ethics that would eventually be found to resolve the aporias of the modern condition, Bauman repudiates general moral prescription, and in particular any model of justice based on equality and reciprocity (1993: 10). Such an ethics is quite inadequate, he insists, for it denies the asymmetrical call of the vulnerable and the weak. Thus Habermas's ethics ultimately cannot avoid the selfish motive for concern for one's own place in the social scale as motivation for ethical action: the 'reversibility of perspectives' required in Habermas's Kohlbergian scheme does not oblige an encounter with true difference, true morality, or altruism, but rests on an empathy that comes from sameness, the fear of our *own* possible suffering (1993: 220-221ff); a motivation that is not truly moral, therefore. Bauman instead presents an anti-systemic, anti-representational model of morality, a morality of proximity with the other, positioned pre-rationally. Bearing not insignificant resemblance to Adorno's mimetic relation, morality becomes intimate, a matter of being with the 'face' of the other in contrast to the objectivity, abstraction and distance of moral systems based on equity. But it lacks the social dimension of Adorno's primary ethical-mimetic relation: morality is understood as a private, aesthetic-affective matter, in essence non-communicable. It is the moral impulse and emotions that furnish the structure of ethics, not rationality (1993: 35). Moral behaviour is the individual acceptance of responsibility for the other,

> ...triggered off by the mere presence of the Other as a face: that is, an authority *without* force. The Other demands without *threatening* to punish, or promising reward. The other *cannot* do anything to me, neither punish nor reward; it is

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[4] See his chapter six, 1993, on the repressive effects of technology, where Bauman's discussion is much indebted to Hans Joas.

precisely that weakness of the Other that lays bare my strength, my ability to act, as responsibility (1993: 124).

The moral stance resists the formalism of intersubjectively constituted norms, for their abstract, deontological premises merely promote distrust in moral intuitions and leaves the self open to moral indifference. A telling illustration of ethics's non-cognitive, non-normative nature is demonstrated in Bauman's research into those who, at great risk to themselves, attempted to rescue victims of the genocide in Nazi-occupied Europe. Bauman argues for the absence of any correlation between these actions and what are held to be 'objective' social determinants of moral behaviour, for they defied both the state as well as common opinion. The absence of a cognitive or rational explanation shows, for him, that moral behaviour is both unpredictable and beyond the control of social powers (1993: 166ff), throwing the burden of proof back onto those who see morality as a product of social norms. Bauman contends that, on the contrary, morality is not normative but inscribed in the willingness to break *away* from socially prescribed moral action. Just as we have no 'right' to expect moral action from someone else, for the moral is aligned with choice and freedom, external obligation and duty is always someone *else's* morality, merely 'imitation' (1993: 60). Against Habermas as well as communitarian thinkers, therefore, solitude is at the beginning, solidarity at the end of the moral act, the being *for* the other precedes the being *with*:

> Desubstantiation of the moral argument in favour of proceduralism does a lot for the subordination of the moral agent to the external legislating agency, yet little or nothing at all for the increase of the sum total of good; in the final account it disarms the forces of moral resistance to immoral commands – very nearly the only protection the moral self might have against being a part to inhumanity (1993: 69).

Principles of equity no longer define the moral relation, therefore: our moral duty is not mirrored in the Other. Moral responsibility can fall only on me, I can expect nothing from others, since such an expectation would be contractual rather

than moral: 'It is this uniqueness (not 'generalizability!'), and this non-reversibility of my responsibility, which puts me in the moral relationship' (1993: 51). The answer is not to rely on the judicial, educational or governmental system for reform, nor on community based action, but to *re-personalize* ethics, to accept that personal morality is the *condition* of ethical conduct, not an obstacle to it. Indeed, the appeal to our personal moral sentiments is the 'last hold and hope' of morality (1993: 34). Moral action and responsibility may be discursively non-redeemable, but not, however, relativist; moral truth remains despite its unrepresentable character:

> Contrary to one of the most uncritically accepted philosophical axioms, there is no contradiction between the rejection of (or scepticism towards) the ethics of socially conventionalized and rationally 'founded' norms, and the insistence that it does matter, and *matter morally*, what we do and from what we desist. Far from excluding each other, the two can be accepted or rejected only together (1993: 250).

But both an ethics of 'being with the other' and of justice have their dangerous sides, he warns, the singularity and intimacy of the first potentially leading to the smothering of the other, domination and oppression or the denial of the self – while encoded justice leads to oppression via the different but familiar totalizing route of the appropriation of moral impulses by the state and market. These risks are not easily overcome: there is a genuine aporia in Levinas's notion of 'proximity', he concedes, namely, that with the representation to ourselves of the Other's command, we do violence to her, identify her needs, make her and them our own, act in her 'best interests', surreptitiously turning care into power (Bauman 1993: 91). Bauman attempts to conceive morality as caress, but does not deny the fragility and ambiguity of this relation. Moral ambivalence becomes central, even celebrated; moral conduct cannot be guaranteed, moral action is 'inherently 'non-rational'' (in the sense of non-instrumental), 'incurably aporetic' and can*not* be universalized (1993: 11).

At this point it comes as some surprise therefore when Bauman calls for moral, spiritual and aesthetic leadership to prevent the field of sociality being overtaken, as it has in recent times, by neo-tribalism (1993: 130). Morality demands some notion of social solidarity, he argues, which cannot be left without direction. Leadership involves reconciling aesthetics and morality in a way which encourages personal responsibility, and this means suppressing the cognitive organization of morality. Bauman conceives these relations in terms of social spacing: fear of the unknown ('proteophobia') prompts our *cognitive* spacing of the other, whereas attraction to the unknown, 'proteophilia', characterizes *aesthetic* spacing (1993: 169). Ultimately, aesthetic and moral spacing must occupy the same terrain, since morality requires that the self-referential indifference of aesthetic pleasure cannot remain at odds with the spontaneity and singularity of our moral response. The 'limits and constraints' of morality must find its ally in aesthetic pleasure, not a competitor (1993: 179-81):

> Always and everywhere, the search for aesthetic satisfaction defies the pressures of moral responsibility, yet unless constantly rejuvenated by aesthetic satisfaction responsibility may flounder, lose its moral identity, ossify into the empty shell of rule-sponsored duty (1993: 182).

The aim becomes one of 're-enchanting' the world with the hope of making it more moral, to dignify emotions and to legitimate the inexplicable. It is a matter, in other words, of dismantling that social space where moral urges are 'alien bodies and pathological growths' (1993: 180) – and replacing it with the aesthetic-moral, which has no conception of *a priori* rules or procedures. Morality is not merely living *with* the other, but *for* the other.

Bauman's is as much an anti-communitarian ethics as an anti-institutional one; both indeed present a danger to morality. He wants to free us from the tyranny of community, of 'situatedness' which moulds and stifles the self, which 'needs to be first lopped and trimmed, dissected, and then reassembled' (1993: 45). The moral community is fearful of the untrammelled individual, insecure because it is but a

postulated community. Social organization thus feels obliged to 'anticipate[] the state to be achieved before it takes off, and monitors and reinterprets as it goes' (1993: 129). There is no 'we' of the moral party however, which is only built out of asymmetrical relations between individuals who are not exchangeable, relations which are indifferent to mutuality, and neither demand reciprocity nor equity (1993: 48).

All this rests on a certain view of human being: 'We realize now – with a mixture of apprehension and hope – that unless moral responsibility was 'from the start', somehow rooted in the very way we humans are – it would never be conjured up at a later stage by no matter how high-minded or high-handed an effort' (1993: 34-5). Yet Bauman backs away from the affirmative ontological position this implies. Morality is outside ontology, it is an autonomous, absolute beginning, not something imposed afterwards on the human body. If this were not the case, the 'being with' of ontologically *separate* beings could only result in recourse to the law, a moral ought deriving from an ontological is. 'We are not moral thanks to society,' Bauman argues, '(we are only ethical or law-abiding thanks to it); we live in society, we are society, thanks to being moral' (Bauman 1993: 61). Morality cannot in fact be situated on any temporal scale, either before *or* after ontology, because the moral is non-ontological, a *'transcendence* of being', or, more precisely, 'the *chance* of such a transcendence'. Morality is given, albeit 'precariously', in the survival of singularity in the threat of synthesis, the face to face of humans; not in the calculation of moral worth, and not temporally before ontology, since this would itself be ontological (1993: 71-72).

ii) The Absence of Judgement

What to make of this apparently radically individualistic ethics? Is Bauman's reliance on the non-propositional tenable? Can he offer anything more than an simultaneous celebration and lamentation of the ambivalence of truly moral conduct? No matter where exactly he locates the moral impulse, clearly the ethical

burden of Bauman's formulation devolves – like Lyotard's – not onto the state or social institutions, but onto individuals within civil society, conceived as a 'practice negotiated between learning agents capable of growth on the one hand and a culture capable to change on the other' (1993: 183-4). A moral system would grant as much independence as possible to a privatized civil society, comprised not of rational universal subjects but creative, reflexive agents who strive to achieve the delicate balance between aesthetic self-regard and indifference and moral care for the other.

Whereas for Habermas the overlapping of the moral and the aesthetic occurs through the cognitive realm, linguistic expression being implicitly the 'natural' effect of a communicatively-achieved solidarity, Lyotard and Bauman are far more wary of the cognitive, preferring to base the moral in aesthetic-affective responses. For both, the somatic and non-cognitive, and therefore incommunicable and unknowable, furnish the motivational and emotional resources for both cognition and non-instrumental moral action. But while Bauman is unwilling to install even Lyotard's minimal universalist safeguards to ensure the survival of an ethical community, his quasi-anarchic alternative implicitly relies, like Lyotard's, on a community of rational beings, amenable to moral and spiritual leadership, but largely self-governing. Thanks to an obscure moral know-how, the question of judgement is avoided altogether. Morality does not involve judgement, since responsibility for the Other is unconditional, free from consideration of the 'merits of the case', not begun in any decision or commitment, but *before* that, in an intuitive and spontaneous aesthetic-affective response (1993: 74).

Scott Lash indeed comments that Bauman believes the problem of ethics in modernity is precisely a problem of judgement: rather than 'displacing universalist moral judgement by extending the particularist principles of aesthetic judgement to the sphere of morality', as Lyotard does, he 'opts for an ethics that displaces the notion of judgment altogether' (Lash 1993: 17). This objection to judgement is made on the grounds that it detaches morality 'from its customary

union with the quality of human kindness' (Lash 1993: 18). Neither pre-ontological nor pre-linguistic in any temporal sense, yet existing before, aside from the ontological and the linguistic, morality 'does not need standards, either; it is its own standard, it sets its standards as it goes, it is an act of continuous creation' (Lash 1993: 110).

Bauman is right to argue that morality doesn't simply result from the fact of living together, but his insistence on the autonomy of morality from the social is nevertheless deeply problematic. This divorces the moral from the symbolic altogether, leaving the political open to the threat of intuitive, irrational impulses and prejudices. Neither is it quite consistent with the reflexive subject Bauman elsewhere demands, for cognitive processes seem simply incompatible with justice. The status of the moral is at best ambiguous, implying a problematic essentialism that confounds any understanding of its social context.

The question must also be asked whether, and what kinds of, cultural or aesthetic-affective forms of moral leadership might encourage individual responsibility and moral independence. If Bauman is right that aesthetic pleasure in contemporary society feeds off the fascination with strangeness, instability and distance of social objects, then it is difficult to see how it can easily be reconciled with a morality that demands intimacy, self-denial and a kind of static (self) capture.

Despite its intentions to evoke a morality of empathic proximity, Bauman's new way of moral being therefore courts a solipsism in ethics that pushes the potential difficulties we saw in Lyotard's work to an extreme, for here there is no ultimate universal regulative principle guiding moral action. Its anti-systemic, anti-communitarian character, and accompanying emphasis on the autonomy of morality slips easily into ahistoricism and naturalism. Morality is isolated from language and norms in a way that creates a sharp dichotomy between discourse and the self. Residing only on a subjective level, it becomes ultimately indistinguishable from aesthetics in so far as its non-universal, self-referentiality

can only be felt: 'the autonomy of moral behaviour is final and irreducible: morality escapes all codification, as it does not serve any purpose outside itself and does not enter a relationship with anything outside itself' (1993: 124). The rejection of codifiable norms indeed raises the prospect of Polan's disenfranchisement of the moral subject,[5] its separation from collective political action. In contrast, the high modernism of Lyotard's justice, with its Kantian demand for the absence of general prescription and emphasis on the reflexivity required for judgement, albeit a singular judgement, appears all the more salient.

The following section will pursue these questions of the self-other relation in Lyotard's postmodernism, and consider just what the distinction between the symbolic and the affective self implies for political action.

3. Postmodernism and the Dirempted Self

i) Lyotard Revisited

Postmodernism objects to modern notions of subjectivity on the grounds of its rationalist beliefs in the transparent passages between feeling, concept and representation and its concept of a unified, authorial self. It purports to avoid problematic epistemological assumptions about origins through two – often incompatible – strategies, conceiving the grounds of knowledge as non-representable, on the one hand, and as always contained within or mediated through the text, or phrase, on the other. This is paralleled on the subjective level by a distinction between the symbolically-constituted subject and an ineffable, libidinal self. These divisions are particularly evident in Lyotard's work, resulting in a number of fundamental tensions.

While for Bauman we are pre-socially moral (albeit in a way that suspends chronology, avoiding the question of foundational subjectivity), Lyotard is perhaps even more elusive on this question. Despite his turn away from the

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[5] See p156 of this chapter.

earlier, subjectivist work typified in *Libidinal Economy* to the less 'humanist' approach of *The Differend*, Lyotard nonetheless implies that feeling is not merely an effect of phrases but an immediate realm of sense experience, quite distinct from the symbolic realm. Lyotard is on the one hand typical of French poststructuralism in the abstractness of his thought and the purely logical status he assigns the subject. The self is decentred, 'always already' situated by language and social relations, relations understood not as unitary or monological social bonds but as webs of interwoven narratives. Ontologically speaking, Lyotard's repudiation of the discursive community in the name of the differend implies that human beings are diverse and autonomous; not by virtue of any Cartesian intentional will, but by virtue of the distinct phrasal modes and spatio-temporal differences that constitute them. For Lyotard, narrative and language are networks of incommensurable, fragmented and context-specific stories. We are not authors of the meaning we express but are constituted *as* authors by the meaning always already intrinsic to the narrative form. We are not determined by narratives, however, their always-already given nature combines with the fluidity and heterogeneity of meaning to make us 'free' and 'creative' insofar as we are obliged to 'go on', we cannot help but make undetermined and unpredictable links from one phrase to the next. Singularity is not the product of a pre-discursive, individual essence pertaining to each personality, but to the inevitable heterogeneity of phrases and the openness of narratives.

This view of subjectivity as an effect of heterogeneous networks of phrases is combined however with a naturalist account of the libidinal, mimetic, pre-symbolic self, the realm of the 'event'. The combination of these two approaches results in an instability of identity and relations between identities that underlies Lyotard's politics, culminating in a self and a politics that cannot be defined and whose meaning is never contained. The self becomes a pagan ideal of an 'aesthetic affirmation of the diremptive self' (Haber 1994: 9, 15): pagan in its refusal of any over-arching normative totality as the explanatory and semantic framework of

knowledge and in its refusal to force the self into any universal or authorial mould of subjectivity; aesthetic in its affectivity, creativity and independence from instrumental concerns; diremptive because split between the symbolic and the affective.

In Lyotard's ethics, as we have seen, the two realms of the social and the corporeal are pitted against each other: the 'truth' of the non-discursive, sentient/phenomenal world struggles to emerge from the repressive effects of subjectivity and the symbolic realm it is built upon. Both Lyotard and Bauman locate the moral community prior to the intentional ego, in the phenomenal realm of the 'it happens'. Our moral faculty is not dependent on social norms: we cannot, in fact, know where prescription derives (Lyotard 1985: 69). The passivity and receptivity that precedes the ego's actions constitute sociality, not any consensus of or meeting between autonomous egos (Lyotard 1985: 35). The ethical obligation comes first, they argue, it obligates us to choose to obey or disobey it, and cannot be justified or explained by reasons. The reciprocity inherent in the cognitive, dialogical relation – where each participant assumes a more or less equal degree of comprehension and expression in the other – is therefore not present in the ethical relation or the prescriptive phrase (Caterino 1994: 256). Unlike Habermas, then, where the subject-subject relation is premised on a simultaneous recognition of both identity *and* non-identity, here intersubjectivity inevitably renders the other the same. For Lyotard, as we have seen, a prescriptive cannot be deduced from a descriptive; one is descriptive of a state of affairs, the other a command or imperative to act. Any descriptive statement requires a further premise to link onto a prescriptive. Ethics therefore 'prohibits dialogue, since dialogue requires the permutation of names upon instances' (1988a: 111-112). His argument that ethics and cognition are therefore incommensurable means that in order to justify or legitimate a prescriptive, the sender or recipient must change their positions to an outside, non-participating observer, and attempt to legitimate the moral injunction or decision through *descriptive* statements. As Caterino explains, it is not

ultimately a matter of consensus on *cognitive* statements that will lead to ethical consensus, but agreement on the premises that *link* the cognitive onto the ethical. The understanding takes no part in this: 'If one gives a commentary, an account or a justification, one cannot understand the obligation; if one is obliged, then one cannot understand' (1994: 245).

This distinction is based on a fundamental separation of cognition and feeling, which begs the question, how exactly are we to understand the status of feeling, the perception of the 'it happens'? Although Lyotard admits that a tacit pre-interpreted telos of human life is embedded in our evaluations, shaped by prior socially and linguistically mediated experience, practices and interactions, the ethical does not reside at this level, but on the level of feeling: feelings and sensations precede cognition and provide the motivating conditions for morality. Although he insists on the linguistic constitution of the subject, feelings are *different* from language and symbolic forms of representation; their *happening* in other words is different from their socially determined *meaning*. The point is that they are experienced in a different way than cognitive forms of knowledge and experience, they operate in a different mode. They neither possess the generalizable, and thus abstract, form of symbolic representation, nor its linguistic communicability: any attempt to translate feelings into other modes cannot help but leave some remainder, misrepresenting the experience it is trying to communicate.

If experience, feelings and sentiments can never be reified into a common, representable object, truth can never apply intersubjectively, in any abstract, general form, but only in a context-specific way. Feelings can nonetheless be social and communicable, but only via the aesthetic transmission of signs – feelings of frustration, sympathy, suffering, enthusiasm – which activate the sublime. They are only able to be known cognitively, in an indirect way. Justice is then realized through the assertion of subject/ed voices, the co-existence of several minorities, none of which prevails; the ceaseless interplay of antagonisms, negotiations and

ruses (Lyotard 1985: 85, 41). Bound only by local standards of validity, justice has recourse to no over-arching criteria of evaluation. The vicissitudes of parochial standards are checked only by the constant reminder of sublime rupture accompanying totalized notions of reality. The sublime is able to support this emancipatory and critical function because it goes beyond the horizons demarcated by concepts to create pleasure, the motivation to overcome the pain of frustration and antagonism between concept and world.

The difficulty here turns around the terms of the dichotomy between the feeling and the knowing self, for, unlike the knowing self, the experiencing self is allowed no interpretative position and is not constituted through the world of representation. Lyotard's refusal to reduce the world to propositional form may well save the specificity of the material, but it also renders the question of how to understand or evoke that which falls outside representation, and the relation of the cultural to this realm, problematic. The elaboration of feeling as the basis of ethical action, feeling that is not subjective but that arises from the silence that surrounds a phrase, carries at best ambiguous ahistorical implications. His notion of indeterminate judgement implies that justice is better served by the *absence* of law, and relies instead on a kind of authenticity of experience, a letting-be of particularity which promotes moral sensibilities and as such subverts hegemonic influences. The limits of conventional, local criteria are always being broken by the imaginative application and interpretation of new criteria within new settings, as David Ingram puts it, a celebration of the innovative capacity of postmodern judgement (1992: 135-6). The autonomy of judgement is reflected in the sublime, where the idea of the conceivable but not representable implies a non-discursive, spontaneous level of perception that can be used to inform reflective judgement, pointing towards the possibility of emptying 'analysis of all cognitive assumptions that might lead it to pre-judge the nature of an event' (Readings 1991: 114). The ethical, face-to-face encounter with the other initiates an aesthetic response of defamiliarity, where the subject finds itself and the other anew, as it were, and

conventional social relations become irrelevant. Ironically, given its emphasis on the particularity of ethics, postmodern ethics becomes a highly abstract process: the encounter aims to be *unconditioned* by social influences, and it is only under such circumstances that the obligation we feel is ethical: 'We are forced to consider obligation without reference to our attachments or to the conditions of our existence' (Caterino 1994: 248-249).

But such a notion of judgement is worrying in its naturalistic connotations,[6] relying as it does on an intuitive faculty of judgement that risks unwittingly reproducing the very cultural norms it purports to transcend. As a form of intersubjective feeling, the *sensus communis* can only exist on the level of the unpresented, but it is also precisely the *absence* of propositional forms that leaves it vulnerable to ideological influences, I argue. As we saw with Bauman, the separation of ethics and cognition is inconsistent with the importance placed on the notion of reflexive judgement, which, is after all, a symbolic and rational faculty insofar as it relies on linguistic meanings and concepts. Justice may intervene in those narratives which exceed their specificity, which desire to regulate beyond their boundaries (Lyotard 1985: 97), but the notion that responsibility for justice cannot be ascribed to a predetermined norm or rule but befalls us case by case then becomes troubling inasmuch as it implies either that reflexive thought can occur outside the symbolic system, or that symbolic representation is not dependent on prior, intersubjectively-affirmed meanings.

ii) The Divided Self

Here we have, on the one hand, the subject as agent, the postmodern 'bricoleur' whose creativity and imagination is expressed through the active patching

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[6] It is tempting to see the hint of libidinal excess, that which escapes the symbolic so evocatively conjured in Lyotard's earlier works, as remaining more faithful to his underlying postmodern ethics. There is 'a natural finality in desire, or in the persistence of being what one is', writes Lyotard somewhat cryptically (1985: 48). For Geoff Bennington, this is indicative of Lyotard's increasing concern with how to judge the critical function of desire (1988: 97), a point which touches on a theme many critics extracted from his earlier works, a libidinal excess which lies outside the discursive, subverting it.

together of multiple and fragmented experiences, discourses and identities to produce new meanings and signs, the anarchic impulse of the creative self always able to make a counter-move, subverting discourse (Probyn 1990: 181). And on the other hand we have the insistence that subjectivities are the effect of signs and phrases, that there is no authorial source of meaning, that meaning derives from the relational structures between phrases rather than an embodied or an intentional self.[7] But the rational action involved in reflective judgement implies a subjectivity that is far more than the sum of contingent phrasal linkages. Language may indeed provide the means by which the self gains self-identity, intentionality or will, and is able to transcend and transform its context. Yet if the appeal to a politics of the sublime is designed precisely to protect a realm of 'being' apart from the symbolic, this suggests that the subject, as conscious ego, is not simply an effect of signs, but an embodied, phenomenal entity that resists and subverts the symbolic by virtue of its mimetic-affective interaction with the world, not simply its position as a distinct spatio-temporal 'support' for phrases. But Lyotard allows little room to understand the interplay between these two realms, explaining the achievements of reflexive judgment purely in terms of an inner capacity to bridge the gap between different genres.

The gap between the symbolic and the phenomenal realms might be bridged by some notion of the way meaning works to link the social and intersubjective with the self. The poles of meaning and referent, addressor and addressee do not function on their own, anonymously; they are dependent on a subject who possesses desires, needs, experience and who shares at least some degree of intersubjectively-based meanings with other subjects. The *telos* of genres, as well as the slippage of meaning that occurs within and between them, requires some notion of an intentional, autonomous subject and the intersubjective context of

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7 Stuart Sim draws attention to the 'svelteness' of Lyotard's postmodern self, its suppleness, speed, ability to metamorphose, to dodge the claims of metanarratives, somewhat akin to the later Foucault's aesthetic concerns. There is also a kind of 'svelteness' in the self's desires, which do not remain in synchrony with the legitimation procedures of grand narratives (Sim 1992: 108-110).

meaning to be coherent: phrases can only acquire a telos or belong to a genre if they are *used* in that manner by actual speaking and acting subjects. Lyotard misses precisely this social, semantic, *lived* dimension of subjectivity,[8] for what links are made or what genres are employed rest on a degree of narrative unity of subjective experience, which reunites the multiplicity of genres inherent in any discourse. It is both the symbolic and the embodied elements of the self that makes it unique at the same time as it is 'positioned' by a common language, and which renders the relevant link between phrases not merely arbitrary, spatio-temporal differences.

Despite Lyotard's dismissal of 'anthropomorphized' theory, his use of the Kantian idea of the sublime and the feeling it invokes – traditionally referring to the aesthetic sensibility to infinity and the simultaneous horror and pleasure it provokes – draws him towards a theory of subjectivity that connects the phenomenal and the symbolic. Kant's sublime acts as a means to sensitize us to the unpresentable through an act of subjective interpretation.[9] But because it lacks any *social* dimension, Lyotard's subject remains caught in a monological, naturalist paradigm, no less individualist than Kant's sublime, is intended as it is to lead us towards 'existential insights of moral import', 'a mode of moral feeling which arises from nature' (Crowther 1993: 139).

This conclusion is reinforced by Lyotard's emphasis on the importance of *phronesis*: practical wisdom, or the art of judgement. With all its implications of an autonomous self, one that is already motivated by one's own clearly defined needs, desires and interests, this view implies an active self, but not an interactive, empathic or suffering one.[10] In Bauman's case, this reflects the masculine bias of

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[8] A result, as I will later argue, of a positivist view of knowledge.

[9] See Crowther, 1993: 164 & C. Bürger, 1992. Kant's sublime indicates both the pleasure and pain in our transcendence of the limitations of embodiment: our ability to think the infinite and the absolute even if we cannot perceive it sensually (Crowther 1993: 172).

[10] I do not however want to deny the very real differences between liberalism and postmodernism. Despite the shared absence of an intersubjective dimension, postmodernism implies a very different kind of political community to that of classical liberalism. Liberalism's disembodied, impartial reason provides the foundation for a principled universalism: in postmodern theory, however, the subject is only ironically autonomous, conscious of her position as an effect of the

Levinasian ethics: suffering is to be attended to, but it is always experienced by the other. In Lyotard, the self reflects the Hobbesian view of language noted in the preceding chapter, playing out an agonistics with the other, every move provoking a countermove, and the more unpredictable the better (Sim 1992: 111). Although Lyotard is obviously concerned with the prevention of suffering, the anti-humanist individualism of his work renders the *intersubjective* dimension of action incomprehensible. By rendering the ethical obligation 'anonymous', he risks bypassing the social nature of our identities altogether.[11] As Benhabib points out, this leaves him unable to draw ethical conclusions from the *difference* in the effects of speech acts on *persons*; an agonistics of language in other words permits no distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative uses of languages (Benhabib 1990: 116).

Lyotard's is a position that rejects the intersubjectivity of meaning in favour of a heterogeneity that resides in the particularity of the body, pushing theory back to a phenomenological, Kantian argument about 'things-in-themselves', to a positivist reading of an undistorted reality. The emphasis on corporeality undermines any notion of ethics as anything but an unrepresentable sign, denying the cognitive as a vehicle of the ethical completely. Lyotard does not appear to admit the possibility that what is *felt* is simultaneously 'presented' in the understanding; in a social context, to experience is also to interpret. The 'it happens' and the 'what happens' are, in other words, ultimately indistinguishable: the 'event' is always-already interpreted. His insistence on the gap between the 'it happens' and the 'what happens' is clearly a strategy to protect the specificity of experience, but he thereby tends to negate the coextensive nature of knowledge and experience. The realm of descriptive, determinate judgement possesses empirically demonstrable objects as their referents; objects lacking in the ethical

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language she employs, but nonetheless able to effect an 'immanent transcendence' of her context. The postmodern self therefore legitimates only communities of local, non-universal justices. See Lyotard, 1985.

11 Caterino argues that in Levinas this anonymity is replaced by the tacit postulate of a positive infinity: God (Caterino 1994: 251).

realm, which calls on indeterminate judgement. In practice, however, this distinction cannot be sustained: indeterminate judgement must look to the empirical world for guidance, if only to judge by analogy; but in any case the two are not and cannot be independent of each other. Lyotard's use of Kant backfires: an over-emphasis on the phenomenal, empirical world at the expense of the social and interpretative means that the subject and meaning are reduced to illusions for which no evidence or evaluative criteria is demonstrable (Caterino 1994: 255).

Because judgement is not seen to be dependent on the cognitive sphere but on feeling and undetermined reflection, the social becomes a 'plurality of singularities', and largely opaque, we might presume, even to reflexive judgement. Lyotard can moreover say nothing of the intrusion of culturally hegemonic values in judgement. The danger here is that 'feeling' might be outside language or representation, but it is not necessarily outside ideology (Polan 1988: 52). Indeed, insofar as it is aesthetic, in Terry Eagleton's view, feeling can be seen as coterminous with ideology.[12] The privileging of heterogeneity paradoxically tends to establish dichotomies at odds with the general postmodern critique of such modes of representation, resulting in an over-emphasis on the self-contained, monadic identity of genres and narratives, symbol and event, the universal and the specific. Lyotard appears unable to acknowledge what is implicit in his own work: that if narrative and feeling structures understanding and moral motivation, then there is a fundamental interdependency between such realms, rather than a straightforward incommensurability. Language and feeling should instead be understood as tarred with the same brush.

The problem with his failure to adopt a more synthetic understanding of language and the phenomenal world becomes particularly salient in regard to gender, which he construes as an 'irremediable differend'. Gender differences are based on a fundamental lack – we are not the other – and desire which is seen to

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12 See Armstrong, 1993. Of course, Habermas's virtual subsumption of the aesthetic-affective into the structures of communication is also problematic, yet his all-encompassing understanding of language at least incorporates feelings into linguistic, and thus ideological, structures.

instigate our very interest in knowledge (Lyotard 1991: 20-22). How to understand sexual difference is of course one of the central questions in feminism. But the foundational character of such difference here is again at odds with other aspects of Lyotard's postmodernism: gender appears to comprise two discreet ontological categories which cannot be dissolved, nor which overlap each other: a naturalism which risks perpetuating a heterosexual as well as patriarchal hegemony. And in any case, how do we recognize an 'irremediable' differend from a remediable one?

Construing gender differences as Lyotard does risks blocking communication and understanding between conflicting parties and reifying gendered identities. The *absolute* nature of this difference is an example of the aforementioned tension between the stasis and self-identity that seems to inhere within the object, genre, phrase on the one hand and the critique of representation and the provisional, fluid nature of our concepts and their meaning on the other. Understanding gender as an irremediable differend means that the plaintiff who is unable to articulate her case only remains so just as long as she falls *outside* the political, the sphere of representation; as soon as she enters into it, representing her case, her quest for justice becomes a mere litigation. Those who do not share Lyotard's views in this respect are therefore ironically at risk of becoming victims of yet another differend. Again, different genders do not appear to be occupying the same epistemic and social space.

We can re-interpret Lyotard's thought in a way that allows a more dialectical understanding of concept, or language, and the material world. If parties to the differend – in this case, of gender – were conceived as possessing an historical, intersubjective dimension, cultural and linguistic identities, as well as corporeal ones, difference need not be absolute but recognizable and open to negotiation. Channels of communication, even if inadequate, could then be kept open, at least allowing the *possibility* of understanding. Although the differend is not an inevitable outcome of disputes the tension here lies in Lyotard's dismissal of the *possibility* of reconciliation between differends on the one hand and on the other

his exhortation to invent and experiment with new meanings in order to circumvent the violence of given representations. The static view of language the former implies sits uneasily with the latter, a stance which opens the possibility of transformation in language and concept as well as access between the aesthetic and the cognitive in order for new experience to be presented symbolically.

Lyotard's work holds a number of affinities with postmodern feminist struggles against reified concepts of gender, hegemonic modes of representation and the suppression of voices that fall outside dominant idioms. But equally, from a feminist viewpoint, the devaluation of intersubjective identity and discursivity under the primacy of heterogeneity stifles an understanding of gender in society by permitting only monological understandings of subjectivity and experience. Lyotard does not adequately show how the two different versions of the self he presents – the symbolic and the libidinal – work together in judgements, how we are to move, in other words, between the propositional and the non-propositional, or how the experience of suffering can be translated into a genre amenable to recognition by others. Yet he needs to do this, for he cannot rely on a kind of authenticity and immediacy of experience and moral sensibilities alone to fulfill the requirements of justice. For despite his focus on incommensurability, intersubjective understanding must occur at a number of levels for justice to be done, cognitive as well as affective. That is, we must be able to imaginatively understand the claim of the other, with all the scientific, moral-practical and aesthetic-affective modes of thinking this involves, to recognize it as a differend, for we cannot *feel* that claim in the same way. Concerned only with the aesthetic-affective self, Lyotard is left unable to situate the symbolically-constituted subject in structures that move beyond the local.

Lyotard's and Bauman's postmodern ethics therefore occupy a rather awkward position, logically speaking: the split between the propositional and the aesthetic-affective swings between two incompatible versions of subjectivity, at once repressing the discursive, but using it to establish the non-discursivity of social

being. As Scott Lash points out, if it is implied that this ethics is somehow an original state of human being, a libidinal condition of desire for the other, then postmodernism has not transcended metaphysics at all, but continues to rely on a foundation based on instincts rather than reason . If on the other hand it is a state of enlightenment, the result of a developmental process, then this implies a cognitive as well as an aesthetic-affective intervention in so far as it demands a particular kind of aesthetic response, a cognitive, reflexive defamiliarization and de-conditioning in regard to lifeworld values (Lash 1990: 111). But of course, the cognitive is precisely what is rejected in postmodern ethics. Lyotard's self, as Richard Kearney argues, therefore wavers ambiguously between a postmodern 'endless play of arbitrary signifiers', an effect of language, and an effort to situate action in its historical and human context (1991: 177).[13]

Lyotard's claim that ethics is not compatible with dialogue indeed imposes a cognitive unity on language at odds with his insistence on the heterogeneity of phrases and their secondary status to affectivity. It also helps to explain Habermas's objection to the irrationalism inherent in postmodern ethics: when no reasons are admitted into the process of judgement, as Brian Caterino puts it, ethical action becomes a normatively empty opening out to the other without any regard for substantive worth or actual social conditions of that call, a blind leap of faith (1994: 253).[14] Not without some cognitive process of evaluation in other words can action be directed towards the truly ethical. Habermas therefore appears vindicated in arguing that the repudiation of truth claims and a non-

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[13] If, moreover, we apply Lyotard's own description-prescription distinction to this schema, we can see how it fails on its own terms. For Lyotard himself makes an illegitimate leap from the descriptive: that fact and ethics are incommensurable, to the command: it is wrong to justify ethics with descriptive statements. But if it is forbidden to interpose one genre with another, if description cannot justly enter into the ethical, Lyotard requires an intermediary premise which links these two: *that it is unjust to do so*; a premise which, on his own terms, cannot be proven, nor which is subject to consensus, which can never in other words reconcile his description of heterogeneity from the prescription not to prescribe. Instead, the obligation to respect the specificity of these genres must be felt, not argued for. The argument quickly becomes circular; the very acts of categorization engaged in by determinate judgement to handle its objects of knowledge must first be formed by indeterminate judgement, which in turn requires the model of determinate judgement to forge its links between faculties (Caterino 1994: 246).

[14] See also Habermas's objections to an ethic of care in chapter two, pp72-73.

cognitive, aesthetic response to otherness is insufficient for a social ethic: an 'emancipatory effect' does not follow from a de-sublimated meaning, or from deconstruction alone (Habermas 1987b: 11). For feminists, particularly, the local and the spontaneous in ethics cannot be left to simply do what it does, along the lines of Lyotard's pragmatics. In this respect the ideological dimension of the aesthetic assumes central significance, those unconscious motivations, reactions and symbolic associations that may be 'part of the process of maintaining a basic sense of integrity and autonomy' (Young 1990: 204) but which may also feed into maintaining unwelcome forms of social inequality and domination.

Aesthetics may be the source of diversity and moral motivation, but if we accept the critiques of Lyotard I have outlined above, it cannot be the *sole* organizing principle of politics or ethics; we are pointed back both to the universalist realm of Habermas and the substantive concerns of communitarian critics.

4. The Postmodern Community: A Critical Summary

I have argued that Lyotard's critique of modernist ethics results in an atomization of community, an inability to adequately account for the structures and commonalities of social existence due to a notion of aesthetic experience that either lies before or subverts discourse, but in any case is specific to the individual. But this appeal to an unstructured multiplicity in the name of justice ignores the intersubjective context of meaning formation as well as the substantive, culturally-specific assumptions of selfhood it implicitly involves. Lyotard shares this latter point with Habermas, both of whom offer purely formal attempts to ground justice. Also like Habermas, Lyotard's substantive political interventions are quite minimal. Since phrases are inevitably agonistic, the solution is to confine conflict to local narratives. Systematic domination can be ruled out where people are allowed to express their own narratives in 'counter-moves' unrestrained by hegemonic cultural and economic paradigms, but this can only restrict violence to

small-scale skirmishes, the inevitable clash of diverse local narratives. Politics is agonistic in this ongoing sense, in light of which an absence of closure best ensures the possibility of justice. Justice *might* only be done through the invention of a new mode of representation, the 'making of unexpected, para-doxical moves' which break free of sedimented, conventional habits of thinking and custom and rely on the 'capability of thinking outside of the concept and outside of habit' (Morris 1988: 226).

It is not far from this scenario to Habermas's undistorted and open discourse of lifeworld interaction, free from the hegemony of systemic imperatives. In both cases it is the intrusion by institutional structures and paradigms that distort a kind of spontaneous, diverse and inherently ethical everyday interaction (Benhabib 1990: 119). Yet the appeal to creativity, spontaneity and diversity is undermined in both thinkers insofar as they require a certain *kind* of cultural framework as their pre-condition, a culture which supports modernist, aesthetically reflexive, *reasonable* beings, able to uphold the moral autonomy demanded of them.

The deeper one delves into the assumptions of Lyotard's ethics, the greater the ambiguity. The burden placed on moral autonomy is indisputably modern, yet the moral self is destabilized by the postmodern emphasis on heterogeneity and plurality. The dirempted subject is situated in a moral sphere that can no longer be located in the public realm of institutions and states, the traditional codifiable field of social justice, for the universality of representation can never do justice to the singularity over which it operates. This aesthetically-motivated ethics implies a 'transcendence' which cannot be derived from the self nor socio-historical structures, but rather an elusive 'feeling', the dissonant effect of incommensurability between the concept and the multiplicity of events, experiences, symbolic and semiotic phrases. Resistance only occurs through anarchic impulses that appear vulnerable to all the dangers outlined in an ethic of

care: an inability to sufficiently distinguish self from other, to protect the weak from the possibly violent response of the strong, or to take action on a *social* level.

Bauman's rejection of reciprocity for instance removes any legal safeguards against the abuse of the caring relationship which continues to blight women's lives. Such protection is not needed in the case of the moral agent who is already acting freely, from her own will, who is in Bauman's terms the *stronger* party; but it is hard to see how in the absence of any reciprocity the weaker party will be identified, or identify herself, as such, for she will have no recourse to any moral principle to which she can appeal, save the cry of the victim to the oppressor, the weaker to the stronger.[15] The absolute and immediate command purportedly exercised by the weak over the strong may perpetuate resentment, humiliation and manipulation rather than care, affection and respect, for it requires first and foremost an act of renunciation, or surrender on the part of the moral agent, to allow herself to embrace the other, not to be threatened by difference but to respect it, to open herself to a 'radical vulnerability to Otherness' (Miller 1994: 270). In order to protect the weak, postmodernism's face-to-face, particularist ethics must be accompanied by more substantive values that go beyond individual, one-to-one relations, relieving the practical burden on moral autonomy.[16]

The grounds of Lyotard's critique of grand narratives are also questionable. Although purporting to avoid the repressive effects of social totalities, he lacks the

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[15] As I have argued in relation to an ethics of care, the asymmetrical relationship is particularly problematic for women in that refusing any notion of symmetry between parties risks leaving the weaker at the mercy of the stronger. Indeed, feminists such as Gayatri Spivak, following Irigaray, attacks Levinas's ethics as 'passive-masculinist' (Spivak 1992: 74). She shows how the subject of this ethics is an irrefutably masculine one, requiring the feminine as the (passive) face of the absolute other, confined to the intimate private sphere, in order to (re)constitute himself as empowered male subjectivity (1992: 76-77): 'In the [female] loved one's fragility and weakness the [male] lover loves himself as a [male] loved one without power' ((sic) 1992: 77).

[16] Irigaray's and Spivak's ethics also rejects codifiable morality, at least as far as gender politics is concerned, but not reciprocity: Irigarary 'exhorts lover *and* beloved to give the woman to the other' (Spivak 1992: 78). Their ethics is one where 'sexual difference, far from being located in a decisive biological fact, is posited as the undecidable in the face of which the now displaced "normal" must risk ethico-political decisions' (Spivak 1992: 75); it does not then, as Bauman does, reject the closure of judgement, but, like Lyotard, accepts it as a risk.

normative premises on which those effects can be *labelled* repressive, for such premises themselves draw on large-scale stories and anthropological elements. While neither Lyotard nor Bauman deny the existence of structural causes of oppression and injustice, they do deny the solace of a prescriptive emancipatory narrative, or any equally generalized response to such oppression. When his theory restricts him to the advocacy of judgements which are local and 'practice-immanent', it is difficult therefore to see how Lyotard is able to talk of broad-based relations of domination along gender, race and class lines, no matter how much he sympathizes with Marxist or feminist aims (Fraser & Nicholson 1990: 25). The state and its public ethics, whether incorporated in institutions, cultural practices or legal systems, can in principle never be moral, leaving the prospect of an anarchistic political community, the absence of legitimate institutional authority, legal systems, or public policy. But to separate off morality from encoded legal and governmental systems is to deny the moral action the state can effect.[17] The problem here is that, in contrast to Habermas's 'thorough-going theory of substantive rights', any guarantee against the public violation of an individual's autonomy, or any guarantee of the fulfillment of basic needs through public welfare, is lost (Lash 1990: 107).

The consequences of an inability to construct emancipatory narratives is profound. There are at times real advantages to the ethical rejection of reciprocity, the insistence on the 'utter inadequacy of any ethics which links responsibility to reciprocity' (Bauman 1993: 220), for this recognizes the important point that we have moral responsibilities to the vulnerable, the needy, or to future generations that cannot rest on the condition that we will receive back the equivalent of what we give. Postmodernism refuses 'to freeze history in prophesies or pre-emptive legislation before history takes its course' (Bauman 1993: 222). But these

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[17] Similarly, postmodernism tends to deny the ability of the legal system to understand differently; the High Court's Mabo decision and the expanded understanding of the defence of provocation in the case of 'battered wives' are two examples of the legal system's expansion and transformation of its own idiom to incorporate other genres.

circumstances are not sufficient grounds to reject the concept of social norms completely. By rejecting reciprocity and symmetry in the ethical relation, or restricting justice to the specificity of events, the ability to plan for or forestall social dangers is undermined. Thus postmodern justice might refuse to accept the 'narrative' of environmental damage, or of structurally-embedded disadvantages to women and ethnic minorities. In such cases, a predictive and prescriptive 'narrative' may be necessary to convey a threat or injustice, and to legitimate the actions needed to avoid that wrong; a projected vision of a possible future society which must move beyond the present, singular 'it happens', and embrace the *collective* and future 'what *will* happen'. At best, postmodern ethics construes collective moral decision making in the manner of classical liberalism, as a 'necessary evil' whose functions should be limited to the greatest possible extent.

Neither is the absence of any collective emancipatory narrative in postmodern theory a wholly consistent theoretical ploy: only with some expression of the right to autonomous development and expression and the absence of suffering and exploitation can we make sense of *why* universal claims are *eo ipso* bad, or why Lyotard has the courage to depend on the dangers of opinion. The attempt to formulate a non-universalist, asymmetrical ethics conceives of community in terms of absence; but this is insufficient to create a cohesive yet not totalitarian community (May 1993: 275). Such a conception ignores the idea that our spontaneous, individual responses are themselves expressions of intersubjective narratives, both universal and local; that there is no pure, non-representational form of ethical feeling that can be trusted to combat the potentially dominatory effects of universal symbolic representations. Just why description and prescription cannot function *together* in ethical judgment is the result of a reductive view of representation as instrumental and therefore dominatory, resulting in a failure to acknowledge the dialectic between identity and non-identity within the particular, the commonalities that also frame difference.

Where Habermas's communicative ethics has the advantage of challenging the conservative side of the aesthetic-affective, that which sustains reverence and respect for traditions, patriotic fervour or fundamentalist styles of religious belief, Lyotard's sublime glosses over the potentially ideological dimensions of the aesthetic-affective: the possibility that pleasure, taste, desire or violence, subliminal yet social forms of experience may be shaped by dominant power relations in society. The reflexive, autonomous self may have the resources to challenge these values, to identify the differend in their midst, but this involves a culturally-specific form of validation that will not accept simply *any* kind of local justice. Thus although the idea that knowledge cannot comprehend the totality of meaning and intentionality – or a whole realm of sensual and affective 'events' – without destroying something of their specificity constitutes an indispensable caution to communicative ethics, the postmodern responses I have addressed here remain one-sided accounts of knowledge, unable to articulate any *affirmative* notion of solidarity, freedom or emancipation. The elusive source of the ethical in Lyotard and Bauman therefore leads us no closer to resolving the practical question of how to judge, for it denies that what *makes* an obligation an ethical one in the first place is decided by its semantic conditions. As it stands, therefore, such an ethics does not get us very far, throwing the epistemological problems of determining equivalence, incommensurability and justice back onto the singular and local act of judgment, rather than resolving them.

In the next chapter I turn to a critical theory that I argue holds certain advantages over both the politics of identity and of difference we have considered so far. Adorno's dialectical critique and espousal of a mimetic knowledge provides a promising approach to the dilemmas of representation in postmetaphysical critical theory. What is of particular interest is how Adorno attempts to come to terms with a radical critique of Western thought without abandoning reason itself.

5. The Dialectical Understanding: Adorno's Critical Theory

So far I have argued that in its expanded, non-instrumental form – as communicative action in Habermas, or reflexive judgement in Lyotard – reason coalesces with aesthetic activity. I have also argued however that these thinkers tend to construe such knowledge as either unitary and transparent or heterogeneous and particular. In this chapter I put forward an alternative approach, Adorno's dialectically-conceived rationality. Although not uncritical, I am primarily concerned with highlighting how Adorno might usefully contribute to the deficiencies I have exposed in communicative ethics and postmodern approaches. In his concern with the suffering body, the subject and what he terms the social 'totality', Adorno's thought in many ways reflects the concerns of feminist theory. The subject and its other, or the totality and the particular, are not independent entities but dialectically conceived through relations of identity and difference. The cognitive and affective become interdependent categories: emancipatory knowledge is based on a model of mimetic action that incorporates the physical, the symbolic and the ethical. I argue that although he fails to develop many of his insights on an explicitly practical or ethical level, they nonetheless offer much of value for contemporary theory.

1. Adorno in the Present

Although a forerunner to contemporary debates over modernity, Adorno's 'melancholy science' still speaks to us today precisely because it presents a challenge to the polarities of modernist debates. His thought has indeed

undergone something of a revival in recent years, due largely to its resonance with critical theory's attempt to forge a 'new constellation' out of the problematics of contemporary theory (Bernstein 1991). For my purposes the value of negative dialectics is found in its radically dialectical treatment of reason and aesthetics. The innovation of his work lies in the manner he joins a concern with the body's particular affects to a structural social critique, elaborated through a dialectical method taught with opposing tensions. In as much as its basis of knowledge and ethical grounding lies in the sensory, suffering body and its creative acts, his is a Marxism that is thoroughly aestheticized. But despite affinities with both the deconstructive strategies of postmodern thought and the critical agenda of modernism, Adorno does not sit happily with either side: postmodernists reject his implicit recourse to grand theory while modernists object to his inability to provide a coherent normative foundation for critique. Without trying to conceal the difficulties in his work, I position it *between* Habermas and Lyotard, as a critic of both, able potentially to move beyond the problems identified with an over-reliance on identity or non-identity, reason or aesthetics.

That Adorno represents something of a dividing line between these two approaches might be seen in his simultaneous attack on rationality and his rejection of the tendency to over-emphasize the 'impotence of the subject', as he saw Heidegger – and implicitly, his poststructuralist followers – attempting to do (Wicke 1992: 15). But for many critics his theory cannot escape from the very contradictions, blindnesses and paradoxes of which he accuses the Enlightenment's *ratio*. These difficulties are seen to arise from a relentless critique of reason as instrumental combined with a retention of the subject-object dialectic as the structuring principle of society, the origins of which is the dominatory role of labour in the formation of humans (Aronowitz 1992: 294).

While there is some substance to these objections, they overlook the subtlety and complexity that also characterize Adorno's thought. One of the strengths of his critical theory is its uncompromising recognition of the problematic of

Marxism's theoretical premises; as Benhabib comments, a recognition radical enough not only to question the humanist assumptions of ideology, totality and subjectivity but to expose Marxism's very foundations in the paradigm of production as dominatory, thus revealing its 'irredeemable flaw' as an emancipatory project (1986: 168). This does not lead him either to a communicative model of reason or the renunciation of objective history: instead, the task is to strengthen the subject's critical faculties while denying it its domination through an ethical opening out to the other.

In many respects this is not so unlike his pupil Habermas's aim to reintegrate a fragmented self into the lifeworld, and indeed they both share a diagnosis of social relations under capitalism as vitiated by the separation of the aesthetic realm as well as technological spheres from the lifeworld. From the beginning, the Frankfurt School project was to allow the arts to counter the hegemony of capitalist rationalization, creating a new 'permeability between administration, law, morality, aesthetics', so that the arts would become a 'medium of communication' (Wellmer 1985: 63).[1] Both Adorno and Habermas attempt to overcome the tension between art, morality and reason by recognizing that art alone cannot provide a model for social integration and reconciliation; aesthetic, moral-practical and instrumental reason are all required to achieve a unity of reason's disparate elements. But where Habermas exhibits far more faith in the redemptive power of moral-practical reason, Adorno turned to art as a model or semblance of reconciliation between instrumental reason and its other, communicative and aesthetic dimensions (Wellmer 1985: 63). The rational subject is never abandoned, however: its task remains to mediate and interpret the knowledge produced by the aesthetic-affective body in the interests of freedom.

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[1] Martin Jay shows that, if tenuously, Habermas has nevertheless remained attached to his precursor's aesthetic project through his ideas of the emancipatory-utopian and subversive qualities of bourgeois art and his notion of the expressive-mimetic origins of language (Jay, M. 1985: 127).

Adorno's critique of metaphysics is undeniably poststructuralist in flavour: the world is fluid, thought's attempt to identify it, to fix it with static, closed concepts, deceptive. This critique of the identitarian illusions of Western philosophy can indeed be likened to Derrida's undermining of its categories of presence;[2] an affiliation with deconstruction that lies in the recognition that respect for difference is not achieved by rejecting rationality in the quest for an unmediated difference or alterity, but by searching, as Derrida does, 'in its core: its crypt' (Nägele 1986: 105). But there exists a crucial difference between the two: while Derrida may develop a more thorough-going *philosophical* critique of identity, Adorno's contribution lies in his articulation of that critique in normative, social terms (Ryan 1982: 78). Despite a radical critique of reason, his faith in philosophy's ability to present substantive, and not simply formal arguments, is grounded in the fundamental belief that thought is never detached from an empirical world whose structure permeates every level of existence. Like Lyotard, the non-conceptuality and immediacy of physical sensation provides the epistemological and normative grounds for philosophy. Ethics arises out of suffering, and it is this feeling that guides our moral actions. For Adorno too the criterion of consensus or intersubjectivity as the grounds of knowledge implies an identity which is anathema; it is only through the recognition of difference that reconciliation can be attained.

His kinship with postmodernism ends however with the possibility of objectivity, the point where knowledge of the objective grounds of history is required to achieve emancipation. This is achieved through an ironically self-reflexive, immanent critique that brings the theorist inside the historical process. Although there is no first principle from which philosophy can proceed, its critical agenda must nevertheless be pursued, marking a wariness of any philosophical attempt to start afresh, and in particular an aversion to any degradation of the

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2 On this point see Peter Dews, 1989: 6. It is interesting to note that both Derrida and Adorno began their philosophical careers with a critique of Husserl's phenomenology, in particular attacking the static essentialism of his methodology.

subject's critical faculties. His critique of identity thinking can be seen (with Nietzsche) to demonstrate the inherently pragmatic character of thought, yet at the same time thought retains the possibility of metaphysical experience; the possibility of truth is bound up with the possibility of freedom (Osborne 1989: 28). As Martin Jay observes, the persistence of *some* form of subjectivity, collective and individual, as the grounds of social transformation is what distinguishes Adorno from both structuralist Marxists and their poststructuralist relatives (1984: 71).

As an exile from the fascist Germany of the 1930's, then, the contemplation of Auschwitz did not lead Adorno to abandon truth or objectivity as inevitable tools of oppression; the world is *not* indifferent or neutral, there *is* objective meaning in its structures and in the actions of its historical agents. But all this was achieved at some cost to systematized theory, and the difficulties in establishing a critical position on his aphoristic, anti-systematic writings are acknowledged by even the most sympathetic critics.[3] Many of the problematic aspects of Adorno's work reside in an unresolved union of modernist categories within a deconstructive framework: tensions lie between the status of collective and individual knowledge, the scientific status of critical theory, the conceptualization of exchange as a universal category and its specificity within a capitalist system; the contrast between assurances on the one hand of the illusions of determinate knowledge and on the other his law-like edicts on philosophy and the falsity of the capitalist system.

Habermas is right to observe that Adorno's radical critique of reason fits awkwardly with a critical theory, yet Adorno responds that the aporias and antinomies of his thought are not immanent to his philosophical project but rather inhere in the contradictions of enlightenment thought and society itself (Bernstein, J. 1989: 60). The contradictions of Western thought and society can only be disclosed through the dialectical opposition of truth and falsity in all its categories, with the result that knowledge can only proceed negatively, finding a kind of

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[3] See for instance Buck-Morss, 1977; Rose, 1979; Jay, M., 1984; Zuidervaart, 1991.

emancipatory solace in a tragic awareness of its fate, doomed to illusion and repetition. Clearly, well before the antinomies of self-reflexive modernism began to be examined in recent debates, Adorno had elaborated them in his negative dialectics. But in spite of the difficulties his work poses, I suggest that he comes closer than either Habermas or Lyotard in establishing a dialectical relation between reason and aesthetics, identity and difference in critical theory.

2. The Genealogy of Reason

i) Marx, Nietzsche and Social Critique

A convenient entry point into Adorno's thought is the genealogy of the Western subject outlined in his *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* co-authored with Max Horkheimer. Although worth examining as Adorno's most sustained empirical survey of the subject, it is by any account a difficult book: a mixture of allegory, metaphor, and sweeping social critique often lacking empirical substantiation. It does however constitute one of the earliest and most influential Marxist protests against the Enlightenment's illusory separation of myth and science, as well as against the mass culture of advanced capitalism and its totalitarian mechanism of exchange. Its major critical intent is to defetishize reason, rid it of its distorting positivist and idealist elements through a narrative of the origins and trajectory of the rational subject. The disenchantment of the world, the liberation of human beings from fear and the establishment of sovereignty over nature is the aim of the enlightenment, the authors assert, yet 'the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant' (Adorno 1990b: 3). With this premise they proceed to develop what is by now a familiar critique of the dialectic of subjectivization and reification: civilization and savagery, emancipation and tyranny, enlightenment and myth constitutes the genealogy of the Western *ratio.*

The influence of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and Weber underpin the work's argument: repression and the damaged subject are indices of the process of

rationalization and exchange. At the origins of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment's* narrative is a humanity characterized by diffuse libidinal energy; but a humanity whose fear has invoked a costly repression. The formation of subjectivity is conceived in psychoanalytic terms of alienation and objectification: reason arises not out of an act of self-reflection but out of the imperative for self-preservation (Benhabib 1986: 217). An originary fear of nature and the need for its domination provokes the suppression of anarchic libidinal impulses through the disciplinary splitting of nature into subject and object, a dichotomy which creates the pre-conditions for rational thought, but which reason is tragically doomed to attempt to dissolve. The figure of Odysseus is symbolic of the emerging subject, who transcends the moral innocence of nature. His fate bears witness to the ultimately destructive attempt to banish myth and fear, overcoming all challenges to his sovereignty through a combination of mythic, natural and human forces, but in the process alienating himself from nature, his body and other people (Kellner 1989: 92). Adorno and Horkheimer use this myth to show how civilization has repressed any tendency which is not directed towards self-preservation of the social unit and its hierarchical order: the idea of 'pure, natural existence', or any reminiscence of a nomadic, pre-patriarchal, unordered existence are subversive and have therefore been 'most rigorously punished and extirpated from human consciousness' (Adorno 1990b: 31). Diffuse ideas of the world, or expressions of fear of the 'natural', are nullified in language by increasingly unified and universal acts of explanation and representation, the metaphorical expression that something is both itself and at one and the same time something other than itself. Abstraction is thus read as the 'tool of enlightenment', predetermining the limits of possible experience through a universalizing principle of exchange which destroys the qualitative, the different, or, in Marxian terms, *use* value: '[t]he identity of everything with everything else is paid for in that nothing may at the same time be identical with itself' (1990b: 12).

Adorno and Horkheimer aim here to overcome not so much the metaphysics of philosophy as the cognitive bias which leads it into scepticism and normative degeneracy.[4] Unlike Durkheim, the universal character of categories is not the expression of social solidarity but evidence of the unity of society and domination. Reason's history has been an attempt to overcome its fear through the objectification and domination of its 'other', assimilating nature to its own conceptual constructions. This kind of instrumental, objectifying rationality – identity thinking – suppresses difference in order to define, name and inevitably subsume difference under a universal category. Its process is a fetishized one because reason is itself part of nature, yet conceives itself standing opposed to it; thus its self-originating justifications are as much myth as the irrationalism it defines. The origins of social power and repression are not locatable in the state, social institutions or class, therefore, but in a more diffuse notion of an imperative for preservation, imbued throughout the totality of social discourses and practices and the structure of thinking that organizes them.

Following Weber's analysis of modernity, the process of disenchantment of the world results in the demise of the legitimating force of myth at the hands of rationalized, instrumental knowledge. This in turn leads ultimately to the destructive view that every theoretical viewpoint is itself only belief, or myth, 'until the very notions of spirit, of truth, and indeed, enlightenment itself, have become animistic magic' (1990b: 11). Every event is explained in terms of the mythic principle of immanence and repetition: the world becomes closed, denying the new and the free, and thus in the end affirming the 'arid wisdom' that 'all the pieces in the meaningless game have already been played...' (1990b: 12). Emotion and finally all human expression, even culture as a whole, are withdrawn from the title of knowledge and cognition, and thus neutralized: survival alone becomes the source of maxims for human conduct. Reason, once substantive, can now be only formal: '[e]very substantial goal which men might adduce as an alleged rational

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4 See Cornell & Thurschwell, 1987.

insight is, in the strict enlightenment sense, delusion, lies or "rationalization"' (1990b: 82). The aesthetic-affective realm of pleasure, the non-identical and the non-hierarchical are relegated to the autonomous sphere of art and the realm of imagination, safely distanced from practices of domination and the sphere of labour; from the idea of knowledge itself. Given this division, reason must combine with the mimetic element of thought to 'know' its object, drawing on thought's affinity with the world to reverse the world's 'domination' over us. The dual tendency of the enlightenment towards domination and equalization therefore has its roots in the prehistory of civilization: conceptual domination – the categories of abstraction, logic and universalization – arises on the basis of social domination, which has in turn arisen from the social reflection of the inequality between human beings and nature (Adorno 1990b: 21).

Despite the apparent inevitability of social domination, it should not be construed as a totalizing element of human existence, for this would merely perpetuate the ideology of enlightenment logic. In dialectical fashion, the enlightenment both forges the subjective conditions of social domination and undermines it by simultaneously, and inadvertently, creating the conditions of its own resistance: the autonomous subject. The coextensivity of domination and resistance on the social level forms the material instance of the dialectics of thought, a point which also aptly illustrates the *immanent* nature of Adorno's critique. Thus the principle of individuality is always full of contradiction, every strengthening also involving the repression of the self: subjects 'were given their individuality as unique in each case, different to all others, so that it might all the more surely be made the same as any other' (1990b: 13). The 'mastery' of consciousness over the world, or the belief in the concordance between subject and object, therefore contains the seeds of its own destruction, for the more subjectivity sees itself as autonomous and free from the imperatives of pure survival, the more it is able to reflexively recognize itself as a social product. The enlightenment's attempts to destroy its own critical, utopian content, that is, its 'free subjectivity', is

a point which plays a pivotal role in Adorno's theory: it is the enlightenment's *insufficiently* critical self-understanding which eventually cancels out the possibility for transformative action: '*unreflective* enlightened thinking based on the notion of survival always tends to convert into skepticism, in order to make enough room for the existing order' (1990b: 93, my emphasis).

The idea of justice which implicitly emerges from this account begins to resemble Lyotard's differend.[5] Justice is measured in the resistance and suffering which always accompanies domination, in the disjunction between reality and reason's totalizing claims: 'the empirical substance of dialectics is not the principal [that two negatives make a positive] but the resistance which otherness offers to identity' (Adorno 1990a: 161). In dialectical fashion, domination restricts itself, giving rise to its other, freedom, inasmuch as it cannot be truly universal in its effects: although it is objectified in law and social organization, freedom constitutes the grounds of law's possibility.[6] Against Habermas's objections (1990), Adorno's critique of reason therefore cannot be construed as totalizing in the sense that it allows no space for rational resistance; the path of enlightenment is never solely one of domination, but always includes the possibility of resistance and transformation. The truth of this resistance is verified in the act of critical reflection on the originary splitting off of the subject from nature:

> By virtue of this remembrance of nature within the subject, in whose fulfilment the unacknowledged truth of all culture lies hidden, enlightenment is universally opposed to domination... (1990b: 40).

The somewhat ambiguous category of 'nature' stands for at once the objective grounds of non-identity – the blind, coercive force which demands the division of subject-object – and the 'other' of civilization, not a given state but one subject to historical change (Benhabib 1986: 212). Emancipation from fear and repression is

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[5] In the tradition of Marxist critique, the terms 'justice' and 'ethics' are rarely used, although they are implicit throughout his work.

[6] Women's resistance to their domination for instance is expressed in the pagan cult of witches, a form of vengeance which invokes a matriarchal challenge to the patriarchal order (1990b: 111).

not a matter of rejecting reason, then, since this is impossible: abstraction is in fact the medium of 'self-preserving reason' (Adorno 1990a: 179) which we cannot do without. Rather it is brought about by transforming reason, by remembering the violence conceptual thought inflicts on the idea of a non-dominatory, mimetic relation with the world. The memory of this kind of originary, pre-civilized existence is a necessary fiction which lingers on in our yearning for reconciliation with the other, a universal expression of resistance to domination. In this sense, nature as 'other' is critically deconstructed as a reified category standing opposed to the social, and the *substance* of its objectivity becomes historically variable rather than fixed as given. The point is to recognize thought as a 'natural' tool with which we are equipped for self-preservation; deception and illusion await any forgetting of its distancing and objectifying function, positing thought either as opposed and 'other' to nature, or fatalistically dissolving the inevitable gap between thought and the non-human world, subject and object. The compulsion of domination in thinking is both the conceptual manifestation of an unredeemed and alienated nature, thought which does not recognize itself as part of nature and therefore fights against the limits of its freedom in the face of necessity, the terms of which it has itself constructed, and the mimetic repetition of nature's mastery over us, the natural compulsion brought about by the struggle for self-preservation. The 'natural' then should not be conceived as the 'other' of the social; human beings cannot return to some harmonious union with nature, they are *already* nature, and it is the denial of the natural within us for the sake of an unattainable domination over non-human nature that in turn comes to dominate the human. Identity thinking – or unreflective enlightenment thought – becomes an act of 'forgetting' which must be halted in order to break down its oppressive character (1990b: 230).

Negative dialectics, or non-identity thinking, is Adorno's term for the attempt to effect the self-transcendence of reason through the (re)incorporation of that mimetic moment into conceptual thought (Zuidervaart 1991: 278). It does not

pretend to undo reason's dominating and identifying functions, nor return to some originary unity with its other, but to move beyond it. For Adorno and Horkheimer, '[a]ll mystic unification remains deception' (1990b: 39): separation is inevitable, and the presupposition of an originary unity to which we can return 'leads to an ultimately self-deceptive understanding of the process of enlightenment and leaves no line of defense against the self-destructive consequences of rationalization' (Cascardi 1992: 55).[7] The primary task of consciousness is to resist falling back into enchantment, the reabsorption into nature. Reason must recognize itself as at once nature and non-nature, standing in a dialectical relation to nature, or it risks regressing to 'self-assertion gone wild' (Habermas 1990: 100). 'True' enlightenment then becomes the *strengthening* of subjectivity to overcome the mythical, prehistorical fear of the other which elevates 'necessity' – here with particular reference to the Marxian category of production – 'to the status of the basis for all time to come...' (1990b: 41). Existence should not be dominated by labour, but by aesthetics, a creative and critical human control.

The separation of subject and object in the interests of self-preservation is both true and false, therefore: true in that the separation expresses the dichotomy of the human condition, the coercive development that is historically given and not wholly destructive, and false because the resulting separation is hypostatized, magically transformed into an invariant. Separation without mediation becomes ideology, the triumph of dominance, allowing meaninglessness and impotence in its recollection of an archaic horror of chaos and the unknown other (Adorno 1978: 499). Without the 'determinate negation' of each 'immediacy', or the conscious recognition that what is given is inevitably mediated by interpretative processes embedded in historical, fluid relations, thought is stifled, and becomes mere tautology. It surrenders itself to the status quo, and becomes ideology: 'cycle, fate,

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7 As Anthony Cascardi notes, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* can indeed be read as a warning *against* beginning from the premise of an original union with nature (Cascardi 1992: 55).

and domination of the world reflected as the truth and deprived of hope' (1990b: 27).

ii) A Critical Response

There are a number of observations that might be made of this genealogy of Western subjectivity. Firstly, it might be said that Adorno and Horkheimer appear embroiled in a metaphysics of conflict based on an instrumental, productivist paradigm of human activity which presupposes the very fearful, authoritarian self they are trying to explain (Benhabib 1992: 92). The notion of autonomy remains essential for critique and transformatory hope, yet autonomy only appears by virtue of the alienation and reification of the self. The connection between domination of the self and domination of the external world which would clarify the relation between the technological and intellectual domination of nature and society is never demonstrated, due at least in part to a depiction of domination which arises from an explanatory framework built on an undifferentiated principle of exchange, the inherently identitary and abstract nature of which provides the primordial paradigm of domination.

Feminists have also criticized the androcentricity of the work, in particular pointing to the belief that the displacement of the father as authority figure in the family and society is accompanied by a *weakening* of the self as an example of the 'patriarchal core of Frankfurt School theory' (Benhabib 1986: 208). Martin Jay too comments that although Adorno de-naturizes Freud's male-centred categories, he does not transcend them (Jay 1984: 90). It could be argued that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* reflects an insufficiently critical conjunction of Freud and Marx, a schema wherein increased technological domination inevitably results in increased domination of society with the (Hegelian) conclusion that reason reaches its (destructive) apotheosis in advanced capitalism. Unable to historically differentiate the functions of exchange, Adorno and Horkheimer slide between a critique of reason *tout court*, a critique of Western civilization, and a critique of the

ratio of capitalism, particularly evident in the juxtaposition of the historically specific chapter on the culture industry with the first section's focus on the history of Western philosophy as a whole. It is left to the Freudian notion of internalism to provide the missing link between the function of the production imperatives of survival and the cultural forms of social discipline used to carry them out; a notion which alone cannot explain the nature of the repression involved in the dialectic of individuation (Kellner 1989: 98).[8] On this view their critical genealogy is not historical enough, ignoring the philosophical inheritance which illegitimately universalizes domination as an inevitable organizing element of human existence.

Despite these objections, many of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment's* insights remain valuable. Taken as an *immanent* critique, a rhetorical and ironic attack of the enlightenment's self-understanding, the totalizing effects of its ontology of fear, conflict and domination is broken. It has indeed been suggested that the work can be read as the pre-history of the *bourgeois* subject, rather than an essay on its universal history and ontology (Kellner 1989: 88). The historical process of the formation of subjectivity is after all conceived as mutable: the possibility for change is always held open, suggesting an historically constituted ontology of human being which presents history as real but not necessary. The will to power and the internalization of domination are reflected back from observation of present society: for Adorno, 'the present did not receive its meaning from history; rather, history received its meaning from the present' (Buck-Morss 1977: 51): 'it is only from the *goal* that the origin will constitute itself' (Adorno 1990a: 156).

Thus at least Adorno's critique was able to recognize that Nietzsche's scrutiny of the illusions of subjectivity did not go far enough: it stopped short of 'feminine natures' for instance insofar as they were regarded ahistorically, as eternal; a

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[8] This argument, nor any notion of a kind of will to power predating social organisation, cannot explain how *some* come to hold more power than others (men over women, for instance): what explains an initial division of labour, if not a *prior* division of social power which enables certain members of a society to control the activities of others? On the sexual division of labour, Adorno comments that it is 'impossible to determine to what extent habit contributed to so simple an arrangement' (1990b: 21).

failure that bought Nietzsche's critique 'finally under the sway of bourgeois thought' (Adorno 1991: 95). The interpretation of a genealogy of subjectivity which deconstructs its object's self-understanding to disclose its ideological nature also accords with Adorno's aim to undermine stable origins and first causes. For Susan Buck-Morss, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* combines dynamic history and static myth to critically reveal the barbarism in present civilization, to destroy the belief that civilization is a progressive journey towards enlightenment (Buck-Morss 1977: 59). Adorno's observation on Benjamin is apposite here: the modern world was viewed as archaic not in order to 'conserve the traces of a purportedly eternal truth but rather to escape the trance-like captivity of bourgeois immanence' (Adorno cited in Buck-Morss 1977: 61), to undermine any notion of clear distinction or superiority between barbarism and civilization (Rocco 1994: 74).

What is distinctive about this treatment, and Adorno's thought as a whole, is its open acknowledgement of the contradictory nature of philosophy: far from *surreptitiously* using the categories of intentionality, representation, and autonomy at the same time as they are denounced as reifications, the central point of *Negative Dialectics* is that the subject and its concepts (what else? asks Adorno) must themselves be used to break through the illusions of constitutive subjectivity. A dialectical immanence therefore inscribes a non-identical aspect to any supposedly universal category. The concepts of agency and structure for instance are conceived as simultaneous moments of the social dialectic; thought can escape its identitarian impulses because the logical necessity of conceptual unity is not conclusive, there are always moments of non-identity, of freedom, which escape social compulsion. Concepts of resistance and freedom are therefore understood in terms of a dialectical process of identity formation: the identity of the self and its alienation are companions from the beginning, identity is both the condition of freedom and simultaneously the principle of determinism.

Taking the argument as an immanent critique begins to make sense of a work which is at times fragmented and torturous, but which obliges the reader to enter

into the particular logic of the authors' social theory. To gain a clearer picture of Adorno's immanent, dialectical method, the linchpin of his critical theory, we will now turn to a more sustained examination of his philosophical premises.

3. The Dialectical Brew

i) *Kant and the Antinomies of Thought*

If Adorno's debt to Nietzsche, Marx, Freud and Weber has so far been evident in his attack on Western thought, a Kantian influence is equally pronounced in his more philosophical writings. The Kantian influence in Adorno's thought is represented by *rational* or 'true' identity thinking, but it is achieved only indirectly and negatively. Such thinking confines itself to the particular, both spatially and temporally, and cancels itself out by refuting the conceptual tendency to stabilize its object, to dissolve the fragmentary, the contradictory and the heterogeneous under the identical, and to subsume it as identical to itself, suppressing what resists *a priori* categorization. As the medium of this dialectical process the subject is inherently equivocal in Adorno's thought: as Martin Jay points out, any reference to subjectivity which fails to acknowledge the difference between subjects is 'not adequate to its object in the real world', but at the same time the subject's objective and universal moments must equally be assumed, the historical and collective moment of the particular (Jay 1984: 59). But these contradictions within the philosophy of the subject are, for Adorno, as we have seen, the expression of an antagonistic *society* rather than faulty thinking.

The simultaneous moments of truth and falsity in subjectivity also partly account for the paradox that the subject is both constituted and damaged by the process of civilization. It is impossible to say what the subject is, for 'to decipher the human essence by the way it is now would be to sabotage its possibility' (1990a: 124). Essences are therefore not illusory, but the *results* of human action, the product of sedimented layers of social history, and not their cause. To deny

that there *is* an essence means 'to side with appearance, with the total ideology which existence has since become' (1990a: 169). For Adorno, Kant unintentionally disclosed the truth about bourgeois society in recognizing and trying to resolve the antinomies of the subject, but the riddle of the 'thing in itself' dissolves once the *ratio* cannot be separated from its social origins (Buck-Morss 1977: 112). To deny the validity of Kant's insights therefore is to become entangled in a kind of performative contradiction: although our cognitive function is derived from society, these form-giving elements are 'presumed in every proposition that demonstrates their contingency' (Adorno 1978: 510). Thus, the notion of a free 'essential' subjectivity – in the shape of Kantian-like constitutive categories – must be retained, yet subjectivity is at the same time socially produced.

Where Adorno diverges most sharply from the Kantian notion of subjectivity is in his reversal of the subject-object hierarchy: thought approaches knowledge of its object when in mimetic fashion it accords the object priority and rids itself of idealist residues. Strengthening the subject allows the coercive action of the concept to be transcended by means of the concept itself, pushing the (subject's) concept forward to acknowledge what it fails to cover, what is not *already* a case of the concept. The subject's strength only goes so far as it recognizes the effects of its actions, then, and is able to cancel out its own identifying, dominating actions by privileging the object. The subject can be entrusted to its own experience, since the very recognition of the mediated nature of the concept logically denies it a place as the originary, immediate grounds of knowledge (Zuidervaart 1991: 48). No more, Adorno proclaims, ' "is there" really a subject' – the hypostatized, transcendental subject of idealism, instead the subject only *is* through its relations with the outside world (1978: 508). Its identitarian effects cannot be simply thought away by new forms of philosophizing or more adequate concepts, therefore: the transcendence of domination requires social transformation, for the formation of new kinds of empirical relations between subjects and objects (Jameson 1990: 23-4). Adorno insists that subjectivity is in fact *strengthened* by this step of lending

dialectical primacy to the object, rather than to the epistemic subject, as it acknowledges that the subject is *constituted* by the object, even though the latter is always mediated by the subject.

With the argument that the individual is no less imprisoned in itself than in the universal, in society (1978: 505), Adorno positions himself in a well-established philosophical tradition of viewing the subjective as objective (Lee-Hampshire 1992: 37). This forces a rethinking of knowledge away from a 'subjectivist' position: 'The general assurance that innervations, insights, cognitions are "merely subjective" ceases to convince as soon as subjectivity is grasped as the object's form' (1978: 504). By virtue of its participation in the whole, the subjective becomes objective, defined not by its *self*-consciousness but – in Hegelian fashion – by its relations with the outside world. The delimitation of knowledge as subjectively constructed debases its objective moment – which must take the form of subjective particularity – as merely the 'free' play of a consciousness *independent* from society. Not to admit this objectivity implies either an external vantage point or that there can be no collective historical truth revealed through experience, neither of which are acceptable alternatives to Adorno. The task of self-reflection is to unravel that paradox; everything else is 'secondhand construction', a reversion to irrationalism, intuitionism and positivism (1990a: 141). To renounce the possibility of reaching the non-conceptual philosophy must capitulate, and 'the human mind with it' (1990a: 9) just as to deny the subjective ability to synthesize its experience on a general level merely reinforces the status quo by leaving dominant, immediately given modes of knowledge unchallenged.

Here any simple dichotomy between inner and the outer worlds is put into question, concepts being part of the social world. Theory can offer no reconciliation between subject and object: there exists an irreducible difference between the two, a non-identity which must be reflexively conceived. The dialectic between agency and structure need not be seen as contradictory, but as coexisting

at different theoretical levels.[9] In this manner the self-critical function of negative dialectics remains explicit, thought is not permitted to presume identity with its object but must always be held open, acknowledging its mediating role. Materialism cannot rid itself of its idealist moment. The repudiation of idealist, or abstract notions of essence, truth or objectivity indeed has damaging consequences:

> [w]hat is abandoned is the whole claim and approach of knowledge: to comprehend the given as such; not merely to determine the abstract spatio-temporal relations of the facts which allow them just to be grasped, but on the contrary to conceive them as the superficies, as mediated conceptual moments which come to fulfilment only in the development of their social, historical, and human significance (1990b: 26).

We might nonetheless query whether Adorno's negative dialectics can cope with its 'objective' contradictions, whether the fundamental tension between a critique of identity thinking on the one hand and the use of Marxist categories to analyse society on the other is ultimately coherent, if not resolvable. Although Adorno's respect for the complexity of knowledge appears well-suited to the needs of contemporary politics, pointing as it does to the need for closure in decision making yet retaining a radical suspicion of that closure, his attempts to think through the dilemmas of the subject to ground a knowledge which is objective yet cannot confirm identity with its object poses substantial difficulties for any critical assessment. On the one hand he presupposes not only an identity between thought and the world but an ahistorical, privileged interpretative viewpoint; on the other, he makes a radical critique of just such rationalizations. By incorporating the same abstract categories into his own theoretical critique that he imputes to an antagonistic society (the logic of exchange and of identity), negative dialectics is in danger of negating the possibility of hope for any

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[9] Anthony Giddens develops this notion at length in his work (1984).

structural transformation, as well as the grounds for critique (Zuidervaart 1991: 87).

The recognition of the inevitable falsity which accompanies the truth content of any concept in an unreconciled society produces a paradox wherein any attempt to name non-identity is fated to destroy it, threatening to reduce any program for collective or individual action to ideology. He thus questions historical meaning anchored in the rational autonomous subject, yet continues to derive meaning from that subject. The subject must be – along with many other categories in his work – construed and denied: construed sociologically, since society cannot be conceived without it, and denied as an ahistorical unity: it is logically wrong. The subject is constituted by its social and historical context, yet it is also damaged by the necessary repression of society; simultaneously affirming and negating a natural self. The achievement of autonomy, which Adorno fervently defends, comes at the price of reification of consciousness; individualization has involved domination of self and others.

Finally, as a *critical* theorist, above all, Adorno refuses to renounce the effort to achieve the most *objective* representation of its object at the same time as he recognizes the inevitable violence done to the object in traditional theories of knowledge. Out of this array of theoretical dilemmas it becomes understandable why, like Derrida, Adorno was attracted to Husserl's aim to 'intuit' the essence of phenomena (Zuidervaart 1991: 60), but his intellectual rigour prevented him from any subsumption of subject and object in pure immediacy. We are left with the uncomfortable feeling that Adorno himself holds out little hope that anything can be done with the knowledge negative dialectics produces.

We might trace these difficulties back to Adorno's ontological premises, where representation is conceived on the one hand as inherently illusory, on the other as a mimetic expression of nature. If negative dialectics is founded solely on the need for illusion, the illusion of identity required for self-preservation which occurs through the originary splitting of objectivity into subject and object, then Adorno's

project indeed appears tragically doomed, no matter what the historical circumstances. Thought can only approach its object negatively, as knowledge of the object is achieved by recognizing the object's particularity, its difference from other objects and thus by the same token its non-identity with the concept. The inadequacy of thought is reflected in Adorno's repeated return to the 'pathos of the self' (Dews 1989: 18) – consciousness confined to its own immanence, struggling to break out of its isolation and make contact with something more than its own reflection. Indeed, Adorno concedes that the presupposition of truth is 'a broken promise'.[10] Adorno cannot overcome his own thought's complicity in its ontological need for certainty, a need doomed to be frustrated. If we remain focused on this tragic aspect of Adorno's thought, it appears condemned to remain within an economy of truth, unable to reaffirm knowledge by engaging in a 'politics of belief', unable to differentiate on an *epistemological* level between the illusions involved in a Nazi death camp on the one hand or a democratic welfare state on the other (McHugh 1993: 141-3). Is negative dialectics, with its 'relentless insistence on negativity' (Buck-Morss 1977: 189), wherein every conceptual affirmation is immediately cancelled, merely perpetrating the same destructive, stultifying effects on rational thought of which the Enlightenment stands accused?

Adorno pulls himself from the mire of total negativity by developing the emancipatory potential inherent in art and mimesis. They offer some hope, if only momentarily, to bridge the gap between concept and object.

ii) Mimesis, Art and Suffering: Epistemologies of the Body

A distinguishing feature of Adorno's critical theory is the manner in which he finds the general within the surface characteristics of the particular, in the more marginal, atypical social practices (Rose 1978: 10).[11] As Buck-Morss points out, this was to establish more than the social genesis of ideas, it was to open thought's

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[10] The 'unhappy unconscious', the result of epistemological uncertainty, is the mind's reminder of its physical limitations (Adorno 1990a: 203).
[11] See also Buck-Morss 1977: 74.

access to an objective, albeit historically specific, truth (Buck-Morss 1977: 76). Hence Adorno's critique of the social whole was mediated through its cultural rather than economic products: by proceeding from its particular elements to the totality, privileging the particular over the universal, he thought that it might be possible to counter the domination of the social totality over the individual. The critical emphasis on culture approached the specificity of the social in a way economic structures would not allow, largely because it dealt in terms of embodied experience, which assumes a special epistemological status in Adorno's work.

As David Held observes, if history does have any unity for Adorno and Horkheimer it is not given by any systematic theoretical construction but by suffering (Held 1984: 216). Invoking the idea that justice is inscribed in the flesh, suffering provides the ultimate epistemological as well as normative grounds of Adorno's critical theory, for it is both the most particular of knowledges, and also the most universal; its truth claim implicitly extends beyond the historically contingent level of subjectivity to participate in a universal humanity. There is an experience, Adorno insists, fallible but immediate, of the essential and unessential, the measure of which is 'what happens objectively to the subjects, as their suffering' (1990a: 170). The need to lend a voice to suffering becomes the condition of truth (Zuidervaart 1991: 304), a radical concurrence of ethics and knowledge. Physicality emerges as 'the ontical pole of subjective cognition, as the core of that cognition', acting as the pre-social, motivational drive, 'the unrest that makes knowledge move' (Adorno 1990a: 203).[12]

But in its efforts to capture suffering, thought must tread a delicate line between positivism and idealism. It does this by virtue of its *mimetic* relation to the other. Mimesis refers to the physiological, sensuous process of knowledge: to know something, we must first feel it, experience it through our senses. Touch, sight,

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[12] Here Adorno draws on Freudian notions of the suppressed ideas of preconscious, untamed impulses: 'Neither the consciousness of freedom nor true praxis would exist, were there no modified impulses to motivate conscious acts and active thought' (Zuidervaart 1991: 108).

sound and smell are the means by which we interact with the world, presenting sense-data which must then be imaginatively mimicked, shaped selectively into coherent narratives. The re-presentation of the world in conceptual form requires a physiological connection with the other as a material object, the physical nature of the other is re-experienced in the process of understanding so that cognitive knowledge also resides in feeling. Here the subject must strive to think a non-identical relation with the other, characterized not by any *a priori* application of the reductive and homogenizing logic of exchange but by an intimate, particular relation to the world. In as much as it involves both faculty and impulse, therefore, mimesis belongs to body as much as to mind.[13]

The refusal to reduce mimesis to imitation endows it with a strong ethical connotation in Adorno's work. Mimesis refers to a non-conceptual impulse to assimilate, conveying the idea of a non-dominatory, communicative relation with the other wherein the self strives not to control but to make itself like the other, to know the specificity of the other by experiencing an affinity with it. It invokes, therefore, a non-representational correspondence (Buck-Morss 1977: 87-8), thought's desire to be like its other, to know through intimacy rather than a previously-determined universal concept. Mimetic knowledge is not aesthetic in the sense that it is merely fiction, a self-referential product of the human mind, but in the sense that it is both a *felt* and *imagined* representation of reality, an aesthetic-affective product that draws in mimetic fashion on the material world through the interaction of the physical body and its environment. It remains a heavily mediated category: mimetic expression discloses the affinity of a subjective creation with its objective and unposited other, but must enter into a dialectical relation with reason to effect this expression (Adorno 1984: 80 & Osborne 1989: 80).

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[13] This also accounts for the importance of mimesis in aesthetic theory, for the idea of mimesis has always meant far more than simply representation; art is never simply the mirror of nature, but the point of intersection between history, the body and nature.

..knowledge comes to us through a network of biases, intuitions, innervations, self-corrections, anticipations and exaggerations – in short, through the tightly-woven and well-grounded but by no means uniformly transparent medium of experience (1991: 80).

Mimesis is thus not *opposed* to reason, but is on the contrary the 'original form of rationality' (Zuidervaart 1991: 111); a *conscious,* and thus cognitive, mimicking of nature. It incorporates that sphere of expressive, non-dominatory receptive behaviour Habermas reserves for communicative action, allowing thought that very relation of unforced affinity with its object which the identifying tendency of reason alone denies. The subject yields to the object, but does not simply mimic it, leaving it unchanged; the object is transformed in the act of miming, so that its identity – and its truth – is not taken from it, but preserved in a new modality.[14]

In its emancipatory role, mimesis expresses a state which constantly crosses the threshold from 'psychosomatic drives to consciousness and from collectivity to individuality' (Zuidervaart 1991: 112); neither wholly immediate nor non-conceptual, but the point of intersection between perception and rational cognition. Knowledge is not located merely within the subject, locked away in Kierkegaardian isolation, but resides in relations that run between and amongst material entities. Thus while mimesis secures a kind of truth in corporeal experience, it does not provide any guarantee for representational, discursive truth: on the contrary, its ethical content is found precisely in that it sustains the non-identity between concept and object; all knowledge must remain reflexively non-identical with its object. Inherent in Adorno's use of the notion of mimesis, then, is some understanding of the moment of ethical universality in the mimetic relation, that mimesis allows an objectivity that, although immanent to a culture and non-discursive, reveals its 'truth'. Therein lies its appeal for critical theory, the possibility that, despite its radical critique of rationality, thought is able to find a

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14 For Benjamin, language was mimetic, and one of human beings's great talents. Its non-representational correspondence is explicitly metaphorical – words imitating nature (Buck-Morss 1977: 87-8).

kind of Archimedean point, one grounded in the *phenomenological* universality of the body.

Adorno is not the only theorist to have used the concept of mimesis as an emancipatory vehicle. In the modern era the mimetic imagination was used to forge a site of autonomy and resistance in the face of increasing social regulation, a means to escape instrumental thinking and develop a mode of thought that while continuing to draw on the material world could also transform it. By establishing a physical intimacy with the object, the mimetic faculty allowed the possibility of knowing a specific entity (or concept) without subsuming it under a pre-conceived universal. This is clear in Kant, who resorted to aesthetic categories to combat the instrumentalization of thought.[15] And what else is Marx's utopian vision of communism's re-humanized relation with objects than a plea to recapture a lost, mimetic, quasi-animistic, non-instrumental relation between human beings and the world, a relation forged on the idea of *sensuous* knowledge, not abstraction? (Taussig 1993: 8).

There is then a rich tradition preceding Adorno's reliance on the concrete immediacy of mimesis as a way of overcoming the grip of an administered world. Indeed, for Michael Taussig, mimesis is the 'obscure operator' at the heart of Adorno's entire system (Taussig 1993: 45). But in true dialectical fashion, mimesis can also be ideologically co-opted. Indeed, the attempt to socially regulate mimesis is always dominatory. The appropriation of the mimetic impulse to support racism for instance is graphically illustrated in Adorno and Horkheimer's description of German fascism; its regimented, reiterated conformity and repetition invoking primitive magic practices, as well as the sensuous imitation and fascination with those qualities so despised in Jewishness. These are instances

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15 See Schulte-Sasse, 1988. Kant's notion of the sublime – the feeling of pleasure and pain that accompanies the realization that something exceeds our conceptual understanding – can be read as the mark of his effort to understand the sensuous experience of the world in the absence of given concepts. The sublime called for reflective, that is, autonomous judgement as opposed to determinate, *a priori*, heteronomous judgement. Taken up by postmodern thinkers such as Lyotard, the sublime was 'the most important realm in which a mode of thinking untouched by the efforts of instrumentalization does survive and continues to be productive' (Schulte-Sasse 1988: 207).

of the organized imitation of mimesis, where impulses and desires are regulated in the interests of social control: the 'mimesis of mimesis.'[16]

For Adorno, within the confines of an administered society, mimetic, non-identical thinking can only be communicated indirectly: it is unsurprising then that the intuitive practice of art is privileged as a medium through which to express the truth of suffering. The central point of Adorno's aesthetic theory is that art participates in the social on the level of use value, rather than exchange value, representing non-identical, non-dominatory aspects of social life in an antagonistic society ruled by the principle of exchange. Paradoxically, art is problematic because it has become autonomous from discursive reason as it exists in its identitarian form, undermining the claims of a formal and procedural morality (Bernstein, J. 1989: 50). Quite independently from the artist's intentions, art permits the conscious expression of social conflicts by virtue of its ability to escape the reifying effects of the commodity principle. Art, like all social products, internalizes the repressive principles of society. But its formal intent is pure particularity in so far as it does not claim identity with anything but itself; it therefore does not participate in the *instrumental* practice of identity thinking, but is able to identify and expresses that condition, 'thus anticipating its overcoming' (Adorno 1984: 27-8). By virtue of its very non-discursive nature art – not all art, or even most – is therefore seen to be less amenable to ideological influence. It cannot help however extending beyond itself, as a social product, registering 'a will to truth beyond the work' (Jameson 1990: 130). It hence can achieve true identity with its object, an object it creates itself; mediation occurring not between subject and object, since these become unified, but through prior social immersion. The foundation for critical theory becomes somatic, rather than transcendental: moments of spontaneity expressed in art and suffering furnish glimpses of the truth of the social condition. Art's truth claim is, again, not truth in a

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[16] 'Racism is the parade ground where the civilized rehearse this love-hate relation with their repressed sensuosity' (Taussig 1993: 63).

representational sense, but indicates the conditions for the *possibility* of truth.[17] Autonomous art is therefore a symptom of the exclusion of the aesthetic-affective dimension from social organization, and praxis becomes transformative activity and cognition practised *without* the exclusion of aesthetic-affective concerns.

The critical, non-discursive illusion of truth in art should not be conflated however with the notion of non-identity thinking, for this reduces the possibility of praxis to poetics: art remains merely a *model* or image of praxis, not praxis itself. While art can and does criticise morality, it is, after all, not the only domain able to do this (Korthals 1989: 249). But for Adorno as well such theorists as Marcuse and Jameson the retreat from political critique to aesthetic modes of social analysis inevitably follows from late capitalism's submersion of conventional, discursive modes of opposition, requiring dissent to find alternative forms (Agger 1991: 127-8). Given Adorno's personal experience of 'an age of incomprehensible terror and suffering', it is perhaps unsurprising that the idea recommended itself that 'art may be the only remaining medium of truth' (1984: 27).

If art is seen in this way as a model of praxis and a negative symptom of social repression, the not infrequent charges of elitism aimed at Adorno's theory are somewhat attenuated: art is *social* production, not the intentional product of a privileged individual (Jameson 1990: 125). But the relevance of modern art to the politics of emancipation is another question, since Adorno makes no explicit attempt to show how his analysis of art aligns with a material analysis of social oppression beyond analogy.

Taking up the theme of corporeality once again, however, we might see a way in which art more directly connects with his emancipatory concerns. As we have seen, the body is also the grounds of *resistance*: 'the physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different' (1990a: 203). In a parallel with Lyotard's sublime, it 'registers the real antagonism that calls for negative dialectics' (1990a: 192-4). Suffering demands transformative

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[17] On the problematic status of truth in art, see Zuidervaart's chapter eleven, 1991.

praxis to overcome the antagonism it reflects. But the relief of suffering can only be a social act, not an individual one. Philosophy can label this antagonism 'subject and object', and art can lend it a voice, but neither can remove it; philosophy can only give voice to the corporeal experience of suffering that only social praxis can overcome (1990a: 203).[18] The telos of social organization would be therefore to alleviate all suffering, only achievable through a 'solidarity that is transparent to itself and all the living' (Jay, M. 1984: 203). If subjective experience is also objective, the subjective act of artistic expression extends beyond itself to the social. A critique of art in other words constitutes not just an aesthetic but also a social critique. Adorno then does not naively suggest (like Marcuse) that art directly indicates a utopian state, but that its contradictions and subversions reveal the tensions of existing society (Korthals 1989: 245). Art provides a negative model, therefore – not a substantive instance – for an alternative kind of reason, an objective, historical reason aiming at the transcendence of dichotomies; its semblance is the overcoming of the differentiation of reason into the isolated spheres of truth, normative rightness and beauty (Bernstein, J. 1989: 55-6).

Clearly for Adorno the truth in knowledge is always at risk of dissolving under its own illusions. But truth and objectivity are not simply fictions, as they become in much postmodern thought: as part of a social totality, thought's synthesizing activities are not so much epistemologically but ethically false. Thought must struggle to recognize its proper place in the scheme of things, neither a positivist domination over objects nor trapped in a self-referential idealism: just as identity thinking contains the non-identical, the non-identical concept cannot be such without an element of identity with its object. The social, or universal, always also inheres in the particular. But when we add to this Adorno's insistence on the contradictory nature of the social totality, we can begin to understand the tragic

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[18] The conditions of the normative and interpretative processes necessary for this mediation are not explicitly discussed, but Martin Jay points out that Adorno argues that Psychology (from which we should infer psychoanalysis, and not 'reductive' psychology) is a legitimate defence against the contingent, empirical, suffering subject's suppression in 'the name of an allegedly higher and or more general subject' (Jay 1984: 88).

element of this thought: truth is largely restricted to the negative; its own illusions and contradictions revealing the falsity of the social. Reconciliation with thought's other is impossible when that other is situated within contradictory social relations. The mimetic moment in art and suffering therefore prevents theory from negating itself entirely: as Prado observes, 'Adorno's dictum continues to hold true: without artistic, nonconceptual mimesis, rationality negates itself' (Prado 1992: 364).

iii) Negative Dialectics as Ideology Critique

As I noted earlier, while Adorno's concern with saving the specificity of the aesthetic-affective realm aligns him with later poststructuralists, his belief in the objectivity – the universality, in other words – that inheres in knowledge sets them apart. Adorno remains a traditional 'philosopher' in the sense that the world is not reduced to language or text, there is an independent moment of truth towards which rational consciousness must strive. He thus retains a realism lacking in Lyotard's linguistic reading of the world, but a realism tempered by a postmodern respect for the specificity of things and events, and suspicion of the mind's potential violence.

We can understand then that although Adorno still adheres to a belief in the epistemological difference between ideology and reality, this is based on the principle that 'it is not ideology itself which is untrue but rather its pretension to correspond with reality' (Rose 1978: 18). While the subject and its objects of knowledge are constituted by identitarian categories, there is always an excess, an element of disjunction between concept and object which belies identity: 'the identity of idea and reality is denied by reality' (1990a: 336). If truth coalesces with substance, which is mutable, knowledge stabilized is ideology (1990a: 40). Against Nietzsche, however, there is a moment of solidity and stability in the world, or

else the subject and its concepts would constantly be exposed as a lie (1982: 27).[19] It is not then a question of rejecting the principle of reality but of any *a priori* understanding of it, allowing the object to speak for itself, as it were, and the expression of an 'elective affinity' between subject and object. Neither concept nor reality are affirmed 'in themselves', but rather affirmed in their non-identity (Buck-Morss 1977: 63). The falseness of identity thinking is not determined by contrasting the concept with its object to discover their correspondence, but by the prior closure of the concept, its totalizing and exclusionary effects – its unfreedom. So although Adorno's critique transcends local parameters by appealing to universal criteria,[20] his is no naive realism. Faith in the ability to connect with reality is always a fragile one, in bleaker moments falling away completely. In a prescient foreshadowing of the postmodern era, he laments that the difference between ideology and reality has disappeared altogether, and there 'is not a crevice in the cliff of the established order into which the ironist might hook a fingernail' (1991: 211).

Aware of the precarious nature of this venture, then, Adorno addresses the dangers inherent in his project through a number of stylistic as well as methodological strategies.[21] Adorno's argumentative presentation as a whole parallels his totalizing but amorphous depiction of the social totality: there is no hierarchy of cause and effect, no structuring first principle from which secondary elements flow. Philosophical and empirical arguments are presented with no clear explanatory linking passages, every category appearing embedded in a network of problematics without a specific order, each informing the other interdependently. This anti-systematic approach is part of a number of strategies for resisting identity thinking, or at least rendering its problematic nature explicit. Adorno adopted the Benjaminian notion of a conceptual 'constellation' as the most

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[19] It is not therefore a Nietzschean 'ontology of flux' – a fundamental chaos and infinity of the world – which supports this epistemology (Dews 1989: 9).

[20] On this point see also Benhabib 1986: 9 and Zuidervaart 1991: xx.

[21] See Jay, M. 1984: 58 and Rose, chapter two, 1978, for a detailed discussion on Adorno's methodology.

productive sociological method for representing the empirical actuality of its object, conveying the principle that there is always more to the concept than the subject can grasp.

Constellations imply a non-hierarchical but interconnected grouping of conceptual elements which better approach the singularity of an object than a single, unifying concept, signifying the complexity and unclosed nature of an object and the impossibility of any one concept adequately 'covering' its object. A constellation attempts to unlock the object's (historical and social) 'essence' without subsuming it under single, static, unitarian concepts. It thus attempts to reconcile social analysis with the idea that critical theory is untrue to the extent that states-of-affairs would ever simply correspond to its constructions and aporetic concepts (Adorno 1982: 25). The conjunction of a plurality of concepts to disclose the particularity of an object indicates that no single category can capture the particularity and fluidity of substance, least of all highly mediated categories such as art or freedom. The explicit rejection of definitions demands instead sociological concepts be 'gradually composed' from 'individual points taken from historical reality' (Adorno 1990a: 165). This 'assemblage method' has the advantage of automatically putting into question the correspondence of any single concept with its object, leaving explicit the constituted nature of social objects, (as well as inferring an instability between objects and an elective affinity between objects and concepts) an acknowledgement of their 'non-correspondence' with their concepts (Aronowitz 1992: 311).

Like later postmodernists, and for similar epistemological reasons, Adorno also makes substantial use of irony and the creative use of fantasy and play. With the recognition that knowledge is never identical with its object, that imagination as well as perception is required to approach the other, comes both irony and the pathos of distance. The idea that objects are non-identical with their concept, that they always offer resistance to definition, has the effect of freeing philosophy up: released from the illusion of representational accuracy and systematization

Adorno's theory undercuts the dichotomy between science and art, philosophy and aesthetics by valorizing cognitive creativity, allowing the subject to draw on the imaginative opportunities opened up by the use of irony, exaggeration and fantasy in thought. Critical theory becomes an 'exact fantasy', an expression of the subject's active arrangement of elements of reality that expresses its autonomy, its moment of agency. It neither steps outside the materially given, nor attempts to make itself identical with it (Buck-Morss 1977: 86-9). The notion of critical theory as an 'exact fantasy' incorporates both the critical and the utopian moment of philosophy without pretending identity with its object: *exact* in that it preserves the priority of the object and emerges from a determinate historical context: 'no philosophy can drag the *facta bruta* by the hair and present them like cases in anatomy or experiments in physics' (Adorno cited in Buck-Morss 1977: 122). *Fantasy*, in that the 'element of exaggeration, of over-shooting the object, of self-detachment from the weight of the factual' (1991: 146), strengthens the utopian possibility of change: by refusing to accept its predetermined limits it transcends the given. Acknowledging that empirical knowledge is constituted by this *mélange* of imaginative, corporeal and factual elements enables the subject to escape its imprisonment within itself in order to produce objective knowledge, an objectivity which aims to incorporate the richness and complexity of everyday experience. The subject's creativity is thus defended as 'a counterweight to the merely factual' in any valid epistemology (Jay, M. 1984: 60).

These strategies are closely aligned with the notion of mimesis insofar as fantasy also involves both a mimetic – imitative and connective – representation and an ironic recognition of the non-identity of its representation. As fantasy, it does not pretend to truth, and thus avoids falsity. On this reading art provides a model of the tension within political praxis, an indice of the possible relation between reason and mimesis.

Adorno's immanent method becomes as much a strategic tool as an epistemological critique, operating under the recognition of the ultimately

unsustainable grounds of its object of knowledge to reveal the social contradictions contained within it.[22] Critique can therefore exist precariously with the notion of ideology as some kind of untruth, so long as a truth is not presented in its place. Indeed, for Adorno the difference between ideology and reality is 'irony's medium' (Rose 1978: 18). The outcome of this anti-systematic methodology is, for sympathetic critics, 'not a relativistic chaos of unregulated factors, but a dialectical model of negations and simultaneously constructed and deconstructed patterns of a fluid reality' (Jay, M. 1984: 15). An exposition and critical analysis of Adorno's work is in a sense obliged to pursue the same strategy, eschewing the temptation to hierarchically order, for the prioritization of any one element distorts the 'constellation' of problematics Adorno presents us.

4. Adorno and Contemporary Social Theory

i) Some Critical Remarks

For many critics Adorno's social theory is weakened by the absence of any sustained analysis of the capitalist process of production. The universal logic of the exchange system is seen to dominate the conceptual and empirical structure of society to such an extent that he is unable to account for different levels of social repression and reification, critics argue, nor the way in which abstraction in the sphere of production translates into abstraction and repression on the cultural and psychological level (Zuidervaart 1991: 81, Rose 1978: 141). We can glean no distinction between the logically universal category of exchange and the historically *specific* logic of capital (Jameson 1991: 239). His inability to theorize the historicality of repression tends to push notions of particularity and totality to the extreme, society becoming an atomistic field of particulars only united under a monolithic principle of exchange. Exactly how the mechanism of exchange

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22 In Gillian Rose's words, the irony involved here takes the 'objective idea' of a work or text and 'confronts it with the norms which it itself has crystallized' (1978: 18).

translates on the psychological and cognitive level as theoretical abstraction and social instances of power remains unclear, and in the absence of specific historical analysis his theory at times appears arbitrary (Zuidervaart 1991: 300). It might also be argued that a critique of mass culture and its homogenizing effects is no longer relevant in late capitalist societies characterized by diversity, a lack of homogeneity and fragmentation (Hebdige 1990). Ironically, despite his aim to strengthen subjectivity, Adorno is in danger of finding himself in a position where it is 'impossible to reinsert the individual into a socio-political context' (Rose 1978: 141).

From the standpoint of communicative ethics, Adorno's metacritique is insufficient to furnish the basis of a liberatory theory of normative integration. On this view, Adorno's resolute focus on subject-object relations as the ground of knowledge entrap him within an instrumental theory of knowledge, despite his radical critique of it, preventing any affirmation of an emancipatory project and ruling out any substantive practical-moral conception of his critical project. For Habermas, whose reading of Adorno is far blacker than mine, Adorno equates reason in cultural modernity with 'sheer power', the servant of a 'self-preservation gone wild', and unable to make any claim to validity (Habermas 1990: 112). For Benhabib, the micrological approach to empirical analysis which ensued from this repudiation of rational normativity flattens out broad-based relations of domination and repression along class, gender and race lines: the material for critical thinking could only be found in the relations between the totality and particular events. Adorno's thought therefore requires supplementation with a theory of discursive interaction, an analysis of the conditions under which social practices are regulated and actualized and an interpretative analysis of the intersubjective formation and transformation of social concepts (Benhabib 1986: 105).

Like Lyotard, so this argument goes, Adorno's insistence on the contextuality – and therefore specificity – of knowledge denies the validity of normative

consensus, which inevitably falls prey to the ideological structures of advanced capitalist culture. The social is instead composed of an anarchic plethora of specific knowledges. Critique along class, gender, or racial lines becomes irrevocably tied to the piety of grand narratives or illusions of identity thinking. Caught within a subject-object dichotomy, Adorno is unable *methodologically* to allow space for resistance to the dominatory functionalism of capitalism because political economy and social psychology are so deeply integrated (and implicated) in this very system. Because of his construal of capitalism as a totalizing, administered system, subsuming all but the most marginal, critically reflective practices under its reifying cloak of exchange, he is obliged to position art and philosophy as privileged spheres of social analysis. The political significance of art in Adorno's work may be congruent with his theorization of the identity principle, but since this critique of reason is itself too narrowly conceived, areas of social non-instrumental or non-identitarian action cannot be acknowledged. The esoteric notion of truth in art cannot sustain, on this view, a model of an alternative kind of social organization (Zuidervaart 1991: 280).

There are real affinities between Adorno's corporeal materialism and Lyotard's emphasis on heterogeneity, and in particular, the unspoken. For Adorno, philosophy has 'in its present historical status, its true interests...in the nonconceptual, in the singular and the particular' (Adorno 1990a: 8). But from a postmodern viewpoint Adorno is also trapped in a philosophy of the subject, constructing a kind of negative metaphysics, a theology that still places the author at the centre of knowledge, or capitalism at the centre of a structural critique, as Lyotard's essay 'Adorno as the Devil' (1974) submits. The concept of totality is merely the other side of this humanist, metaphysical coin, illegitimately positing a pre-determined, all-pervasive unity upon the diversity of being.

i) In Defence of Adorno

While these criticisms are to some extent valid, and although Adorno is certainly not immune to the charges that he too at times neglects difference, they can be met by a number of possible defences. Adorno's imputed neglect of the process of knowledge-formation and his failure to theorize different levels of social complexity has its roots in a structuralist outlook: the question of where meaning originates makes no sense, since meaning refers not to intentionality, nor to collectively-produced understandings, but to a property of the social structure (Rose 1978: 139). Like Lukacs, Adorno saw advanced capitalism as a historical formation in which the commodity form has permeated all aspects of culture (Zuidervaart 1991: 41). There was no longer any collective subject of history, however: in common with much contemporary cultural theory, class was increasingly seen as an outdated organizing principle. Hegemonic forces were instead diffused throughout society, in the sites of identity formation, the cultural sphere, mass media and social institutions, all structured by the universal logic of the market.

In response to Adorno's failure to adequately distinguish between different social forms, it might be pointed out that he nowhere sets out to develop a systematic analysis of empirical social conditions, and to accuse him of a failure to do so would be to miss the point of his attack on theory as system. Adorno held that the contradictions and antinomies of the real world meant that it could not be adequately captured by a homogeneous, systematic methodology (Jay, M. 1984: 50). It might also be raised in his defence that the social conditions under which he was writing – the decline of liberalism, the increasing dominance of state capitalism, technological and bureaucratic rationalization and the rise of mass media and communication – predisposed theory towards a functionalist view of society as an administered system wherein different empirical levels were flattened out. Like the Habermas of *Toward a Rational Society*, for Adorno there had been a shift in the mechanism of ideology under capitalism from ideology as a

function of an independent cultural sphere (wrongly denying its economic moorings) to its subsumption into an economic structure which then dominated directly rather than via legitimating political discourses, reflecting the destruction of an independent cultural, conscious sphere. His turn to a critique of the cultural sphere, and art in particular, reflected the belief that the truth of the damaging effects of society could best be disclosed through isolated and marginalized areas of culture – in their illusory autonomy, symptoms of a general repression – rather than through analysis of the mode of production, the inequities of which were no longer disguised by bourgeois abstractions.

Adorno's refusal to attribute any causal relation between economic and cultural forms might be seen not so much as a neglect of the distinctions between them, then, but a rejection of the idea of a unified causal system. The reified contents of cultural works are regarded as *homologous* to the structure of social domination, not secondary reflections of them. The micrological approach to social analysis he adopted is therefore consistent with his formulation of the relation between totality and particular: the truth of the totality is only visible through its particulars; social antagonisms and contradictions on the social level of production reveal themselves on isolated, individual levels; it is here that the social totality can be critiqued. No study of society will be complete, adequately 'covering' its object, but specific political and cultural phenomena can be located in a wider context of problems, avoiding the imprecision of global philosophies.

Particular cultural objects and events are all the social critic has to proceed from, but the intent is to understand the larger context within which these objects are produced. The exchange relationship cannot exist outside the exchange system, just as abstract thought or reason cannot exist outside the social totality: we therefore cannot abandon the concept of the total. To refuse all structural, abstract social analysis in favour of the local and particular, looking only to the

empirical, has the ideological effect of blocking critical, synthesizing thought.[23] The repression of that tension is itself a form of violence, an inevitable domination of the universal over the particular that 'takes the placid form...of everyday reality' (Jameson 1990: 90).

There is also a strong case for arguing that although he does not directly address the question of political practice, Adorno remains primarily concerned with the disappearance of public discourse through the rise of mass culture and what he sees as the ensuing degradation of subjectivity, the basic unit of democratic culture (Rocco 1994: 86). His criticism of the cultural sphere presupposes more extended forms of economic and political analysis; what he indeed attempted to do was combine a critique of society as a whole *with* aesthetic theory, an approach which participates in a particularly strong tradition within German philosophy, and which itself constitutes an attack on the differentiation of social spheres of knowledge. The point of looking to art as both symptom of a damaged society and hope for its reconciliation is not to privilege art as the agent of change or knowledge, but to harness the knowledge it yields to the service of general social emancipation. The focus on autonomous art (that is, art which escapes total ideological adherence to dominant cultural practices) is designed to *critique* the exclusion of need interpretations from morality and social understanding rather than confine it in some rarefied sphere. It is not, therefore, altogether fair to accuse him of retreating to a rarefied world of art as some privileged critical domain. Indeed, for some critics, Adorno emphasised the 'profoundly ambivalent nature of cultural products, or the way in which an art work can be *both* reactionary and progressive at the same time...' (Wise 1994: 218). In the face of the increasing globalization of media, information technologies and capital today, Adorno's conclusions cannot be lightly dismissed.

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[23] It has been argued that Adorno does not possess a 'theory' of culture, but rather construes works of art as separate events (Jameson 1990: 107). The culture industry is not construed in terms of works of art but as a business, as exchange; this is due largely to his understanding of capitalism and the exchange system as totalizing, and which in turn obliges him to construct a theory of art in danger of elitism.

It may indeed be argued that Adorno is more closely aligned to political praxis than Habermas's communicative ethics, with its lack of a *volitional* component.[24] For Adorno the shift to an intersubjective theory of the social does not resolve the central problems of modernity, for philosophy cannot abandon the attempt to distinguish between truth and falsity, leaving the question to discursive rationality, distorted as it is with the fixed beliefs of everyday reality (Zuidervaart 1991: 306). The attempt to ground knowledge intersubjectively under antagonistic social conditions inescapably replicates the dominant ideology: '[t]he concept of the person and its variations, like the I-Thou relationship, have assumed the oily tone of a theology in which one has lost faith' (1990a: 214). The task is not to confirm an already existing commonality but to filter it through thinking that moves beyond our everyday, unreflexive assumptions: the communication of knowledge must not be confused with knowledge itself.[25] The emancipatory burden remains on an expanded rationality, but one grounded in the immediacy of experience, not simply discourse. Thought must never forget its specificity: 'One must not philosophize *about* the concrete, but from out of it', Adorno insists, creating a rupture that 'never reseals in a transcendent synthesis' (1990a: 106).

This is not to say that Adorno's is a monological theory, or even that he remains within a 'philosophy of the subject'; he does not speak of intersubjectivity because reason already radically belongs to the social, not just through subject-subject relations, or language, but through the whole network of social practices and institutions. As the social is immanent in subjective experience and its concepts, a critique of society also entails a critique of subjective knowledge (1978: 503).

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[24] See Charles Taylor's discussion on the absence of a hermeneutic dimension in Habermas's work (1991).

[25] Adorno did not address Habermas's theory directly, but we might surmise that Adorno's attacks are directed towards rather cruder versions of communication theory than we find in Habermas. While they clearly part company in their different emphases on the aesthetic-affective and its role in knowledge, Habermas also refuses to give up philosophy's task of finding the truth; in his insistence on the universality of truth, rightness and authenticity, the objectivity of history has by no means been renounced in Habermas's work.

Indeed, the recognition of the dialectics of enlightenment thought – that its dominating, instrumental and self-illusory aspects are mingled inextricably with moments of truth and mimetic affinity with the other – renders Habermas's objection that Adorno's critique of reason is caught in a 'performative contradiction' far more complex than it at first appears (Habermas 1990: 119). The confrontation of contradiction, eschewing identity by embracing a dialectical mode of thinking, is for Adorno the way out of the dilemmas of rationality: reason is both instrumental and non-instrumental, cognitive and mimetic-affective. These two different modes of rationality are not separated safely off into different spheres of action, however, but must always be negotiated.

Adorno also possesses certain advantages over Lyotard's postmodern approach. His is far from a mere celebration of particularity, but a critique which interweaves speculative thought with micrological attention to details. The idea that some form of totality or metanarrative is inscribed in the local – that universal history is more than an illusory, hegemonic claim made from within the local – represents an important point of difference with Lyotard's thought. Where the latter's self is integrated into the social through narrative, it is also cut off from any universal through the agonistic pragmatics of transmission. Adorno's universal on the other hand can only be grasped via micrological analyses, empirical effects of an absent cause. Universal history should not be rejected on logical grounds, or even because it does not concur with historical actuality; universal history cannot be simply dismissed, because history is then at risk of becoming increasingly, 'uncannily', like the totalizing picture that it paints. Universality therefore must be thought together with discontinuity: as Rainer Nägele puts it, 'to cross out universal history as a remnant of metaphysical superstition would confirm mere facticity as the only thing to be recognized and accepted...'. Illusory ideas such as 'world spirit' cannot be simply negated, lest they be blindly affirmed in praxis (1986: 97).

Lyotard's division between cognition and affect is another important point of difference with Adorno. Where Adorno's emphasis on corporeality is also marked, it is inextricably linked with subjectivity and the social through mimesis. The subject's key position in cognition therefore becomes empirical, not formal; the knowing subject is viewed as part of the object to be understood, and not its point of reference or departure (Jay M. 1984: 77).

Given Adorno's suspicion of any attempt to ground rationality (non-identity thinking) in the present, in comes as no surprise that he is as critical of reducing meaning to hermeneutic and phenomenological philosophies as much as to communication theories. Some other way of integrating the aesthetic-affective into the cognitive is needed to respect the specificity of otherness, but this could not be achieved by expanding the discursive realm alone, but by placing renewed emphasis on the situated materiality of the self and its experience of the world. The only way language can be freed from its confinement within a closed system of articulating and communicating 'reality' is to recognize that although concepts arrange themselves around 'concrete historical facticity', they should remain transient, used in their determinacy only as critical tools to reveal untruth, or to undermine their own priority over the empirical. History, nature, the social totality and indeed subject and object must be seen as rational categories, *only* concepts, and as such preserve a relation of indeterminacy with their historical referents.[26] Truth can never be, therefore, an effect of discourse, nor the result of consensus; in an antagonistic society that would amount to an ideological betrayal of the *actual* need for reconciliation.

Knowledge must be subjected to continual self-scrutiny and self-renewal in an interactive, reciprocal relation primarily between thought and experience rather than between subjects, for fear that the materialist anchor in the object, in the phenomenal world, would be lost. Since the moral 'we' is not grounded in the discursive realm but in the non-discursive, material sphere of objective experience,

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[26] See Jay, M. 1984: 60 & Adorno 1978: 498.

community is only realized by social transformation and collective action. Only under the right conditions, in other words, can the promise of discursive justice be redeemed: since such a community does not at present exist, 'then there is no extant alternative to instrumental reason' (Bernstein, J. 1989: 62). The affirmative moment of truth rather alludes to a utopian normative image of a future reconciled society, remaining strictly negative until such a condition is realized:

> If speculation on the state of reconciliation were permitted, neither the undistinguished unity of subject and object nor their antithetical hostility would be conceivable in it; rather, the communication of what was distinguished. Not until then would the concept of communication, as an objective concept, come into its own. The present one is so infamous because the best there is, the potential of an agreement between people and things, is betrayed to an interchange between subjects according to the requirements of subjective reason. In its proper place, even epistemologically, the relationship of subject and object would lie in their realization of peace among men as well as between men and their Other. Peace is the state of distinctness without domination, with the distinct participating in each other (1978: 499-500).

Here there resides a humanism absent in postmodern accounts, an elusive but objective truth of the human condition on whose behalf the impulse of resistance and emancipation function. Freedom is derived from the liberatory alliance between the mimetic body and rationality: freedom recalls the 'untamed impulse that precedes the ego' without which it would be impossible to derive the idea of emancipation (1990a: 222). The basis of an emancipatory project on these terms is immanent in the sense that it makes use of concepts which have current purchase; the possibility for change arises out of the norms already present within an antagonistic condition. In capitalist society reified or identitarian concepts are the only form in which non-reified properties can appear (1990a: 47): reification is in fact 'the condition from which liberation is possible...the form in which, however brittle and inadequate it may be, subjective impulses are realized...' (Jay, M. 1984: 69). Liberation will occur not only when the subject is reconciled with the not-I, but when it is *above* freedom in so far as freedom is in league with its counterpart, repression (1990a: 283).

Philosophical discussion is until then confined to the conditions of its possibility: the ethical cannot therefore be separated from knowledge. Happiness only remains possible by collective action, until which time we as individuals are not free to put ourselves in the right:

> ...the aporia extends to the teleological concept of a happiness of mankind that would be the happiness of individuals; the fixation of one's own need mars the idea of happiness that won't arise until the category of the individual ceases to be self-seclusive (1990a: 352).

5. Conclusion: Negative Dialectics as Theology

It becomes evident that the contradictory nature of Adorno's project is not to be construed as a flaw but that, on the contrary, paradox and indeterminateness form the central philosophical *point* of it. Dialectics is the 'self-consciousness of the objective context of delusion; it does not mean to have escaped from that context' (Adorno 1990a: 406). Such epistemological dilemmas haunt any critical theory, I suggest, an outcome of the problems that arise from the struggle between what *should* be and what is, and the impossibility of bridging any such division with absolute knowledge. Adorno does point to means to move beyond this condition, however. Clearly Adorno intends his notion of justice, following Marx, to coalesce with the notion of truth as actuality rather than ethics: justice is the practical realization of emancipatory aims. Although truth is construed as immanent to the social, it possesses a kind of transcendentality in its alignment with the normative category of freedom: the possibility of truth is coextensive with the illusory (because still only potential) ideal of emancipation, the absent reconcilement of subject and object (McHugh 1993: 136). If we take the grounds for critical theory to be simultaneously epistemological *and* ethical, knowledge is not simply reduced to competing narratives or allegory, fiction as opposed to fact. The descriptive, in other words, is also normative.

For Peter Osborne, this double ethical and epistemological concern is demonstrated in the originary splitting of objectivity into subject and object, representing at once the materialist *and* the utopian element in Adorno's work. On the one hand this splitting creates the illusion of constitutive subjectivity, yet at the same time it criticizes existing conditions of unfreedom. The moment of truth in identity thinking, in ideology, is thought's longing for an end to the antagonism between it and its object: the point at which truth merges with the emancipatory, utopian element in thought. Need is what we think from, but only where the 'structural opposition of objectivity to the needs and desires of the subject has been overcome – a reconciled society – will the idea of truth be realized' (Osborne 1989: 28). Under existing conditions philosophy is condemned to its aporias since it can only refer to experience; a situation only transformative action can move beyond. The possibility that objectivity can be reconciled with subjective needs lies not simply in the subject's ability to overcome its fear of the other, but in the *actual* fulfilment of its needs through collective action, the transcendence of the isolation of the individual from others and the world. Until such time knowledge remains negative, its affirmative moment retained as a utopian hope, inseparable from critique. Truth is therefore both ethical and objective in as much as it refers to an absent condition, the *possibility* of a transformed society.

Methodologically, Adorno cannot avoid remaining perilously close to the very logic he attacks. No knowledge is innocent or privileged, guaranteed of affirming a non-dominatory truth, but neither is it merely contingent; knowledge carries with it the truth of its social content. The world is thus construed, *contra* poststructuralism, as potentially intelligible and transparent, existing 'out there,' but an out there which can only be mediated through the concept's aesthetic and mimetic act.

It is perhaps in recognition of these paradoxes that much of Adorno's writing assumes a theological tone, albeit a theology grounded in the body. Adorno's ethic demands that the abstract, identitarian principles inherited from the Greek

tradition be incorporated with the non-functionalist ethics of love articulated in the early Judaeo-Christian tradition. Eschewing Heidegger's regression to a pre-rational 'authentic care', he retains the universalist insights of modernity without its identitarian implications. Adorno does not give up on the project of modernity, but it is a far more corporeal one that Habermas's: as Hauke Brunkhorst shows, to the cognitive tradition inherited from Greek philosophy – the impartiality and equality of the moral viewpoint – is added an aesthetics of sensuality and corporeality, a 'theodicy of suffering'. The redemption promised by Christianity is only possible through modernity's profane culture (Brunkhorst 1990: 190). Adorno is thus forging a path which leads out of the absolutism of metaphysics, away from Heidegger's Being, the sphere of myth and a 'desubjectivized destiny' and towards a 'justice and solidarity which are indebted to the universalizing force of subjective contributions...', autonomy, impartial justice and 'non-narcissistic solidarity' (Brunkhorst 1990: 190-191).

My aim has not been to defend Adorno against the charge that his theory is only translated with difficulty into an affirmative project for collective political action, and that as a result his rigorously negative procedure is ironically always in danger of falling prey to the very political quietism he abhors. It has rather been to demonstrate the advantages of a dialectical mode of thought that prevents any straightforward conceptualization of either communicative rationality or the particularity of the event. Indeed, we can say that then Adorno's 'postmodernism of the object' falls between modernism's idealist tendencies and postmodernism's radical phenomenology (Lash 1992: 14). Adorno's unrelenting insistence on the social grounds of truth reveals a dialectical understanding lacking in Habermas and Lyotard: a synthesis of rationality and aesthetics which does not dissolve either one into the other. His dialectics attempts to preserve the concurrence of collective and plural experience, and the dynamic non-identity between discourse and the material world: its materialism disputes Rorty's claim that our discourses are given 'only by chance' (Alexander 1992: 39) just as it denies that discourses

should or could be justified by foundational principles. As Jameson suggests, deconstruction's attempt to abandon these categories altogether may create even more torturous Archimedean problems than the 'objective contradictions' of negative dialectics (Jameson 1990: 235). Ethically, thought cannot betray its task to differentiate between fascism and democracy, even in the face of ever-present epistemological problems. For not a few critical theorists, the epistemological dilemmas of Adorno's work, the thought of a 'disillusioned Marxist', *should* remain unresolved.[27]

In the following chapter, I want to develop the ways in which the problematics of Adorno's dialectics parallel issues in contemporary feminist politics. The affinities with an ethical, postmetaphysical feminism have not gone unremarked. For Drucilla Cornell and Adam Thurschwell, Adorno's critique of identity is aligned to feminist concerns insofar as it does not wish to appropriate the 'other' either by reconciling it to the same or by fixing it in its difference; rather, it remains uncategorized, 'beyond what is heterogeneous and beyond that which is one's own' (Adorno cited in Cornell & Thurschwell 1987: 160). I am concerned to explore in particular Adorno's connection between knowledge and the mimetic body in the context of two leading postmetaphysical feminists, Seyla Benhabib and Judith Butler.

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[27] As Zuidervaart comments, Adorno's thought represents a striking illustration of the tensions that arise when philosophy recognises its own 'impotence and complicity' but keeps alive the utopian hope of reconciliation once sought through the humanist ideals of moral autonomy (Zuidervaart 1991: 151). See also Rocco, 1994.

6. Between Totality and Mimesis: Feminism, Identity and the Body

In the previous chapter I drew on Adorno's dialectic and mimetic understanding of knowledge to criticize what I argued were Habermas's and Lyotard's overly-narrow formulations. From a feminist viewpoint, the privileging of identity or difference translates into a failure to satisfactorily integrate the gendered, particular self into the social, resulting in some all-too-familiar blindnesses in regard to women and politics. Thus a feminist critique of communicative ethics reveals the masculine bias encountered with a rationalist emphasis on the universality of knowledge and the division between spheres of action, and the inevitable hierarchy of public over private, the generalized over the particular that ensues. On the other hand, postmodernism's orientation towards difference can be criticized for its failure to incorporate the affirmative, intersubjective instances of meaning and norm-formation, or the shared experiences of inhabiting gendered bodies, not only the differences.

As an alternative to these positions, I then argued that Adorno's critical theory provides some promising insights. It offers a dialectical view of knowledge that insists on the non-identity of concepts with their object without renouncing thought's affirmative moments. While eschewing any unifying notion of communication as well as the postmodern, anti-humanist dispersal of meaning in his critique of reason, Adorno retains the possibility of objective grounds for critique without privileging identity. When categories of knowledge are seen to be radically constituted by their other, any attempt to privilege the masculine sphere of public over private, cognition over the mimetic-affective, or identity over difference breaks down.

Just how useful Adorno might be for a revisioned emancipatory politics will be examined here through an analysis of issues of representation in two prominent but quite different feminist thinkers. Taking up some of the themes raised in the previous chapter, it is in particular the intersection between the body as the site of knowledge and the social that forms the focus of the discussion to follow. I examine the way Seyla Benhabib and Judith Butler, representatives of a politics of reason and of difference respectively, understand relations between the body, identity and the social. I have chosen these two thinkers not only because they offer sophisticated and influential analyses, but because their opposing views are paradigmatic of the impasse that can develop in feminist theory as a result of overly-reductive approaches to representation. I argue that the difficulties in both Benhabib's and Butler's work might usefully be addressed through a dialectical-mimetic approach that privileges neither identity nor difference, and that includes the phenomenal self.

Adorno's project, as I have noted, holds a number of affinities with contemporary feminist concerns. Although he addresses gender issues only in passing,[1] his corporeal, mimetically-grounded knowledge is analogous to feminism's efforts to bring the body into the centre of knowledge, for the particularity of the body is always situated within a social totality. The aim to strengthen the rational subject in order to synthesize and abstract out of the particular, embodied self I have argued finds numerous feminist allies insofar as it sees the development of autonomy as a necessary aspect of collective freedom, yet is suspicious of the rational self. His relevance to contemporary theory therefore lies in his retention of both the universality and objectivity of modernism as well as the postmodern insistence on difference. Yet his thought is also quite distinct from either of these two approaches, and my interest in it resides in no small part in these points of dissonance as much as its similarities.

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[1] As we saw in chapter five, pp204-205, however, he was at least critical of Nietzsche's failure to recognize the social construction of woman.

Feminism similarly continues to demand interrogation of both modern and postmodern approaches, its theoretical task in this sense always remaining ahead of it. Because women do not fit into the mould of the autonomous, self-determining subject of enlightenment, they rightly question the adequacy of the concept. But their exclusion alone does not provide adequate grounds for rejecting notions of the subject, or universality. In practical terms the achievement of subjectivity as a benefit of the enlightenment process is something many feminists feel is still worth pursuing, despite its dominatory connotations. For Monique Wittig, women's political goal is to be an 'absolute speaking subject' which will destroy the category of woman as the particularized other of the masculine voice: 'no woman can say I without being for herself – that is, ungendered, universal, whole' (Wittig cited in Butler 1990: 117).

It is not only to the rational subject but also to the embodied self, the sensing, feeling, desiring body, that feminists have increasingly turned to resolve questions of representation. The relation between knowledge and the body remains unclear and theoretically fraught with dangers, however. Although feminism has in many ways successfully challenged the Western paradigm of rationality and its denial of the affective, libidinal roots of thought and identity, the question of sexual difference as it is inscribed in (or on) the body remains intransigent: is it socially constructed 'all the way down', does it escape signifying practices through its spatio-temporal particularity, the unintended consequences of linguistic structures, or is it shaped by anarchic, pre-discursive libidinal desires? How, if at all, does the 'natural' biology of the body work to shape meaning? Is the experience of the gendered body communicable, intersubjective, or stubbornly individual? The status of the body often remains ambiguous in much feminist theory, slipping between a number of different epistemological and ontological positions. While Adorno might suggest paths through these issues, the task remains to draw out the implications of his work, as well as some of the most

valuable postmodern and communicative ethics insights we have discussed, within more explicitly feminist problematics.

My analysis of Benhabib's discourse ethics in this chapter serves at least two related purposes. It firstly allows me to revise the issues surrounding communicative ethics with which my discussion began, for although she softens some of Habermas's rationalist excesses, Benhabib remains firmly in the modernist camp. Like Habermas, the mimetic-affective dimension of aesthetics is far too unproblematically subsumed under cognitive modes of communication, threatening to undermine the specificity of the other. Despite its attempts to accommodate feminist concerns, therefore, her work provides a good example of the limitations of a theoretical over-emphasis on reason and identity.

Secondly, Benhabib provides a pertinent contrast to Butler's postmodernism. While both construe meaning and subjectivity as linguistically constituted, tending, at the same time, to ignore the specificity of the mimetic-affective, their respective political ontologies – their understandings of what these categories *are* – could not be more different. Butler's postmodern feminism, whose influential 'constructivist' account of discourse and the body forms the bulk of this chapter, deconstructs subject-positions by revealing how they remain caught in a logic of exclusion and violence. While she provides an arguably more radical challenge to communicative ethics than Lyotard's account, I argue that her thought suffers from a failure to develop a sufficiently corporeal understanding of knowledge and the self. Butler's understanding of representation is, like Lyotard's, predicated on an implicit equation of identity with domination, the socially-enforced reproduction of identity, a kind of 'mimesis of mimesis'. She thereby cannot articulate the more primary level of a non-dominatory mimesis her work implies, nor any concept of its broader social nature.

It is against the diverse projects of these two thinkers, united by a common desire to speak of women without relapsing into essentialism, that I want to test the notion of mimesis. With its emphatic corporeality, mimesis points to a way of

reconciling a critique of metaphysics without relinquishing the ability to make truth claims about women. It can, I suggest, work to construct a feminist politics which transcends the intransigent dichotomies of identity and difference, justice and care, or constructionism versus essentialism, and approach the more dialectical mode of understanding I believe both theorists are striving to achieve. But it involves a greater emphasis on the affective particularity of aesthetics than Benhabib's theory admits, as well as a moment of naturalism and solidarity anathema to Butler's critique of representation. In an era where subjectivity, experience and the possibility of knowledge have been the target of intense scrutiny, extending so far as to negate 'nature' itself as a socio-linguistic construction, the 're-materialization' of knowledge through mimesis may prove a valuable corrective for feminist thought.

1. Benhabib and Discourse Ethics

I have argued that one of the main challenges facing contemporary feminism is to overcome the aporias which lead either to the *dérèlection* of linguistic entrapment in a phallogocentric culture – where identity, representation and language itself are implicitly allied to domination – or the metaphysics of the privileged, authorial voice of personal experience. Feminism must in one way or another address the question of whether it is possible to invoke the category of woman as self-consciously historical and differentiated, neither all-encompassing nor fixed, but which nevertheless has some form of social reality, for few would dispute the political need to identify women as such and the specific disadvantages they confront as a social group.

Benhabib's response to this question largely follows the principles of Habermas's communicative ethics. She shares Habermas's faith in the rationality and unity of representation over and against the aestheticization and heterogeneity of postmodern knowledge. But although she is concerned to insert

the corporeal and the aesthetic into discourse ethics, she conceives the intimacy of the ethical relation not as Bauman might, as ultimately ineffable and heterogeneous, but more akin to a communitarian ethic of care. Her notions of subjectivity, language and meaning, that is, are communicable, transparent and universalizable.

Benhabib is primarily concerned with defending the affirmative dimensions of critical theory's project via the communicative, intersubjective self. Although she largely concurs with Nancy Fraser's objections that Habermas's discourse ethics 'privileges rational speech over more evocative and rhetorical modes of public speech' as well as its prudish neglect of the role of the body and the 'carnivalesque' aspects of public self-presentation, she disputes Fraser's conclusion that Habermas's model is not compatible with feminist aspirations (Benhabib 1992: 111ff). The Enlightenment's moral and political universalism requires reconstruction, but not 'wholesale dismantling' (1992: 2). She attempts to reconcile the universality of justice with the particularity of an ethics of care by adopting a more communitarian, hermeneutically-based reading of Habermas. Communicative ethics should be seen in terms of a cultural achievement, she contends, restoring the concrete, affective, motivational dimensions Habermas's understanding of discourse neglects. His discursive participants are anonymous and detached, reflections of the conventional split between the public, generalized self and the private, non-political other. This division, embodied in the distinction Habermas draws between generalizable and non-generalizable interests, the moral and the ethical, implicitly reproduces dominant social relations, suggesting not only a political omission or moral blindspot in its neglect of the emancipatory claims of feminism but an epistemological deficit (Benhabib 1992: 13).

She points out that for Habermas norms express not needs and feelings but common interests: Habermas's notion of self-actualization and autonomy is governed by the norm of formal reciprocity, located in public and institutional spaces. This focus devalues and ignores the aesthetic and expressive dimensions

of communication in favour of an overly-rationalistic, linguistic model, or at least illegitimately separates them out from factual or normative discourse. The norms of interaction of the private sphere are, on the contrary, based around more affective, personal and contextual relations than the more indifferent and abstract ties of the public sphere on which Habermas focuses, thus tending to overlook the expression and development of individual difference, the 'standpoint of the concrete other' which lends real significance to difference (Benhabib 1986: 341).

Benhabib thereby attempts to revitalize the substantive ideals of self-development as well as moral emotions, the legacy of practical reason lost in the rationalism of the Enlightenment's project of emancipation, and to 'situate the moral self more decisively in contexts of gender and community...' (1992: 8). Rather than abstracting our differences to arrive at an abstract commonality, she proposes an ethics which abstracts or presupposes our commonality and 'seeks to understand the distinctiveness of the other'. This represents a shift in focus from identity to difference, but remains within a more or less unified framework of interaction governed by the norm of 'complementary reciprocity' (1986: 341). Thus, the weak transcendental status of the principles of communicative action are replaced with an 'historical self-conscious universalism' as the contestable grounds for the principles of universal respect and egalitarian reciprocity (1992: 30-32).

Significantly, this means breaking down the public-private distinction in justice and civil society, to introduce an ethics which does not suppress 'inner nature' (1986: 341), and which valorizes private non-institutional settings as the locus of moral action. Habermas, she maintains, comes close to breaking down the biases of traditional moral philosophy which preserve a mind-body dualism by bringing need interpretation into the centre of moral discussion, but the persistence of the moral standpoint of the 'generalized other' as the highest level of moral attainment prevents the full incorporation of an ethics of care and solidarity. Benhabib thereby combines the two modes of ethical action – justice and care – in

a call for the encouragement and cultivation of a public ethos of democratic participation. The demands of justice and the demands of virtue are bridged by the moral attitudes of civic friendship and solidarity (1992: 140): the 'enlarged thought' which derives from engagement in a democratic public culture, and which obliges us to think from the standpoint of the other, is a result of the development of one's moral imagination. The rationalism of Habermas's ethics is remedied by separating what is defined as moral from the universalizable principles used to justify moral action: for her, 'universalism' in morality implies a commitment to the equal worth, dignity and respect of every human being, and involves the acceptance of constraints upon the kinds of justifications used, rather than a delimitation of the moral domain itself (1992: 185).

It is clear however that universals still occupy a central place, for the partisan, yet universal meta-norms of communicative ethics must predominate over the specific norms of a way of life; a community's shared ethos cannot act as the criteria by which to evaluate moral actions, as communitarian and neo-Aristotelian theorists argue, but only universal standards of moral action (1992: 46). The integration of the concrete and the personal in ethics is sufficient to ensure against the potential dangers of universality: once the attitude of care and responsibility associated with personal relations is extended to the wider community, she argues, it necessarily changes character, becoming generalized and abstract, but it does not cease to look at the concrete specificity of its object, that is, the *difference* between people, not simply their similarities.

Now, Benhabib's attempt to sensitize communicative ethics to difference is laudable, and I agree with her reading of it as a cultural achievement. Her work must moreover be accorded attention as probably the most sustained attempt to make communicative ethics more compatible with feminist concerns. The affirmation of women's identity as normative and intersubjective is, in the context of contemporary feminist theory, quite distinctive. As Allison Weir points out in an attack on poststructuralism's individualistic treatment of subjectivity, the

notion of self-identity as a 'capacity to resolve differences and conflicts' has not been popular among feminist theorists (1995: 266).[2] Benhabib is noteworthy in her strong opposition to postmodernism's perceived failure to link up individual demands with the social, a failure she sees evident in such statements as Diane Elam's rather ephemeral definition of feminism as a political movement held together by the fact that 'we don't know what women are, despite our mutual concern for them' (1994: 84), or the postmodern idea that the subject is a play of differences that cannot be comprehended. For Benhabib, these views are exemplary of an aversion to acknowledging the stable, unitary or knowable aspects of the self that normative action requires. If understanding and agreement are seen to impose a false unity, if they hold an entirely negative status in ethics rather than a conciliatory, democratic or binding one, a conflict-resolving discourse ethic becomes unworkable.

While I cannot consider here the full implications of her substitution of a *concrete* for a *generalized* other in discourse ethics, I suggest that it does little to alter some basic assumptions of communicative ethics: its universalism, its quest for impartiality, or its faith in the transparency of language and the self. As I showed in chapters one and two, Habermas is very much concerned with the question of how to integrate the aesthetic-affective into a universalist ethics. The task of abstracting normative interests, or of discerning concrete wants or needs (how these can be distinguished is itself problematic), which in turn must be generally thematized, would remain more or less unchanged under Benhabib's ethics. As a guide to decision procedures in pluralist societies, I have argued that communicative ethics presents a number of advantages. But Benhabib remains open to the same kinds of criticisms as Habermas, namely, that the aesthetic-affective sphere is co-opted into discursive spheres, and by default, rationalized. Habermas and Benhabib are most persuasive when they contend that *some* notion

2 While for postmodern feminists identity is generally the object of suspicion and deconstruction, in its more affirmative modes it is used more as a means for self-development and autonomy rather than a vehicle for an alternative ethics, Weir goes on to argue.

of justice is a necessary adjunct to ethics, or else the risk of particularism arises, of which nationalism, the mafia, and other particular non-universalizable groups are examples (Benhabib 1992: 190). But although she admits that her theory privileges a secular, universalist, reflexive culture (1992: 42), she elides the problem of identity that postmodernists – and Adorno – have so forcefully articulated. Her understanding of the aesthetic-affective, concrete self remains overly unitary and transparent, unproblematically-constituted through narrative unity, and whose needs and desires are always implicitly cognizable and redeemable through discourse (1992: 5).

Where for Bauman the moral impulse appears a natural quality of the self, for Benhabib the moral impulse appears a natural outcome of our relations with others, implying that the interactional norms that forge the moral self are already in place, and that these affective connections unproblematically provide a reflexive, rational moral facility that renders needs, desires of the other as well as the self transparent. Her understanding of the moral self seems at times so harmonious that it is difficult to see how consensus on moral issues would *not* be achievable:

> The standpoint of the concrete other...is implicit in those ethical relationships in which we are always already immersed in the lifeworld. To be a family member, a parent, a spouse, a sister or a brother means to know how to reason from the standpoint of the concrete other (1992: 10).

For all her substantive additions to communicative ethics, her understanding of aesthetics remains cognitive rather than mimetic-affective: simply *being* a parent, for instance, provides us with the means by which to *rationally* understand the standpoint of our children. This implies too great a faith in the transparency of representation, interpersonal harmony and the primacy of rational worldviews, depending implicitly on homogeneous aesthetic-affective experiences. Certainly a degree of coherence in the experience of self-identity is a desirable and probably

necessary attribute of the moral self.[3] But her work implies an unproblematic passage between mimetic-affective experience and the symbolic sphere, eliding the specificity of the unpresentable, semantic slippage, or the possibility of ideological distortion.

Benhabib's attempts to transcend the dichotomies between justice and the good life, generalizable versus private need interpretations, public norms and private values cannot therefore convincingly account for the assurance that discursive processes will (or could) be 'radically open and fair to all' (1992: 9), that subject-subject relations would not do violence to some non-propositional particular. The danger lies, of course, in the possibility that universal norms may exclude forms of cultural predilections and idiosyncrasies that simply do not accord with its prescriptions. Indeed, while Habermas has responded to criticism of the subordinate role of aesthetics in his work by reinforcing both the importance of *structures* of communication (which embody the interactive achievements of cultural lifeworlds) and the practical limitations of a universal justice, allowing more room for diversity in aesthetic and ethical spheres, Benhabib shifts the focus back to a prescriptive, substantive rational subject, one more submerged in community than Habermas's, but that thereby risks losing the critical reflexivity his theory supports.

Benhabib's overly-unitary outlook also fails to recognize points of similarities with postmodernism where they might in fact exist.[4] She contends for instance that the unity and universality of the subject and the transparency of the symbolic sphere is a prerequisite of understanding and self-identity: if the subject is seen to 'dissolve' into a position in language, then it can 'no longer master and create that distance between itself and the chains of significations in which it is immersed such that it can reflect upon them and creatively alter them' (1991: 139). For a theorist who insists on the *communicative* and *intersubjective* constitution of the self,

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3 See for instance pp258-259 of this chapter.
4 See especially the exchange between Benhabib and Butler in *Praxis International* (Benhabib, 1991 & Butler, 1991).

this hints at a rather monological essentialism. Benhabib does not attempt to entertain the possibility that the postmodern argument might refer not to the fact that language *determines* subjectivity, a view that denies the self free will or agency, but that it provides the preconditions for its intelligibility; it *allows* the self to become a subject. This shift in thinking might then open up the question of how the process of identity-formation occurs, and the violence it may simultaneously effect, without discarding the subject or its representations. It might indeed be argued that the postmodern position is not so very far from her view of subjectivity as constituted by intersubjective (communicative) interaction.

Judith Butler attacks exactly the presupposition of an identifiable, normative subjectivity to which Benhabib adheres. Where Benhabib sees a stable, intersubjective ontology as the pre-condition for political agency, Butler sees only the violence and exclusion that pre-determined subject positions can effect. But she too denies the specificity of the mimetic-affective, not, this time, through a rationalist orientation, but through a Foucauldian equation of knowledge and power. Knowledge is aestheticized, but is afforded no autonomous moment: indeed, the body is radically dissolved into text.

2. Judith Butler's De/constructed Politics

i) The Coercive Construction of Identity

Judith Butler's postmodern position presents a provocative and challenging portrait of the self, in particular, the sexed-self. She sets out to undermine any understanding of identity or meaning as somehow real or given, be they notions of the self, a people's destiny, or the immutability of a given system of law; notions which, she submits, can inflict the grossest violence in the name of truth. Their illegitimate appeal to identity starts from the illusory premise of a pre-constituted, unified subject-position. She instead insists that the formation of the subject requires an identification with a 'normative phantasm of "sex"' through a

psychoanalytically-understood process of repudiation, abjection and disavowal (1993: 3). The abject and disavowed is an unintelligible, unliveable zone that delimits the meaning of its other, the sexed subject. In this sense the abjected 'outside' also resides within the subject, as its own founding, negative meaning.

Butler is adamant that the symbolic self, the bodily ego, is *not* mimetically related to a pre-existing biological body (1993: 91). Her 'deconstructive' politics attempts to move beyond the theoretical attention to representational subject 'positions', eschewing the starting point of subjects and the rights that attach to them. Subjects, she argues, are always erroneously taken as given rather than constructed by the very politics of rights and universal principles to which they give rise.[5] Feminist politics must therefore proceed without a stable, *a priori* subject, without a feminist 'we' that is always in any case 'phantasmatic' (1990: 142). Emphasis on the category of women and the implications of women's sexual difference in fact suppresses analysis of the very relations which continue to 'place' them as subjects. We need to look instead at how those positions are secured through differential power relations, and turn attention to the contingency, particularity and fluidity of identities within their social relations rather than what they represent as given entities.

Butler therein radically problematizes the conventional understanding of subject as signifier and object as signified, and contends that such dichotomies are constructed through the concerns of traditional 'phallogocentric' philosophy. Attacking what she sees as a metaphysics of substance which underlies our conceptions of subjectivity, sex is seen not as an ontological but a performative category, requiring not merely linguistic affirmation but an ongoing enactment of that identity. The subject and intentionality are no longer the organizing point around which meaning and authority congeal but performance, the act of 'citation' or repetition. These acts of repetition, furthermore, are never recognized

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[5] Diane Elam shows how a language of rights attaching to different subject positions leads to a stalemate in the abortion debate, to a classic 'differend' in Lyotard's terms (1994: 79).

as constitutive process of identity formation: the dissimulation of this arbitrary social process is required in fact to secure its authority (1993: 13). Although identity is constructed through 'ritualized repetition', it is also unstable and non-identical to those norms. Norms are also enabling, indeed, they are the condition of action. Hence the social force and repetition required to stabilize meaning, which is always in danger of slipping beyond their discursive bounds, into a realm of unintelligibility (1993: x).

Far from de-materializing language, cutting language off from the material world, language is seen as a material practice, striving to reunite the link between bodies and meanings as natural.[6] The mimetic performance of subject-positions, both productive and repressive, is central to Butler's understanding of identity formation. This is definitely not a mimesis that imitates nature, but the imitation of an always-already constructed version of nature, a fabricated reality. Society does not impose meaning onto a naturally sexed body, then, and neither does the body determine meaning in a cause-effect relation; the symbolic realm of signification rather works *with* the body in a process of materialization. Construction is not to be understood in an ideational sense, therefore, where we need only change our minds to change ourselves, but as a very material compulsion, 'the "performative" dimension of construction is precisely the forced reiteration of norms' (1993: 4). All knowledge is constructed, and there can be no knowledge of a given reality outside of or prior to discursive constructions, but this does not reduce to linguistic idealism or determinism; it is simply the obstinate reminder that we can never talk of the world without also forming it.

In denying any 'natural' determinations in the relation between discourse and the self, that bodies have no immanent nature prior to their symbolic representation, Butler's work commonly evinces an unease about the status of the

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[6] Paradoxically, the unease of radical construction emphasizes the materiality of language itself: Terry Eagleton's comment on Benjamin's efforts to re-aestheticize language are just as pertinent in Butler's case: 'precisely because meaning has leaked from the signifier, its materiality has become curiously heightened; the more things and meanings disengage, the more palpable become the material operations of the allegories which fumble to reunite them' (1990: 334).

material world: surely the body and its conscious self possesses a dimension of material 'being' quite distinct from the discursive construction of meaning? Her critique of the ontology of the subject indeed goes further than either Foucault or his predecessor, Nietzsche, because she rejects any implication of a pre-discursive will-to-power, and even Foucault's notion that the 'body is the inscribed surface of events', for this implies a 'mute facticity' of material corporeality that precedes signification (1990: 29). In response to frequent protests that her 'constructivism' misses the materiality of the body, Butler insists that such objections are caught in a referential, linguistic trap that misses the exclusion, erasure and foreclosure of language, the abject outside to discourse (1993: 8). It is precisely because certain forms of being are forcibly excluded and rendered unintelligible that discourse is constitutive. The marginalized, therefore, that which falls beyond the boundaries of discourse, prove the symbolic realm's inability to construct unified identities, as well as the illusion of its mirror-like representation of nature.[7]

Women's identity is disrupted and made multiple, on this reading, as is the identity of the power that ostensibly subordinates her. Power is de-anthropomorphized, cut loose from its traditionally conceived centres, economy, family, or state: there is 'only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and its instability' (Butler 1993: 9). To identify a 'monologic masculinist economy' is to suppress the diversity of social and historical contexts in which sexual difference occurs. Power is both juridical (restrictive and oppressive) and productive, that is, it also enables action and constructs subject positions (Butler 1990: 29). It is dispersed, strategic, differentiated and relational; there *are* hegemonic discursive practices, but these are not monolithic, nor can they fail to give rise to various forms of resistance to them. They in fact incessantly give rise to various forms of resistance, to a proliferation of meanings and subject positions. Resistance becomes the insistence of difference within the homogeneous.

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[7] As I will argue later, however, the psychoanalytic narrative of repression tends to presuppose just what it is trying to establish.

Women's subordination is thus understood as fluid and reciprocal, feminine subject identities both perpetuating relations of inequality and subverting them in complex and multiple ways. In short, the perpetual presence of Lyotard's agonistics, founded, similarly, on an ontology of difference.

Butler nonetheless engages in ideology critique, some 'grand' narratives of her own. Recalling Adorno and Horkheimer's 'mimesis of mimesis',[8] the social regulation of meaning is viewed as a double process which first constructs a system of signification that excludes and denies and then retrospectively imputes a naturalized status to what is affirmed within that system. The social constructs an indifferent nature – in this case, sex – on to which it imposes its own second nature, gender, in the interests of social control. Sex is here 'retroactively installed at a prelinguistic site to which there is no access' (1993: 5).[9] It becomes a fantasy without which culture would be unintelligible, obliging a rethinking of the notion of 'construction' itself. The boundaries of inner and outer worlds become merely linguistic terms that articulate a contingent system of regulatory practices; the body is brought *inside* the realm of discursive construction, not left outside as either some passive matter onto which signification is inscribed, nor construed as an instrument through which an authorial will appropriates meaning (1990: 8). The body is no longer a limiting condition of discourse, but is itself 'set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality' (1990: 9).

Here Butler is strongly influenced by Irigaray's critique of Western metaphysics, which also identifies a double strategy as the means by which a feminine is first constructed and then erased by the symbolic realm: women are

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[8] For Adorno and Horkheimer,

> The purpose of the Fascist formula, the ritual discipline, the uniforms, and the whole apparatus, which is at first sight irrational, is to allow mimetic behaviour. The carefully thought out symbols (which are proper to every counterrevolutionary movement), the skulls and disguises, the barbaric drum beats, the monotonous repetition of words and gestures, are simply the organized imitation of magic practices, the mimesis of mimesis (1990b: 185).

[9] Mimesis is the 'nature culture uses to create second nature' (Taussig 1993: 252).

excluded through abjection and denial, then produced again to form the subordinate part of a binary masculine/feminine opposition (1993: 36). Irigaray indeed uses this strategy against itself, dialectically, to criticize mimetically; miming philosophy's grand, totalizing gestures and claims with those of her own to undermine its propriety and coherence (1993: 38). Irigaray indeed 'mimes mimesis itself': 'Through miming, Irigaray transgresses the prohibition against resemblance [women's resemblance of men] at the same time that she refuses the notion of resemblance as copy'. On this reading, Irigaray is not the 'uncritical maternalist', reinscribing the feminine in (masculine) language. Instead she strives to forge a different way of being with the other, a mimetic ethical relation of intimacy and respect, where boundaries are uncertain: the metaphor of two lips figuring the simultaneous idea of break and proximity (1993: 45).

For Butler too, what is produced by the representation of woman is at the same time excluded by it. The outside is unintelligible, but necessary for the constitution of the inside's meaning. This is a kind of false mimesis, a refusal to let the other speak for itself, a refusal of women to be other than their copy. But despite the compulsion inherent in this process, identity formation is also an unstable state, for repetition always involves displacement, mimesis is never identical reproduction but always belies representation as truth. The possibility of resistance resides in this instability, the inadvertent outside that accompanies repetition, the 'disruptive return of the excluded from within the very logic of the heterosexual symbolic' (1993: 12). Thus any enforced stabilization of meaning is always to be suspected as an ideological disguise, a theme we see in Nietzsche and echoed throughout poststructural thought.

With the idea that bodies – those material entities usually assumed to be pre-date discourse – are themselves wholly constructed by discourse, a radical instability and unpredictability of identities emerges. We might surmise that for Butler to ponder the kind of feminine subject required for an ethic of care, or for a communicative ethic, or for social and economic justice, merely substitutes one

rigid matrix of possible identities with another, still marginalizing, for instance, those identities which do not conform to the 'correct' feminist ones. A seamless category of women excludes even if its intention is emancipatory (1990: 4): the 'feminine' is always abstracted from contexts of class, race, ethnicity, and only articulable in the binary terms of masculine/feminine. On this account, all stable identities are to be suspected of underscoring relations of power and exclusion, and politics becomes undecidable in advance. The radical move in her subject-less politics is that the political, dialogic process whereby subject identities are articulated and conflict resolved can never be an *a priori* one, where procedures, subjectivities and results, even their form, are worked out in advance: this would preempt the democratic process and foreclose articulable possibilities of meaning and identity (1990: 14). Meaning is not some abstract, disembodied message passing between subjective vehicles of communication, but is destabilized, always exceeding or falling short of its imputed intentions and boundaries, new meanings proliferate while existing meanings fail to find comprehension. It also means that there can be no *a priori* universal ethic, for there are no stable ontological grounds on which such a project could be based. Thus Habermas's or Benhabib's discourse ethics, which rely on an orientation towards understanding and agreement immanent in the act of communication itself, is untenable, even if it does attempt to shift the ontological question of identity away from the subject and onto speech acts.

ii) The Elision of Mimesis

Butler succeeds brilliantly in unsettling the politics of subjectivity. But I argue that there are nonetheless tensions that inflect her work, tensions that arise not so much from the attempt to think materialization and construction as inseparable moments of the process of meaning formation, as from a one-sided analysis that privileges difference over identity, that indeed often seems to reduce normative, reciprocal interaction and symbolic communication to domination.

Firstly, the unease I noted earlier that is commonly felt over the status of materiality in her work is a symptom, I suggest, of the elision of any reference to a more primary, unforced mimetic relation that occurs with the implicit equation of domination with the symbolic. Although adamant that to name is also to constitute materiality, there is nonetheless implicit in her formulation a conception of some heterogeneous, extra-discursive realm that cannot be spoken of, an unintelligible corporeality that proves its existence only by its negative, disruptive effects; a realm that discourse works *with*, rather constructing or being constructed by. Butler indeed avoids implicating any causal relations between discourse and nature: 'to claim that sexual differences are indissociable from discursive demarcations is not the same as claiming that discourse causes sexual difference' (1993: 1). With the idea that discourse is formative but does not originate, cause, or exhaustively compose matter, her account of the self assumes a rather less counter-intuitive air. Her intention, in fact, is to shift attention away from binary, cause-effect relations and to recognize that the subject-object grammar itself must be challenged in order to see the construction of meaning not in terms of cause and effect, or wilful act, but as an activity without a subject, the origin of which is no longer a relevant question.

Yet, ambiguously, the body remains a sedimentation of compelling historical *fictions* (1990: 140), an *illusion* of substance, compelled to approximate the 'phantasmatic' model of 'factic' sexuality (1990: 146). How do we understand the fictional status of the body without some complementary notion of truth, however? We might agree that discourse possesses both regulative (disciplinary) and positive (productive) effects, working on or through a subject identity, as well as providing the means by which subjects shape themselves and their meaning. But since the body is constituted *all the way down* by text or interpretation, discourse inevitably takes priority in its determining role, and there appears no foothold for a referential knowledge, nor for the physical materiality of existence to impact back on the symbolic. In consequence, her theory never secures its

references to materiality, for despite its dialectical moments the body and its experience is tied into an ultimately arbitrary textuality. I am not suggesting that the subject is a reflection of its biological body, but that a more affirmative space must be allowed for the body to act as agent and cause *within* the process of its constitution.

Secondly, and interrelatedly, the affirmative, transformative possibilities opened up by discourse are missed because emancipation is seen only in the monological terms of inadvertent, marginal and subversive identities that defy hegemonic identities. As we saw in Lyotard, it is the notion of community that seems most sharply to delineate postmodernism's weaknesses.[10] Butler's position also problematizes community by reductively equating discourse with domination in a flattening, aestheticizing gesture arguably more thorough-going than Lyotard's, for in her case there is no genre that is not also vitiated by social repression. Politically, it is hard to see this formulation supporting anything other than a quasi-anarchic individualism,[11] for despite assurances that performativity and iteration are both necessary and enabling, resistance is found not in normative or collective performance, or as Adorno would dialectically have it, in the rational subject itself, but in the interstices of social structures, in that which falls between the cracks of intelligible discourses. As in much postmodern theory, representation as such comes under constant suspicion and is therefore devalued; so closely associated with domination, the affirmation associated with solidarity and identity can only sit awkwardly with deconstructive critique.

Yet underlying the ideological disguise of a naturalized yet compulsory repetition, I suggest that we can glean something like a non-ideological mimetic

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10 As we saw in Lyotard's case, the absence of any guiding moral principles leaves politics open to continual negotiation. Without the protection of normative principles, battles previously won against racism, sexism and other inequities may have to be continually refought and renegotiated (Elam 1994: 82).

11 Epitomized in the idea of a somewhat isolated, free-floating view of the self, as in such comments: 'Identifications are multiple and contestatory, and it may be that we desire most strongly those individuals who reflect in a dense or saturated way the possibilities of multiple or simultaneous substitutions...' (Butler 1993: 99).

relation with the other, a heterogeneity of being and an unforced 'connection' that can potentially exist amongst the 'densely populated', abjected zone of non-subjects (1993: 3):

> To the extent that subject-positions are produced in and through a logic of repudiation and abjection, the specificity of ideology is purchased through the loss and degradation of connection, and the map of power which produced and divides identities differentially can no longer be read (1993: 114).

But just what this connection might be cannot be articulated, for the relation between self and other can only be understood insofar as it also excludes and denies; in terms of domination and repression.

Butler's reluctance to assume and engage in given systems of representation is understandable, for even in the interests of increased freedom the danger of once more fixing meaning and therefore doing violence to possible subject positions is always present. But her refusal to grant the body any autonomy from the discursive is ultimately incoherent: socially regulated mimesis appears necessary for social life, and yet at the same time to override some kind of non-universal, ethical relation of 'being with' the other that Butler never affirms, indeed cannot affirm. Her reduction of meaning and the aesthetic to discourse therefore loses an important part of Lyotard's critique of identity, the idea that there is a realm of morality and experience that defies representation, and which may be communicated intuitively (Kearney 1991: 222). For Butler representation is inescapably normative, always a coercive 'regulatory ideal' that constitutes the material through historically-embedded practices (1993: 1). But this signals a mistrust in representation that refuses the transformative possibilities of language to such an extent that if, as she claims, grammar so often fails the feminine (1993: 39), it is difficult to see how a new grammar, which requires at least some modicum of affirmative, collective action, can be forged. The refusal of any truth claim attached to the body denies the emancipatory role of Lyotard's politics of the sublime, as well as the affirmative moments of Adorno's thought, carried in

the notion of mimesis. It thereby undermines any appeal to the suffering and injustice on which critical theory is based.[12]

While her approach is adept at exposing the illusions of a unified, intentional, *a priori* subject and its representations, therefore, it is not at all clear what the next (political) step should be. Asking after 'the cost of articulating a coherent identity-position if that position is produced through the production, exclusion, and repudiation of abjected spheres that threaten those very subject-positions' (1993: 113), Butler tentatively concludes that the cost of a coherent identity-position may be too high, and that it may only be by risking the coherence of identity that connection is possible. But the nature of this connection remains obscure, and the consequences of an incoherent identity unexplored, which raises some dangers Butler this time fails to acknowledge.

iii) A Poetics of the Body

Feminists such as Allison Weir and Jane Flax see the experience of self-identity as essential for both the resolution of contradiction and fragmentation within the self and its relations, and for the constitution of meaning. Jane Flax emphasizes the need for a coherent narrative of the self to provide psychic unity, a philosophical 'fiction', perhaps, but one that is nonetheless essential to mental health. The need for narrative unity risks the too unified and transparent understanding of the self that we see in Benhabib and Habermas. Flax however draws a distinction between a 'core' self and a 'unitary' self: while the latter is rightly perceived as an illusion of Enlightenment's representative thinking, the former can only be repudiated at the cost of ignoring the real suffering connected with a 'fragmented self' and is disdainful of the subordinated, fragile self of those struggling to find a subject

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12 It can be argued that the individualist, if not masculinist orientation of the postmodern self is revealed not so much by any logical argument as by the imaginative construal of the kind of self required to think its critique of traditional modes of thought. Hence it can be argued that Foucault, Lyotard and Derrida in fact implicitly rely on some version of 'deep' subjectivity which contradicts their insistence on the constituted nature of subjectivity (Flax 1990: 210). On this reading, the postmodern subject is a highly individualistic construction, able to respond to the call to continually create itself anew because it is *already* a 'unified' autonomous subject.

position from which to express their 'truth' (Flax 1990: 218-219). The unity of the self may be a *logical* fiction, but it remains an ineradicable abstraction required to respect the psychic coherence and suffering of the experiential body as well as its irreducible particularity as *this* body among others.

An important consequence of a more or less coherent psychic narrative is that an ethical orientation derives from the recognition of the intersubjective foundations of human existence, the notion that the 'I' is always also a 'you', a dialectical tension of identity and difference, one of which never assumes an *a priori* primacy. The self therefore 'cannot avoid incurring any debt to the other', allowing us to avoid the atomism that ignores, or at best underemphasizes, the constructive work of identity and meaning formation through social interaction and to appreciate our intersubjective natures (Diprose 1993: 24). The problem of the identity of the self is therefore bound up with the problem of the identity of meaning, and Weir points to the failure of poststructuralists to recognize the intersubjective mediation and constitution of these two forms which renders them unable to '*abstract* from concrete relationships or from the system of language, to a concept of the individual as a *participant* in the intersubjective constitution of *meaning*' (Weir 1995: 267):[13] a failure directly traceable to poststructuralism's dual steps of reducing social being to language, and fragmenting that language through a formal logic of repetition, negating the commonality of social being as well as the referential grounds of any notion of truth.

The logical idea of *repetition* of signification renders impossible the realization of any one 'ideal' identity, revealing the phantasmatic status of the natural, but is insufficient to account for the variety of embodied experiences of subject identities. The body may not have a fixed or stable gendered identity in its role as parent or lover, for instance, but it may have a definite scientific-medical identity

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13 That the subject is elided is clear both in Lyotard's de-anthropomorphized language of phrases and Paul de Man's insistence that ethics does not involve two subjective wills or relationships, but the clash of two distinct value systems, whose resolution or judgement is compelled by linguistics, not the subject (Elam 1994: 107).

and givenness insofar as it requires treatment for heart disease, say, or a definite *political* identity insofar as it possesses (or lacks) certain political or legal rights.[14] The multiplicity of subject positions is not solely attributable to a formalist slippage of meaning in the iteration of language, then, but also to the specificity of aesthetic-affective experience interpreted through more or less coherent narratives. What a formalist account omits is the knowledge – perhaps partial and inconsistent, but meaningful nonetheless – derived from a self who is both dependent on other subjects, its own agency as well as linguistic structures; one who is more or less able to negotiate within and between the narratives that tell its story. For a self wholly constructed by discursive structures, there can be no comprehensible interpretation of contradictions and suffering in social life attributed to a disjunction between the individual's experience and the political, symbolic or economic order, for that experience of social contradiction is itself discursively construed – discursive in the sense that it is a matter of a web of signs, in the absence of 'real object' referents. The *dis*continuities, excesses, and differences engendered by these regulatory practices is only coherently explained by taking into account the particularity of the body, the repetition of structures mediated through a concrete, experiencing self, and its specific position within a multiplicity of possible discourses. This is not to revert to Benhabib's transparently rational and innately ethical self, or an ethic of care's non-reflexive, socially-embedded self, but implies a dialectical understanding of a self who is both ironically aware of her disjunctive social constitution, yet who can nonetheless knit together the narrative identities into some coherent, ethical form. Some notion of a stable, 'core' self is moreover not incompatible with postmodernism's insistence that subjectivity is an effect of language, if this is seen

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14 That the concrete, situated body, its sensuous existence and dialogic interaction with others is a fundamental element of social theory is evident as soon as we ask postmodernism the question *why* difference between phrases or actions should be respected: why is some difference is to be valued over others, and difference in relation to what? (Cooper 1995: 115).

to imply merely that agency and intentionality require language as their precondition, not that language *determines* the subject.

Butler's thought is also plagued by a tension between psychoanalysis and deconstruction, philosophy and history. The substantive narratives she uses to explain and construct identity on the one hand and her radical critique of meaning itself on the other are somewhat contradictory bedfellows. Although admitting that such linguistic markings as abjection, desire, the phallus, castration or the 'laws' of sexual identity differentiate and exclude, she fails to satisfactorily distinguish between their function in her critique and their function within hegemonic discourse. Because of her reluctance to engage with language and its uses, Butler is unable to differentiate between *kinds* of repetition and representation, or to discriminate between the different *forms* of exclusion that language effects. Her project balances precariously between the self-referential narratives of psychoanalytic theory, refusing any 'marking' or signification of the body prior to its marking in language, and the ironic, deconstructive use of those symbolic markings to criticize the process of marking as such (1993: 97). If we refuse to accept the universality of Freudian structures of abjection and prohibition as the basis of sexuality and identity formation, however, then the link she forges between construction and materiality is made less convincing, and the force of social reproduction is undermined as a critical target. Paradoxically, by appropriating the tenets of psychoanalytic theory for her own analysis, she risks reproducing its own phallogocentric logic, relinquishing the symbolic to the masculine, to the law of the father.

A certain flattening of the social also occurs in her belief that there is no anthopomorphized, structural subject named 'power' that acts and constitutes, only a simultaneous 'appearance' of subjects and acts and their discursive representation. But such a rejection of social structures risks submerging the insights of systemic critiques under a tide of amorphous, decentred interpretations. Power may not be *necessarily* linked to traditional 'subject' centres

of state, family or economy, but it may be *historically* centred in those forms. The explanation for why certain discourses are privileged over others is allied to an anonymous functionalism: gender is the cultural imperative for reproduction, 'a strategy for survival within compulsory systems' (Butler 1990: 139).[15] If this regulatory and defining practice occurs in the name of some vaguely defined notion of social function, cohesion or order, then it remains to be explained where this impulse to order and the accompanying fear attaching to its loss inheres if it is not *already* embedded in some way in human bodies. While Adorno too might be accused of homogenizing the social through a totalizing critique of reason, he nevertheless retains a critical agency of the rational subject through the mimetic grounds of knowledge. Constituted from the particular, Adorno thus enables at least the possibility of a non-dominatory totality, where Butler loses the link between the non-ideological materiality of the body and the social totality.

Central to my argument here is the notion that an ethical concern for suffering (surely manifest in Butler's work) depends on a mimetic knowledge – an empathic affinity with the experience of the other – that starts with some reference to the 'real', the truth of the sensuous, physical experience of the self and other on which ethics depends, before it engages the aesthetic, conceptual representation of that experience (Ricoeur 1984: 47). This moment of reality requires a kind of faith – a metaphysics – in and of the embodied self, for it can never be linguistically or discursively *demonstrated*.

In Irigaray's and Jane Gallop's psychoanalysis, the tension in the status of reference is handled in terms of a mysticism about the body, a kind of feminist, corporeal poetics.[16] The invocation of a female 'form' in Irigarary, her defenders claim, is not to be read naturalistically but as a metaphor within a particular

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[15] In fact, the idea of identity as a strategy of communication and survival reintegrates the body with the symbolic, putting forward the corporeal once again as an invisible cause in a kind of 'will-to-survival' gesture. Butler consistently uses a passive, subject-less tense at these explanatory junctures: the demarcation of the body as a signifying field or practice occurs for instance through a 'diffuse and active structuring of the social field' (1990: 131).

[16] See Kathryn Bond Stockton, 1992.

theoretical – feminist, psychoanalytic, philosophical, political – discourse.[17] To talk about the 'real' body requires mysticism, as we are referring to something outside our discursive system; but to confine oneself only to metaphor as rhetoric or poetry is to imply the possibility of language as non-metaphor, as a transparent system of meaning.[18] We can't help mystifying, but this word is both right and wrong; it rightly warns us against a naive realism, a direct relation between thought and its object, or transparency of meaning between subjects, but it also wrongly implies a *non*-mystifying realism. They advocate a pragmatic and ironic acceptance of referentiality in the knowledge that it is logically illusory. Armed with this dialectical understanding of truth and fiction, Gallop finds of most use in Irigaray's controversial 'essentialism' of the female body the ability to obligate the reader to 'reconsider the status of anatomical referentiality', for 'the gesture of a troubled but nonetheless insistent referentiality is essential' (Kirby 1991: 95), the holding in tension of two inconsistent but nonetheless necessary analytical elements.

Butler's less poetic style exposes the difficulties of reconciling deconstruction and psychoanalysis rather more starkly, for it prohibits even any *metaphorical* articulation of the referents of knowledge on the grounds of their incorrigible repression. The tensions in her thought might also be attributed to what Elizabeth Grosz sees as a fundamental incompatibility between Nietzscheanism and

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[17] For Gayatri Spivak, Irigaray's aggressive use of rhetoric has prompted misplaced criticisms of essentialism (1992: 74). Both Meaghan Morris and Drucilla Cornell also defend Irigaray from her critics in so far as she is accused of essentialism or a politically irrelevant poetics (Morris 1988: 49). Hers is, as Morris comments, a 'paradoxical project of inscribing a *feminine* position in discourse' – paradoxical in that the feminine cannot be pinned down, even as the 'other' to the masculine. Irigaray, they contend, manages to critique essentialist accounts of women's experience at the same time as she affirms the feminine, her '"uncapturable" *jouissance*' (Cornell 1991: 75). Thus unlike, for instance, Mary Daly, a common feminist politics for Irigaray is not exclusive but resides in a multiplicity of different positions (Morris 1988: 47). Women must be reprieved from the patriarchal 'economy of the Same and the One' within which they are *absence* and *lack* and allowed to occupy a multiciplicity of being (Morris 1988: 47). On this reading Irigaray's attack on the 'strategy of the same' is far from an essentialist confusion of the social and the anatomical; it instead 'works with a deadly deliberation on the point (the site and the purpose) of the confusion of anatomical and cultural' (Morris 1988: 64): a celebration of diversity and experimentation in writing, and not an attempt to reinscribe the feminine in the logic of phallocentrism.

[18] 'Extreme constructionism', therefore, 'loses its object' (Stockton 1992: 125).

Foucauldian perspectives, both of which are present in her work. Where for Foucault the body is 'the field on which the play of powers, knowledges, and resistances is worked out, for Nietzsche the body is the agent and active cause of knowledge' (Grosz 1994: 146). And where Nietzsche's self animated by a will-to-power or libidinal forces – 'deep' competences – Foucault's is a self that implicitly lacks this *a priori* depth. Metaphysics, including logic, truth, subjectivity, and morality are read as bodily strategies or resources which implicitly emanate from a 'will to power' (1994: 126) *and* externally related ideas that have no necessary connection with human ontology. Butler's psychoanalysis both requires and denies the body as that matter and energy which makes discourse possible. Indeed, Butler's understanding of identity as a strategy of communication and survival pushes the body beyond the symbolic despite herself, positioning the corporeal once again as an invisible cause in a kind of 'will-to-power' gesture. The 'mute facticity' to which Butler objects as being *itself* constituted is here not 'mute' insofar as it grounds the mimetic dimension of language.

The ethical privilege postmodernists such as Butler bestow on heterogeneity betrays a positivist epistemology: because 'woman' turns out to be a logically fictional category, unstable and opaque, the commonalities that identify women as members of social groups are ignored. The spectre of a dehumanized structuralism has not been properly excised, preventing postmodernism from reinventing a deconstructed politics which can develop a systemic critique of the relations between the ethical, political and economic systems (Hennessy 1993: 59). I argue that the admission of an agonistic quality to social life need not eliminate from vision the bases of commonality and solidarity that also supports sociality: indeed, the *coexistence* of both identity and non-identity, to put it another way, is more in keeping with the poststructuralist insistence on heterogeneity and undecidability than a totalizing depiction of difference.[19]

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19 We see this too in Lyotard's paradoxical prescription for the absence of prescription, and Habermas's recognition of the central struggle between modernity and tradition.

Despite her totalizing depiction of the symbolic, Butler's critical project rests on a notion of the self whose desires, impulses and expressive-mimetic acts can break through the totality of hegemonic discourse. But as I have indicated, this is insufficient to construe a political ethics, for the ethical relation resides not within a self-referential, ultimately contingent world of discourse, but in the interaction of meaning with embodied, lived experience, the realm of the 'real'. In this sense an Adornoian-understanding of mimesis has the advantage of showing how sensuous, material existence connects with the discursive, to work as a kind of hermeneutics of social being.

3. Mimesis, Ethical Feminism and Critique

i) The Mimetic Foundation of Knowledge

Mimesis begins in the movement from the materiality of the body, as the site of the non-propositional 'real', through the interaction of sense experience with language, interpretation and social structures, and back again to the construction of embodied experience through discourse. It is this two-fold movement between materiality and discourse, highlighting the relations between them rather than holding them distinct or dissolving them one into the other, that I find most promising in the concept. In my reading of mimesis, the corporeal as well as conceptual contact with the other implied in the mimetic relation provides a break within the pre-interpreted circle of language, providing an opening, if mediated and tenuous, to the experience of suffering that underpins feminism's political and ethical endeavours.

Knowledge is thus dialectically conceived, somewhere between identity and difference; as both radically other (the object is not identical to its concept), and part of its concept, sharing an identity with the other. Relating to the material world through the interaction of the physical body and its environment, the mimetic faculty is not merely imitative but ethical in so far as it requires

imagination, empathic attention and respect for the specificity of the other. Thought is able to approach knowledge of its object without the illusion of identity.[20] Mimesis therefore offers a more dialectical mode of understanding that does not reduce knowledge to either a positivist truth or illusory rhetoric. The subject is neither an autonomous intentionality wielding language as a passive tool, nor an effect of language, but the point of intersection between the body, the symbolic and the material world.

There is a risk involved with this manoeuvre, however, for mimesis can easily be recuperated for politically conservative means (Cohen 1994: 2-3). If mimesis recalls an anti-systemic, non-instrumental, 'communicative' relation with the other, there is a danger of passively losing oneself in one's environment, as we saw in an ethics of care, of either succumbing to a non-critical mimesis that disempowers the subject, or the re-appropriation of the other simply under a new guise. As Butler herself warns, the agonistic, exclusionary aspects of social life must be acknowledged, where identities are continually negotiated 'as part of a dynamic map of power' so that the trap of an 'insidious' all-inclusive humanism is avoided, either the notion that language can encompass all dimensions of social being or the sympathy that turns into a colonization of the other's position as one's own (1993: 117-118).

Adorno drew on two strategies to avert this danger. Firstly, like Benjamin, the emancipatory dimension of the mimetic relation to otherness only occurs fleetingly, dispelled as soon as its appears, or else knowledge risks masking, fixing and once again dominating the other. In a society vitiated by the logic of exchange and patriarchy, this knowledge can only be glimpsed, at times in art and in the suffering body, at those sites where the dissonance between social discourse and

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[20] Here the mimetic faculty has affinities with a Freudian pre-ego stage, a fluidity and porosity of the ego that recalls the child's pre-discursive desire to communicate with the other *without* generating meaning (Taussig 1993: 35).

actual being is felt.[21] The 'mimetic immersion in the concreteness of otherness can only teeter on the edge of stable knowledge', always ready to splinter off into fragments or find itself co-opted into 'unstoppable metaphoric reproduction' (Taussig 1993: 36-37).[22] We might begin to recuperate this elusive knowledge by admitting that although knowledge then can never be stabilized in abstract concepts, it must continually renew itself in its particularity.

Secondly, the dangers of mimesis can be countered by a strengthening of the subject to such an extent that it could transcend the demand for instrumental action, and reinvigorate an ethically superior way of knowing. This required a modernist, reflexive and discriminating mode of knowledge.[23] Butler indeed concurs that the separation of knowledge into categories is a necessary part of understanding, for escape from the reifying potential of language requires engaging more fluid modes of identification that recognize the dialectical nature of concepts, the idea that they are constituted in terms of identity and non-identity with their other (1993: 117). It could be said that both Adorno and Butler participate in modernism's nexus between aesthetic self-creation and resistance. For both, too, it is only where mimesis is refigured in an ethical way, as a giving over to the other rather than an attempt to capture it, that the twofold danger of losing the critical faculty in immediacy or of subsuming the other under the guise of intimacy might be forestalled.

The effect of mimesis, as one critic has said of Irigaray, is then able to be 'revelatory and ironic; it opens a discursive space that can be repossessed or appropriated in new ways, to new ends' (Oppel 1993: 95). Concepts are metaphorical therefore because they are not simply representations of objects 'as

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21 Whether this is a modernist formulation is a moot point: Lyotard for instance implies something of the sort in his politics of the sublime, where the differend indicates the disjunction and heterogeneity of the social.
22 This is also expressed in Benjamin's edict: 'Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction' (Taussig 1993: 20).
23 The archaic, magical connotations mimesis held in ancient philosophy cannot be retrieved, or else the subject would lose its ability to discriminate between different kinds of objects (Adorno 1990a: 44-45).

they are', but imaginative analogies of the corporeal as well as cognitive experience of knowledge; a constant reminder of the dialectical relation between subject and object. Experience can then be seen as simultaneously constituted and constituting; it does not escape the reifying or abstracting processes of identification, but is *also* shaped by the body's own response to its perception of the world, the gap between perception and concept which permits transformation and singularity is not merely a formal effect of repetition, as I have argued on other occasions, but also an embodied, aesthetic response.

Tied to the phenomenological body, knowledge would not so much be free from the hermeneutic circle, the fatalistic interpretation of always-already interpreted experience, but can use mimesis to momentarily break that circularity. Language, as not merely ideological and totalizing but also mimetic, could refigure itself.[24] Discourse would then not remain doomed to suspicion, but be mobilized for emancipation, drawing on the poetics of metaphor and mimesis as re-membrance, the memory of both injustice and an (imagined) originary non-dominatory relation with the other (Cornell 1991: 169). Identity would remain mimetic in the sense of performative and iterative, but would retain a *connection* with what has previously been outcast and 'abjected' under hegemonic modes of understanding. Feminism need not remain entrapped, derelict, within patriarchal language and practices, nor marginalized into non-rational or non-linguistic forms, but can work towards the new ways of knowing embodied in mimesis: the glimpses of the 'truth' of the social in the experience of suffering, and an ethical opening out to otherness.

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24 As Richard Kearney comments, we must invoke the imaginative ability to 'invoke exemplary figures and narratives, to put oneself in other's shoes, to identify oneself with their actions, thoughts and feelings', without which 'it is difficult to see how moral sentiment or reason could operate at all' (1991: 222).

ii) Re-Reading Butler

Although Butler fights against any crude reading of her work as constructivist, because it is unable to affirm any moment of experience outside the bounds of social control, its consequences are nonetheless similar: subjectivity becomes a product of discourse, a play of differences within a linguistic system, the body and the material world constituted by interpretative practices, emancipation a playful subversion of disciplining practices which can be transgressed and resisted through alternative (equally groundless) interpretations. The focus of social critique rests no longer on the body and its experiences, but on the practices which position and constitute an 'experiencing body', which in turn must be suspected. But with this refusal of women's representation, she risks perpetuating the suppression of women's difference by refusing to engage with the category 'woman' and the place it holds *now*: a lower socio-economic status, inequitous child-rearing roles, structural discrimination in the industrial sphere, violence in the domestic sphere. By rejecting the idea that our bodies or communicating selves impose any limits on our identities and signifying practices, she rules out the possibility of any common premises on which a discourse ethic can be grounded, and which might combat such structural inequities.[25] Thus it is not unreasonable to wonder how Butler's theory could adequately protect marginalized or disadvantaged social groups, or provide the structural support they require to overcome real inequalities. Political struggle may be a contest over signification, but it cannot lose its empirical connection with the production and distribution of resources, and our embodied experience of the consequences of that production and distribution; the latter can only be reduced to discourse at the expense of losing the distinction and utility of signifying practices in a self-referential and ultimately apolitical formulation.

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[25] As Rosemary Hennessy asserts, the postmodern self is problematic insofar as it eliminates *personal* forms of the economic from the political realm, subsuming them under modes of signification (1993: 23).

The concept of mimesis as I have outlined it here provides a means to understand Butler's rather obscure lamentation for the 'loss and degradation' of 'connection' in social relations. The call for 'connection' might be read as a desire to develop non-dominatory, open relations with the other that allow space for the other to 'speak', to communicate its own truth in the absence of *a priori* determinations. The specificity and materiality of the other is understood not simply cognitively, through concepts, but through an aesthetic-affective response, incorporating the moral, the conceptual and the aesthetic through empathic feeling and imagination. Political judgement would require both face-to-face interaction as well as abstract, synthesizing thought. This also involves a form of self-identity, but one that extends beyond the self through relations with the other, combining an ethical, corporeal orientation with a structural understanding of knowledge.

If the physical, sensing self is seen as an intrinsic part of understanding, the epistemological focus shifts to the *relation* between subject and object, neither wholly outside the subject (in the form of linguistic structures) nor inside (the intentional self). Mimetic experience remains dependent on culturally specific interpretations, construed not as a private, inner state of feeling but as contextual and objective in the sense that it extends *beyond* the particular self (Crowther 1993: 91). As Adorno insists, the subjective is also objective, political meaning and subject identities being part of an aesthetic unity which is irreducibly historical, and achieved through the continual confrontation with tradition and ideology. In this way mimesis offers an ethical approach to representation which respects difference by combining ideational and materialist dimensions of knowledge.

Understanding Butler's project in terms of mimesis is therefore a way of resolving the tendency in her work to privilege difference and non-identity. Mimesis allows us to understand the process of social reproduction as intersubjective, corporeal and structural, an interaction between bodies as well as the social, overcoming the aporias of either the 'philosophy of the subject' or

linguistic idealism. The 'realism' involved in a mimetic knowledge requires an element of faith in the synthesizing power of knowledge that extends beyond 'mere' subjectivity. Here we might recall Adorno's insistence that all knowledge, as a social product, contains its moment of truth, if only negatively. Objectivity remains possible therefore without foregoing the self's historical perspective. Neither 'text' nor 'mute facticity' therefore ever succeed in freeing themselves from their interdependent relation with the other: the text requires a world of non-textual matter on which to work, and the extra-discursive domain of matter depends in its turn on linguistic structures to delimit and signify back its very *non-linguistic* nature. To be rid of all abstraction is, as Adorno comments, to throw the baby out with the bathwater (1991: 43): philosophy cannot coherently cease abstracting the fields of text and experience, or language and the material world, as conceptual dichotomies. For their dissolution into either text or materiality is both philosophically (logically) and politically (strategically) problematic: the first implying a self-referential circularity which risks denying the specificity and experience of embodied selves, the second a positivism which denies the cultural and subjective mediation between idea and referent. As Butler herself argues, the point is that subject and object are *not opposed*, indeed they become synonymous (1993: 28-35). The concept of mimesis therefore provides a promising basis for feminist epistemologies, one that sees cognition as embodied, knowledge as also imaginary. It accounts effectively, I suggest, for the radical fluidity and dialectical condition of knowledge that Butler attempts to convey; an unstable state which 'constantly crosses the threshold from psychosomatic drives to consciousness and from collectivity to individuality' (Zuidervaart 1991: 112), for mimesis is neither wholly immediate nor non-conceptual, individual nor collective, but the point of intersection between them.

My discussion of Benhabib and Butler has intended to argue for a dialectical theoretical framework that understands knowledge as both a rational and aesthetic achievement, and as both social and embodied. Despite its strengths as a

program for democratic civil life, Benhabib's revised discourse ethics remains plagued by a unified self and cognitive view of knowledge, with the result that it retains an abstract, rationalist understanding of the social. Butler's deconstruction, on the other hand, lacks a mimetic-affective relation with the other that can furnish a coherent ground for the unforced, diverse and ethical community she seeks. The dialectical understanding I am proposing does not intend to retain the self-identical categories of identity and difference as much as rethink them as interdependent, fluid and approximate but nonetheless delineating meaningful distinctions. The identity in question here is not absolute, therefore, but always contingent on the particularities that compose it. As part of a social totality, knowledge is both produced by and participates in an objectively historical system of meaning. At the same time, the dialectical relation between the social commonalities and the specificity of the mimetic self is recognized. In a radical sense, the subjective knowledge is also objective, that is, it extends beyond the self to constitute a 'real' social phenomenon. Inherent in this understanding of mimesis, then, is a universality inherent in the mimetic relation, an objectivity that, although immanent to a culture, reveals its 'truth'. Universality is only approachable however through the 'close reading' that mimesis obliges, in order to understand the nexus between the common *and* heterogeneous dimensions of social being.

Non-identity thinking need not entail the 'death of the subject', or rationality, but rather a limitation on the claims and theoretical terrain of authorship and rationality, reversing its movement from the universal to the local. The epistemological basis of critical theory becomes a 'radical empiricism' (Bennington 1994: 103). In this sense it displays substantial affinities with the aims of feminism: the subject, not to be confused with the human individual, is critiqued on the grounds of its delimited positions and situations, and the social interests those positions serve. But its physical, phenomenal being is leant a status that is interdependent on, but is not dissolved into, the social and the discursive.

In the following, concluding chapter, I summarize the arguments which have led up to my proposal for a dialectical and mimetic approach to knowledge. I go on to develop some of the political and ethical implications of this position.

7. Conclusion: The Dialectics of Identity and Difference

I have framed the problem of representation facing contemporary critical theory in terms of a struggle for priority between reason and aesthetics. My aim has been to move beyond the series of conceptual dichotomies which result when either one is prioritized, or when they are polarized into self-identical opposites. The more synthetic understanding pursued here results in the categories of reason and aesthetics becoming far more complex than their binary opposition suggests. Reason cannot be simply allied to a universal symbolic realm, nor aesthetics with a singular indeterminacy and affect. Reason must develop its creativity and sensitivity to the non-propositional, just as aesthetics must strengthen its cognitive, ethical dimension.

I have not advocated the elimination of any distinction between them, however, for there are strong political as well as philosophical grounds for resisting this step. Just as the aestheticization of knowledge tends to foreclose the discursive thematization of political issues from processes of argumentation based on universalizable reasons, the rationalization of knowledge risks suppressing those modes of being that fall outside the discursive, or that cannot find a voice within its logics. Neither reason nor aesthetics should be conceived as independent from each other, for this allows theory to avoid the reductive assumption of an ontology of identity or difference, and to recognize the dialectical nature of social categories. I have endeavoured to show therefore that any reading which understands these categories too narrowly is not so much wrong as one-sided. My aim has been to transcend the unsatisfactory choice between a linguistically-

constituted and a materially-determined subject;[1] or between a homogeneous, universalist conscious, symbolic sphere and an ineffable, particularity of being; or between identitarian relations of presence as opposed to relations of absence. Language is not inevitably totalizing, a 'delusion-producing monolith' (Schulte- Sasse 1984: xxxii), nor is it simply a network of agonistic phrases. Drawing on a dialectical and mimetic understanding of knowledge, language becomes far less self-identical than these interpretations imply, able to extend beyond itself to what is not currently within a given system of representation.[2]

In this concluding chapter I re-trace the path of my argument as it developed in each chapter, before moving on to a more general discussion that restates my case for a synthesis of modern and postmodern positions, informed by Adorno's critical theory. The thesis began by addressing the problematics of representation in critical theory: after the critique of metaphysics and the linguistic turn in twentieth century philosophy, on what terms can theory now be grounded? Habermas's communicative ethics exemplifies the modernist response to this question.

1. Chapter Summaries

i) 1 & 2: Communicative Ethics

In a contemporary ethos often more closely aligned with postmodern sensibilities, Habermas stands out like a rationalist beacon. His theory is indeed one of the most important examples of a postmetaphysical yet still clearly modernist critical theory. These chapters examine the way Habermas attempts to reconcile a universal reason – the immanent principles of communicative action –

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[1] A 'linguistic or material girl', to quote Diane Elam's phrase (1994: 58).
[2] The failure to construe knowledge in this more open-ended manner is witnessed in Kristeva's symbolic versus semiotic account of social communication, wherein the subject, with somatic drives, is faced with a contradictory external world with no means of identifying a mediation between the two, and no possibility to reconstruct any form of social organisation to overcome the ensuing contradiction (Bürger, P. 1984: 102).

with the particularism of cultural forms. The aim is twofold: to firstly demonstrate that Habermas's rationalist claims can be defended by persuasive arguments, and that they are far more nuanced and attentive to difference than is often supposed.[3] Secondly, and more critically, the discussion aims to show that his treatment of aesthetics is a central weakness in communicative ethics, not because it is ignored, but because it is subsumed into discursive argumentation and hence rationalized.

Chapter one provides an overview of the philosophical and normative foundations of communicative ethics, and concludes that it can only justifiably be considered a *cultural* achievement, rather than a rational, universal one. Chapter two focuses more specifically on the distinction between universalism and particularism in ethics. It does this via the justice versus care debate in feminism, and through a closer reading of the role of aesthetics in communicative action. I argue that Habermas's universalist formula has some advantages over an ethics of care, whose rather unreflexive conception of the self has difficulty extending beyond personal relations, or strengthening the autonomy of the self as a moral agent. But I also locate a key tension in communicative ethics in the ambiguity surrounding the role of aesthetics, in particular, the affective underpinning of social relations: on the one hand Habermas lends the universal priority, relegating aesthetics to a subordinate position in discourse; on the other hand he acknowledges the centrality of aesthetics's motivational and integrating effects in the moral sphere. This position can only coherently conclude in the idea that communicative reason is itself aesthetic, a notion that continues to deny the specificity of the non-propositional, mimetic-affective sphere, however.

Certainly Habermas's demand for a participatory, discursive ethics that attempts to accommodate plurality finds widespread support, setting a standard by which other theories of discourse and democracy might be compared. It is

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3 One of the strongest defences of Habermas's ethics might be that it would disallow an apartheid state, or a fascist one, because they depend for their justification not on potentially universalizable interests but on aesthetic, particularist motivations: the *special* character of white South Africans, or Aryan Germans.

directed towards illuminating the rationality implicit in the act of communication itself, in order to provide a framework within which political dissent can unfold in the most peaceable and equitable manner possible. But in light of postmodern, communitarian and feminist critiques of the rationalism of his project, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Habermas's distinction between and privileging of the universal over the particular, justice over care, the rational over the cultural, paints an overly-homogeneous image of the political. It might be questioned for instance whether a communicative ethics can create a consensus around conflicting lifeworld interests, or whether it presupposes a pre-existing harmony of interests. But in the latter case, why the need for a conflict-resolving ethics at all? (Benhabib 1986: 310-1)

I concur with sympathetic critics such as Benhabib that the universal principles of communication should be conceived not so much as transcendental but as cultural achievements. In fact, I go further than Benhabib and argue that communicative ethics should be understood as fundamentally an *aesthetic* mode of action. But if rational discourse is a cultural achievement rather than a universal structure, the aesthetic grounding of discourse can no longer be simply 'written in' to the pragmatics of communication, but emerges as far more problematic than Habermas (or Benhabib) admits.

The opacity of the aesthetic-affective indeed haunts Habermas's thesis: unacknowledged aesthetic forms of oppression are not satisfactorily addressed by the strategy of inhering a moral aesthetic – the impulse towards understanding and agreement – into the communicative process itself, while distancing less desirable aesthetic dimensions. If the strength of his work resides in his often persuasive defence of a universal justice as the structure that allows diversity to prosper, its weakness lies in the unsustainable transcendence of its formulas and its overly-rationalist dichotomies between procedure and content, justice and ethics. This leads to an unwarranted faith in the ability of participants to transcend differences without the need to attain a prior background ethical and aesthetic

consensus – even within shared lifeworlds – and an assumption of transparency ✓ *NB*
between all levels of communication and experience. The failure to understand
knowledge and communication as constituted by literal *and* figural elements, or to
develop the implications of his admission that the motivational dimensions of
ethics do not simply rest on rational argumentation, ultimately undermines
Habermas's project. Communicative ethics risks excluding the very social
members it is most designed to protect: subliminal forms of prejudice, sexism and
racism may miss rational argumentation altogether, undermining democratic and
open discussion, as numerous linguistic and sociological studies of gender have
shown.

In short, communicative ethics should incorporate the aesthetic-affective and
the rational in a more dialectical manner. That is, it should afford greater
autonomy to the aesthetic-affective, not subsuming it under the cognitive but
granting it an independence flexible enough to recognize its potential force in
shaping discourse. While one of the consequences of Habermas's critical reception
has been to highlight the importance of the *conditions* of discourse, the usefulness
of communicative ethics only extends so far as the aesthetic, motivational and
ethical realms can be reconciled with a procedural justice. I argue however that
the shortcomings of his thought in regard to aesthetics can be amended without
dismantling its central normative aims. The achievements of modernity – its
reflexivity, categorical distinctions, its project to democratize the process of
rationalization – need not be abandoned, but must be reconciled with the
challenge of aesthetic and cultural diversity in a more satisfactory way than
Habermas has done.

ii) 3 & 4: Postmodern Ethics

I turn next to postmodernism's aesthetic response to Habermas, in the form of
Lyotard's politics of the sublime. My exposition of Lyotard's recent thought in
chapter three aims again to establish the merits of his project, particularly in

contrast to communicative ethics. It also aims to expose the points of ambiguity in Lyotard's work, this time connecting them to an ontology of difference rather than identity. Like Habermas, Lyotard also has much to offer a feminist critical theory, for his insistence on the fundamental role of feelings in discourse stands as a powerful corrective to the cognitive bias of communicative ethics. But while the value of a postmodern ethics lies in the political recognition of an aesthetic-affective basis of difference, it ignores the interdependency of the rational and the aesthetic-affective, the differences *within* difference – and thereby risks abandoning the political: symbolic representation is cut off from the ethical and affective sphere, leaving no room for discursive processes of legitimation, implicitly rendering the political anarchic and intuitive.

Chapter four explores the subject of postmodern ethics in greater detail, looking at Zygmunt Bauman's as well as Lyotard's writing. Their particularist (but this time, anti-humanist) critique of universalism providing a useful comparison with the justice versus care debate discussed in chapter two. Although they have their differences, both Lyotard's and Bauman's is a morality that occurs *before* thought, not amenable to social regulation, but deriving from an unknowable moral impulse, implicitly developed through everyday, untrammelled civil interaction. This has the advantage of not assuming an overly-unitary subject, but its conception of the ethical self remains untenably individualist. The failure to theorize the social nature of the ethical self leaves moral action unknowable and ethical discourse irrelevant, if not destructive of morality. I argue that postmodernism as an *emancipatory* project only coherently leads back to a more cognitively-understood, universalist knowledge: a rationally reflexive, imaginative subject, not simply a mimetic-affective one. This is indeed implicitly acknowledged both in Bauman's call for moral leadership, and in Lyotard's final, ironic acceptance of a prescription that there should be no prescription in the political sphere.

If we accept the broadly postmodern view that knowledge is never evenly distributed within a community, that the very *specificity* of the concrete assures the agonistic and partial quality of knowledge and interaction, then the possibility of discourse structured by understanding and oriented towards agreement recedes significantly. For Lyotard truth is indeed local and heterogeneous, and the ethical stance must bear witness to this. Justice can never therefore be aligned with the general structures of the symbolic or discursive, but is grounded in feeling, communicable on this (sublime) level, but never amenable to rational redemption or validation. Lyotard indeed wants to protect life in all its diversity from the 'sickness' and terror of rules and knowledge: to return to the paganism of art and nature, away from the piety of ordered, determining, restrictive knowledge to create a politics which is both godless and just.

On this view, the traditional bases of ethics are rejected largely because of the unsustainable narratives on which they rest. The question of the ethical constitution of the self is *prior* to the possibility of rational discourse. Obliging thought to fragment, multiply, apply itself to the concrete, always recreating its 'rules' anew according to particular cases, is the best, or least dangerous, strategy against totalitarian violence. Systemic forms of violence can only be countered case by case, as they arise, and are unable to be averted by any universal law, or socially-based action: morality as socially regulated laws and structures can effect nothing but injustice and oppression of the individual's spontaneous morality, replacing the calculative, instrumental form of moral coding in 'discursive rules' with an indifferent (because lacking an external end) *unprincipled* aesthetics as the basis of moral action (Bauman 1993: 119).

But the weakness of this approach lies in its inability to conceive of representation, either subjective or intersubjective, as anything other than instrumental and exclusionary. It thus cannot avoid implying a dual ontology of the self, split between the symbolically-constituted subject and the ethical, aesthetic-affective self. As a result postmodern justice has difficulty looking

beyond the singular to act on notions of the *social*. As one critic comments, Lyotard 'unnecessarily conflates the concept of totality with that of totalitarianism'; whereas in fact totalities need not be oppressive or homogenizing, but 'enabling and liberating' (Waugh 1992: 1988). His 'politics of the sublime' may be compelling for feminism in so far as it seeks to defend what has traditionally been excluded from hegemonic discourses, yet it is not a wholly satisfactory answer to feminism's dilemmas of representation.

In a social context of shared language, practices and institutions, in an historical moment where the principles of equality and universal rights – at least for women in advanced industrial societies – appear to have achieved real advances in freedoms, the repudiation of the homogeneous *as such* in the realm of justice is to say the least a provocative step. If some notion of identity can be incorporated into postmodernism's critique of representation, we may be able to profit from the more valuable of postmodernism's insights. For postmodernism's 'anti-representationalist', aestheticist stance does have its advantages: destabilizing conventional cognitive views of moral agency and obliging us to consider the aesthetic-affective as the field of moral action and motivation.

iii) 5: Adorno

So far I have argued that Habermas's rationalization and Lyotard's aestheticization of the political – that is, its relegation to the affective realm of feeling – are too polarized as responses to the problems of representation. Chapter five examines Adorno's provocative critical theory as an alternative to these two, presenting a knowledge that eschews a framework of identity or difference. Adorno's intent is to move beyond Habermas's containment of self and communication within language systems and Lyotard's separation of the aesthetic-affective self from symbolic communication. Although his thought is fraught with conceptual tensions, my interest in Adorno resides in the fact that he accepts neither Habermas's transcendental theories of communication nor

Lyotard's refusal of the normative self, offering instead a synthesis of postmodernism's radical empiricism with a Marxist emphasis on structures and objectivity. The ethos of his work is however more closely aligned with Lyotard than Habermas, for he is acutely aware of the potentially exclusionary, violent effects of conceptual representation. But he conveys this concern in a dialectical view of knowledge: reason must recognize its non-identity with its object, but at the same time it is able to connect with the other through mimetic-affective relations, and the social whole through the structural relations between the universal and particular.

In light of my critiques of Habermas and Lyotard, Adorno's insistence on the interdependence between social totalities and systems and the particularity of the aesthetic-affective sphere is of special interest. The impossibility of bridging the subject-object divide is not taken as grounds to abandon the basic categories and projects of philosophy. Reason's task is made all the more difficult by the non-identity of concepts and their other, but does not disappear: thought must think its way through the intricate relationship between symbols, corporeality, the material and social world without reifying or hypostatizing those concepts. Hence the need for a *negative* dialectic, to destabilize any rational affirmation, to keep the task of thinking always ahead of it.

This ceaseless task of knowledge is exemplified in the idea of mimesis. Non-identical, mimetic thought must adopt an *ethical* approach to its object in response to the paradoxical attempt to understand what will always remain other, and in some sense unknowable. Such an ethical orientation is important because what is at stake here is the suffering of the body, so easily silenced by portraying it as a product of hegemonic discourse, as we might find in Nietzsche (or, more arguably, Foucault) or consigned to an arduous process of rational argumentation. For Adorno however suffering is objective, the sign of social contradiction and domination, an ineffable and particular side-effect of an oppressive totality. It is precisely this concern for protecting the specificity of the other without

renouncing ideology critique that makes Adorno's work pertinent to contemporary feminism.

I have also set out to show that looking at Adorno again *now* is not simply an historical exercise, but a way of re-illuminating some of the perennial questions of critical theory, to work carefully over questions of subjectivity, truth and totality rather than discarding them at the bidding of an often hasty rejection of universality and normativity.

iv) 6: Postmetaphysical Feminisms

Chapter six takes up these issues in regard to contemporary feminism, arguing that some of the difficulties in the postmetaphysical feminist project might better be addressed through a critical, dialectical-mimetic approach. Although the feminists dealt with here – Benhabib and Butler – both share a desire to represent women without falling into essentialism, their respective projects are nonetheless quite dissimilar. Despite her efforts to invest discourse ethics with a concrete, affective turn, I argue that Benhabib's discourse ethics fails to move far beyond the rationalism and transparent subjectivity of Habermas's schema. Moreover, her shift away from a more abstract, structural account of communicative action and towards a more concrete, personalized ethics may even lose the critical and historical perspective Habermas's theory affords.

Judith Butler's critique, which is afforded most attention in this chapter, might be seen as a direct response to Benhabib's overly-unified moral subject. Butler's project arguably goes further in its aestheticization of knowledge than either Lyotard or Bauman, who retain at least an implicit notion of a non-discursive, phenomenal self. Criticizing both Foucault and Nietzsche for their assumption of a natural self, Butler maintains that there is no ineffable realm of being separate from the symbolic; instead, knowledge, identity and meaning is constructed 'all the way down'. While from one (rather positivist) perspective this logic cannot be disputed, I show that hers is again a one-sided version of the social, raising a

number of problems for social theory: it rules out any non-contingent ground for ethics, problematizes the idea of truth claims about women's experiences, and implicitly denies any recourse to affirmative, normative action. All knowledge is dissolved into a generalized aesthetics, into discursive structures that are radically constitutive, permitting no real distinction between the mimetic or the cognitive, science or morality, matter or language, spaces in which the truth claims of ethics, or ideology critique, might gain a foothold.

For postmodernists, justice is local and specific; its universal application inevitably repressive. While certainly concepts of universality must be treated with the utmost caution, if they are construed as *necessarily* at odds with justice then the possibility of political action as well as reflexive thinking is ultimately undermined. Critical theory cannot avoid the 'tyranny of the real', to use Lyotard's words, simply by turning to the local. Postmodernism's radical empiricism, its focus on the 'event', *also* involves elements of abstraction that extend it beyond the particular.

I also argue that ethics requires some notion of the 'real' to ground its actions, a grounding that Butler implies but cannot articulate because of her totalizing depiction of discourse as repressive. Mimesis provides an ethical, non-dominatory point of connection with the other as a unique entity, a radical empiricism that does not pretend to 'know' its object once and for all. Insofar as it incorporates the creative, subjective dimension of imagination in representation, moreover, mimesis is saved from positivism, for this step installs an irreconcilable distance between thought and the world. It is suggestive of a dialectical view of knowledge that always contains an element of dissonance; the symbolic is also part of experience, just as embodied experience is never isolated from the social, but they are never the *same*. Through this link with the larger social context of the symbolic, then, mimesis provides the micrological basis on which an ethical notion of totality might be built.

2. Adorno, Feminism and Representation

Although he devotes little attention to the issues of communication, discourse or ethics as such, Adorno's negative dialectics in many ways represents a more promising schema for feminist-critical theory than the work of his later Frankfurt School and postmodern counterparts. That he sits between these two positions is particularly evident in his willingness to use reason to abstract out both a *subject* and a *totality* from the semantic network at the same time that his suspicion of conceptual representation distances him from Habermas. This abstraction is supplemented by the embodied self, which, suppressed by postmodernism's anti-humanism and Habermas's universal pragmatics, here assumes renewed vigour. Adorno's thought obliges us to confront the *phenomenology* of communication and ethics; namely, the relation between culture, discourse and the body, both in its cognitive and its sensual, aesthetic dimension. The body, its experience and its suffering is not merely a discursive product, although it is still that; nor one whose experience and knowledge is individual and incommunicable. Rather its particularity is only conceivable through the social, just as its suffering is only overcome by the solidarity of collective action.

In the paradoxical aspects of this approach, its abstraction *and* its empiricism, negative dialectics holds certain affinities with feminism. Adorno's work resonates with theorists like Elizabeth Grosz and Vicki Kirby, who believe that theory has far too quickly dismissed the old epistemological and ontological grounds of philosophy, and must move back into the perilous terrain of universality, essentialism, and subjectivity. Adorno's strictures on the limitations of philosophy and our ability to think the non-identical make precisely this point: speculative thought is our salvation and hope, in fact, for without it we are left to the quietism and conservatism of 'facticity': the bleak realm of empirical events without synthesis or abstraction.

His retrieval of the subject in the face of a critique of metaphysics moreover parallels feminism's efforts to reconcile an ethics of justice with an ethics of care, to find a political, universal role for corporeal knowledge, rather than surrender the idea of justice to a realm of feeling. For the danger here is in losing the self in the sea of Kristeva's 'semiotic chora', or Irigaray's maternal body, those inchoate, pre-discursive realms of bodily desire and impulses, instead of using them to inflect knowledge with its corporeal grounds. This would be to surrender the symbolic realm to the masculine, once again restricting the feminine to nature, culture's other, and de-politicizing her. Neither does Adorno imply a return to the philosophy of the subject, as knowledge is not located solely in the self but in the constellation of relations running *between* the self, other and the social whole. Mimesis as a subjective as well as social principle indicates a willingness to take the risk, through imitation, of complicity with dominatory relations, a 'relapse into injury', as Butler puts it (Butler 1993: 123), but also the opportunity to re-work the site of ideological 'interpellation', the bodily immersion in social roles and expectations.

Adorno obliges us therefore to move slowly through some of the central questions of feminism's conjunction with critical theory and philosophy; in particular, how women's experience can be integrated into a social critique as well as discursively (ethically) represented without reification. Adorno achieves this in part through his *negative* method; one, that is, that acts as a guiding *critical* rather than *affirmative* principle, one that leaves space for opposing premises, contradictory ways of knowing, refusing unitary ways of seeing or static principles which risk imposing those very limitations and exclusions a theory of emancipation is trying to overcome. Ideas of truth and essence are not abandoned, or fragmented into localized narrative, but retained as potentially universal and historically-embedded categories. The social totality exists, but is not immediately accessible, only knowable through its local effects, through micrological analyses.

I have not tried to hide the fact that aspects of Adorno's blend of idealism and materialism raises substantial interpretative dilemmas, however. While an epistemology of the body may be useful in providing a counterweight to the exclusionary effects of transcendental reason, it is always in danger of falling prey to essentialism and subjectivism: employing the body as a source of transcendental or 'authentic' knowledge. I have argued that while Adorno fails to resolve these issues, his dialectical methodology saves him from succumbing to them. Adorno's critique of reason and language aims at a naive metaphysics of presence as well as an idealist metaphysics of a non-present 'being', avoiding the idea that language is either a prison house or a direct medium of communication. Knowledge is not bound to narratives but to subject-object relations conceived in mimetic terms, allowing thought to escape both positivism and a linguistic *dérèlection*. The subject is never renounced, nor its access to and relation with the world, thus avoiding postmodernism's self-referential linguistic world as well as Habermas's intersubjective one, that merely rewrites the dilemmas of subjectivity in the plural.

The self which emerges out of this amalgamation of modernist and postmodernist positions is neither formed through transparent and cognitive processes of communication, nor the inadvertent effects of linguistic repetition, but is one whose cognitive, aesthetic and ethical dimensions are constituted – as autonomous or otherwise – through a complex of social processes. It is in this respect that we can appreciate the importance of Adorno's dialectic between the social and the individual, the subjective and objective: these notions become coextensive, yet their distinctive moments are not lost.

It also means that the idea of universality is not abandoned. The abstract universal is at once an indispensable analytical tool and object of suspicion; the import here lying in the possibility that identity is not *inherently* oppressive. Abstraction is not, *pace* postmodernists, inherently oppression or illusory, but

necessary for knowledge to occur at all.[4] We could say that for feminism it is a universal truth that women have been excluded from the realm of the power, the sphere of the 'autonomous subject', but that this universal can never be presumed 'adequate' to its object: it must carry the idea of non-identity with it, recognizing that its truth is at the same time belied by countless instances of women who have subverted assigned roles, both manipulating 'male' power and transforming it. An array of different critical resources – a 'constellation' of concepts – would be needed to do justice to the complexity of women's historical experience. The indeterminacy of theory leaves it able to contribute only on a meta-ethical level; negative dialectics can only suggest an ethic of sensitivity to suffering and respect for non-identity. For Adorno it is a matter of letting the other, the suffering subject, speak: his radical materialism therefore has the advantage of respecting the plurality within identities, of constructing shared experience from the singular up rather than from the collective down.

It is, then, the insistence that the universal can only *follow* the empirical that holds particular significance for feminism. The idea that there can be no identity or commonality without remainder is unobjectionable, and does not of itself render politics impossible; it is indeed an ethically necessary precaution.[5] What is important is to construe an identity and commonality which despite its partiality is no less meaningful, on whose micrological, empirical basis totalities or universalities can be built which are context specific. Such universality does not

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4 As Alison Weir argues, abstraction isn't opposed to but constitutive of participation in a discursive community (1995: 268).

5 Gayatri Spivak acknowledges a similar point in this warning against the totalizing dangers in denying (to use Adorno's phrase) the subjective principle:

> To deny that there will always be a residual conflict between[...]the *idea* of concrete individuality, or subjective reality – and that of a social and socially imposed morality of reproduction seems not only naive but dismissive of an important value. For any society, there will remain a *level of individual desire that can never be totally reconciled with social need* without destroying the individual personalities whose "self realization" is the ultimate object of social life (1992: 64-5).

deny or repress the elements of non-identity between us, rather it coherently expresses the commonality upon which difference depends.

On this view theory needs to recognize that the question of knowledge may not be amenable to any one solution, but may instead be symptomatic of a plurality of language-referent relations. In the case of an analysis of gender differentiation in speech, for instance, the question of referentiality, or the subject-object relation, may often be a secondary one; secondary to the non-cognitive, implicit social value imputed to women's speech and identity which devalues the feminine and casts her in subordinate roles. Focus on interpretation over reality may well be the most useful strategic point in many cases, particularly in regard to issues of gender and sexuality, which often mark the point of political contention over the given and contingent. Yet in an analysis of industrial conditions, or the provision of welfare or childcare, a far more empirically-based, descriptive approach may be more appropriate. An aestheticized or a rationalized knowledge will always fall short of the complexity of lived experience. Aesthetic consideration of artistic objects for example may be valued not because it leads to resolution, or definitional or semantic closure, but because it adds to and enriches possible interpretations. This however is not always sufficient in politics, where a resolution and agreement is often necessary: who is to receive welfare money, or taxation concessions, which require a pragmatic 'end' to discussion in the form of policy decisions. Life experiences that disempower, that fall outside the aesthetic stylization of social life: unemployment, domestic violence, economic and political inequality, for instance, require a different approach to political and ethical judgement, one whose criteria cannot be solely aesthetic, understood in its non-universal, non-propositional sense as a question of personal taste.

In short, the question of referentiality and the textuality of the body in other words may not admit any *one* overarching theoretical paradigm or method, but vary according to the particularity of the case. To transfer the grounds of knowledge to intersubjectivity, or alternatively to abandon any attempt to ground

knowledge at all, risks losing the specifically gendered aspects of women's experience under more abstract, because more general, sources of knowledge. Adorno instead demands the subject's independent ear and eye, a resistance to hegemonic discourse that comes both from the body *and* cognition; rational thinking that is open to the imaginative, mimetic relations with its object. The indeterminate nature of knowledge should not be allowed to push us into a refusal to know, analyze or think, but rather taken as the 'form...of material determination' (Montag 1988: 99).

I argue therefore that Adorno opens the way for a material and historical understanding of representation which permits some notion of the 'real' to guide our ethico-political decisions: a 'real' that does not claim ahistorical validity but that is based in lived experience. Such a stance does not align itself easily with any foundationalist versus anti-foundationalist position, as it still retains a transcendental dimension of projecting how the world 'is' at the same time that such affirmation is denied in principle. In Adorno, the ethical paradoxically requires a realist social critique *and* a refusal of representation as identical with its object. This preserves a respect for the specificity of the other implied in the concept of the conceivable but unpresentable, but does not break the link between ontology and ethics: heterogeneity and unpresentability might also be conceived as ontological elements – a kind of negatively realist description of how the world 'is' – in whose light the kind of ethics which could be desirable might become clearer.

Donna Haraway echoes the critical sensibility of negative dialectics when she proposes her 'ironic dream for a common language for women...', the call for an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism and materialism:

> Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes...about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humor and serious play (1990: 190).

Politically, I take such a self-confessedly contradictory project to mean that judgement is never closed off, despite the practical need for closure; that its authority does not derive from any external point, but from particular experiences and knowledges; and that the tension between conflicting views must not be silenced. Knowledge is not aestheticized – in the postmodern sense that it becomes a matter of contingent preference – as much as aesthetics becomes a distinctive moment of the social. Aesthetic experience is therefore not construed 'psychologistically as a private state of feeling' (Crowther 1993: 91), not merely an inner state, but as contextual and objective in that it extends beyond the particular self. As Adorno insists, the subjective is also objective, political meaning and subject identities being part of an aesthetic unity which is irreducibly historical, and achieved through the continual confrontation with tradition and ideology. This allows us to project a 'shareable response' which represents a 'possibility of fulfilment, reintegrating us with the lifeworld' (Crowther 1993: 210). The aesthetic then becomes the expression of our need for transformation, a need not to be associated with our everyday physical and instinctual needs but that particularly creative, intersubjective activity of social reproduction.

Although, *pace* Butler and Lyotard, it is true that we cannot speak of any realm of being that is not already discursively interpreted, this does not prevent us from speaking of the 'truth' of the self, the body, or of justice and community on the grounds of their 'fictional' character, or because we then risk crossing the boundaries between genres. For morality is not only confined to aesthetic-affective forms, of which we cannot speak, but to cognitive processes of reflexive imaginative and rational – in the sense of universal – thinking. Here, recognition of the other's sameness as well as difference is the condition for the process of individualization and reflection. One of the challenges confronting critical theory therefore is to come to terms with the abstract intersubjectivity, opacity and multiplicity of embodied experience. The rational discursive community should not then be abandoned as much as treated with far greater caution than Habermas

allows. It must remain aware that it may at times only be possible to counter the misuse of rhetoric, the political dangers of the most persuasive, charismatic, manipulative figure, not through reasons but through aesthetic-affective means. And, of course, it must be aware of the levels of social communication and experience that may be silenced by rational discourse.

The ethical ambiguity typical of modernity need not lead to a distancing from political engagement and discourse. An emancipatory theory must also look to a politics that develops a moral *culture*, a 'rational' aesthetic that brings desires and tastes into closer alignment with the ethical, while allowing space for experience that exceeds language and communication. A *rational* aesthetics is not necessarily an oxymoron, then, but can indicate the sympathetic sensitivity to difference that a reflexive aesthetics can effect, an awareness that any mode or style of thinking also involves an 'blind-spot' (Welsch 1996: 18), an exclusion of other ways of being or knowing. It also becomes clear that no one kind of aesthetic sensibility is sufficient for a society attuned to injustice in this way; that a potentially indifferent tolerance requires the more positive *feeling* of sympathy with the oppressed and aversion to suffering in strangers. If Lyotard is right, and feeling does come before cognition in ethics, feeling which is neither intersubjective nor socially controllable, then law is required precisely to protect the oppressed from a *lack* of feeling in others.[6] Without the 'leap of faith' required for abstraction, knowledge would be trapped in an undifferentiated aesthetics, condemned to silence about that which is most important. The ability to judge a case *as* a case of a differend requires reflective judgement without a rule to guide it, a rational or cognitive process of (aesthetic) creativity, relying not, in other words, simply on feeling but on mind as well. This stance does not mean rejecting postmodern insights on the irreducibility of judgement to language, nor its critique of presence. Rather it means trying to wed

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[6] See Welsch, 1996: 18-19, on the difference between tolerance and sensitivity.

a substantive rationality to a critique of identity: aesthetics may be the affective source of diversity, but it cannot provide the sole organizing principle of politics.[7]

My trajectory towards a mimetic, dialectical reason does not ignore the materiality of language as a constitutive practice, therefore, or the materiality of social, legal or economic practices. Rather, it aims to understand the empirical, suffering body as the nodal point through which language, nature and history intersect, recuperating the identity within difference as an essential component of a critical justice. Postmetaphysical feminism need not then be characterized by totalizing theories of knowledge or guided by a quest for certainty, but can represent a normatively open (i.e. explicitly political) tool with which language and practices can be critically examined. As Lyotard comments, the task for philosophy is always ahead of it; its premises and assumptions are never decided.[8] But unlike Lyotard's postmodern judgement, justice cannot forego recourse to questions of truth.[9] Feminism can then find a way to affirm women's experiences as collective and objective without abandoning the political to the indeterminacy of individual aesthetic responses.

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[7] I agree with Heller's argument that the postmodern political condition does not mean the rejection of traditional criteria of judgement, but its use in a particularly self-reflexive way; the struggle cannot practically be against law and representation as such, but against certain kinds and uses to which they are put. Hence the need for a practical reason, Levinas's 'practical faith' (Cornell 1992: 107).

[8] For Michelle LeDoeuf, feminism and philosophy – as explicitly political interventions – are inseparable: '[t]o be a philosopher and a feminist are one and the same thing' (1991).

[9] Of course, if all language is seen to be catechrestic, 'wrongly' used, à la Derrida, then this objection fails; the appeal to foundations is simply another example of a persuasive strategy.

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