Like some of his most illustrious predecessors in the German philosophical tradition, the work of Jürgen Habermas is a vast, many-dimensional edifice, extending into virtually every corner of the social sciences and theoretical humanities, including ethics, social and political theory, epistemology, philosophy of religion, aesthetics, and sociology. While one might think that such multifaceted theoretical engagement would lead to fragmentation, such that no sustained commitment shows through, the fact is that Habermas throughout his intellectual endeavor has projected a clear and unambiguous vision, capable of inspiring and informing both academic and practical-political orientations. Ultimately, this vision can be summed up as that of defending and articulating the normative structures of modernity, in particular as they are manifest in communally oriented, rational, reflective speech. A liberal-left thinker of deep enlightenment persuasion, Habermas views reason embodied in the capacity for rational utterance as being the very condition of social critique, and also, in its various, differentiated “expert cultures,” as the purpose and culmination of progressive, rationalized modernity.

The interest in exploring the nature of rational speech led Habermas early on to the philosophy of language, and in one school in particular, that of ordinary language philosophy, he found what became the key to formulating the rational core of his theory. If Habermas’s basic commitment can be characterized as that of rational speech in a modern setting, his fundamental tool for theorizing this commitment has been ordinary language philosophy. Ordinary language philosophy is thus situated at the heart of Habermas’s theoretical edifice, offering the instruments that have made his position so distinctive and powerful. Without this philosophy, it is not clear how he could have developed and articulated his view.

The aim of this article is threefold. I first look at how the appeal to ordinary language philosophy helped Habermas in his effort to overcome the subject/object model and its affiliated “philosophy of consciousness.” I then provide an overview of Habermas’s distinct development of ordinary language philosophy, highlighting not only the similarities but also the deep differences between his conception and that of its founder, John Austin. In the final section, I identify objections that, if taken seriously, suggest the need for a different and less validity-oriented approach to the philosophy of language. In particular, I claim that ordinary language philosophy has a certain insight into the dependence of language on individual use and responsivity that Habermas unfortunately ignores.
Ordinary Language Philosophy and the Linguistic Turn

Throughout his career, Habermas has expressed strong reservations about Cartesianism and its influential distinction between the res cogitans and the res extensa. On the Cartesian setup, thinking subjects – viewed in isolation from any intersubjective medium – stand before a world of objects that they can either seek to correctly represent or manipulate, and other agents emerge fundamentally as entities to be represented or manipulated. While consciousness provides unmediated access to one’s own representations, knowledge of the external world, as well as other minds, is inferentially structured, and only the inner can be non-inferentially known. Cartesian thinking is thus prone to skepticism, its continuous shadow.

According to Habermas, however, we need to recognize a different and competing tradition, going to back to thinkers such as Herder, Hamann, Hegel, Humboldt and, closer to our time, Peirce, Dewey, Mead, and Wittgenstein. Here, the subject/object relationship is not central in the way it has been in the Cartesian tradition. The realist idea of knowledge as some sort of mirroring or representation of a fundamentally mind-independent world is rejected. The subject or consciousness is viewed not as some potentially solipsistic, inner sanctuary but, rather, as essentially mediated by various types of intersubjective spaces and media, including language and culture in its widest sense. Sometimes, as in Mead and Wittgenstein, the understanding of language is central; and using language, and being a competent speaker, are said to involve the acceptance and mastery of normative structures. At other times, as in Hegel, for example, what counts as intersubjective is much wider. On Hegel’s view (although Habermas understands his later work to be retreating into a subject/object thinking), it is the concept of spirit (Geist) that ultimately delineates the domain of the intersubjective. Spirit includes all forms of socially constituted and sanctioned life: morality and ethics, the sphere of right, as well as knowledge, art, and even philosophical reflection itself.

In the 1960s, Habermas introduced the term “interaction” in order to categorize and explore this intersubjective space. Critiquing Marx for one-sidedly restricting his account of human action and rationality to “labor,” presumably a subject/object relation, Habermas proposed a dualistic view of rationality that included both labor and interaction. “Interaktion,” according to the early Habermas, designates the whole sphere of normatively guided action in which agents relate to others as alter egos in a shared, communicatively structured space of symbolic exchange. The intuition behind introducing the labor/interaction dualism reached beyond the sphere of action and rationality to include a neo-Weberian vision of society. For its reproduction, Habermas (1972) argued, any society needs (a) to maintain its metabolism with outer nature via labor and (b) to critique and reflect on its symbolic orders via communicative action.

In the early 1970s, it became evident to Habermas that the dualism of labor and interaction, which had informed his early research, needed to be reformulated. In particular, he became skeptical of the anthropological premise of the distinction, the idea that it somehow tracks an anthropological essence. The new work of the 1970s was more resolutely sociological, incorporating insights not only from Weber but from the neo-functionalist social theories of Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann. However, it was also in search for a more precise and philosophically articulate understanding of the nature of communicative rationality. This is the point at which Habermas discovered ordinary language philosophy.

Before turning to the work of John Austin, however, it should be noted that Habermas increasingly viewed his predecessors in the Frankfurt School as having been overly in thrall to a subject/object paradigm. In his early, programmatic essays, Max Horkheimer,
for example, while following thinkers such as Hegel, Durkheim, and Marx in according a
primacy to the social realm, did not refrain from viewing the subject/object relation as key
to the outlining of critical theory and its aims. Horkheimer was hardly a representational-
ist. However, he was deeply concerned with the historicity of both subject and object,
pinpointing those categories as central to his critical, social epistemology. Later on, as
Horkheimer collaborated with Theodor W. Adorno on the Dialectic of Enlightenment, it be-
came abundantly clear that traditional categories of subject and object remained central to
the articulation of critical theory, and Habermas's claim, which in subsequent publications
such as The Theory of Communicative Action and The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity
was spelled out in painstaking detail, namely that a rethinking of those categories seems
called for, appeared warranted.

The early 1970s discovery of John Austin and ordinary language philosophy was, in other
words, well prepared for by the ground Habermas had already covered. He had been search-
ing for a philosophy of intersubjectivity and, in particular, of communication. Not only did
he seek to overcome the subject/object split, he also wanted to develop a theory of reflective,
human speech, while taking into account that rational speech necessarily comprises both a
communicative and a reflective stance.

Austin, of course, did not in any way belong to the German tradition of the Kantian and
dialectical Hegelian/ Marxist theory in which Habermas was steeped. For under-
standing the shift from first-to second-generation Critical Theory, it is vital that one
recognizes how major Habermas's step actually was when he started orienting himself in
Anglo-American philosophy of language. Austin was an Oxford philosopher, having his
intellectual home in a predominantly analytic environment. However, in much of his
work he opposed the empiricism – and especially logical positivism – that surrounded
him. Of particular interest to Habermas was no doubt Austin's groundbreaking 1955
William James Lectures, delivered at Harvard University and later published as How to
Do Things with Words.

While brief, this path-breaking study contains a wealth of ideas, most of which have ex-
erted a profound influence on contemporary philosophy. Perhaps its most far-reaching claim
is that language must be understood and theorized in its multifarious use, rather than simply
as a vehicle of representation. Language should be approached as an activity – the activity
of doing things with words.

In the semiotic tradition from Frege to Russell and later Davidson, language had been
viewed in terms of either sentences or propositions (and occasionally assertions). In Frege,
for example, the guiding idea of the proposition is that, if meaningful, it has a truth-value. It
is, according to the principle of bipolarity, either true or false. Meaning, Frege and later the-
orists in the semiotic tradition argue, is a function of truth-value: we know the meaning of
a proposition when we know what it is for it to be true. To know the meaning of “Snow is
white” is to know what it is for snow to be white. Propositions, moreover, are timeless objects,
endowed with a logical structure. How they are used, and for what purpose, is immaterial to
their meaning.

Austin was not really interested in providing a theory of meaning. However, he did draw
attention to the fact that sentences expressing such propositions – indicative sentences,
that is, with truth-value, which purportedly are used to refer to a particular state of affairs
– comprise only a small part of the range of sentences and utterances being employed by
human agents in everyday life.

In the 1958 Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein had been pointing to the multiple
uses of language, which he claimed would resist any attempt at unifying a theory of language
under one master category such as that of truth. In addition to purporting to state or express
truths, and thereby establish a relation to the world, language is being used in all sorts of
ways – to promise, to baptize, to express aversion or approval, to impress, to scare, to excuse, and so on, ad infinitum:

There are countless kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call “symbols,” “words,” “sentences.” And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once and for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten.

(Wittgenstein 1958: 11)

No philosophical system seems able to unify this multiplicity.

In order nevertheless to categorize the notion of language as use, Austin (1975: 6) introduced his important term performative. Unlike constatives, which are used to describe, predicate, or characterize, and hence to express truth, performatives do something else than merely express that thus-and-so is the case. Performatives are modes of action, ways of doing things with words that carry a certain force. If someone says “I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth,” and the circumstances are appropriate in ways that Austin argues are constitutive of the success of the speech act, then the act of baptizing the ship has been performed. As such, the utterance “I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth” is neither true nor false. However, like all performatives it can, as Austin puts it, be felicitous or infelicitous according to whether the rules outlining the proprieties associated with its correct use have been adequately observed. For example, if someone tries to baptize a ship without having the requisite authority, or if they jumble the words, then the ship will not have been baptized. The baptizing, it turns out, involves a kind of promise: the speaker promises to have undertaken the commitments necessary for the ship to be baptized. In a way that no other previous account had noted, speakers are claimed to be responsible for their words and for making themselves intelligible.

Austin distinguishes between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. As opposed to the act of saying something, which Austin calls a locutionary act, an illocutionary act is the act performed in saying something. A perlocutionary act is the act performed by something. In the baptizing scenario, the baptizer utters certain words with a propositional intent (the locutionary act), thereby, if the relevant conditions are satisfied, performing the act of baptizing (the illocutionary act), while also achieving the end of actually getting the ship baptized (the perlocutionary act). Typically (but not always), an illocutionary act contains a first-person expression addressed to a second-person (I promise, assure, request, know, etc.) followed by a propositional clause containing a referential term and a predicate.

By means of these simple yet powerful distinctions and definitions, Austin manages to draw attention to the institutional and normative dimension of language – how language draws speakers together, attributes certain responsibilities to them, and achieves its purposes within the framework of concrete life-forms and practices. To make oneself intelligible, on Austin’s view, is eminently a social achievement. It is not just an achievement based on paying attention – perhaps as a speaker isolated from any community – to the referential function of language. While language may in special instances be used solely for the purpose of tracking the world, it generally allows one to act in certain ways, relying while doing so on one’s tacit and socially conditioned understanding of the proprieties characterizing the particular speech act in question.

In Habermas’s view, this (as well as Wittgenstein’s related emphasis on rule-following and language games) amounted to a great step forward. By utilizing insights adopted from Austin’s philosophy of the performative utterance, he believed to have a strategy for overcoming the logocentrism and representationalism involved in the traditional subject/object model.
A philosophy of intersubjectivity and communication started to emerge. However, as will soon become evident, Habermas's overall theoretical commitments and goals were quite different from those of Austin.

Habermas's Account of Ordinary Language

Perhaps the most important peculiarity regarding Habermas's appropriation of ordinary language philosophy is his goal of amalgamating the fundamental insights of Austin (and also, to some extent, John Searle, another influential contributor to the discourse of speech acts) regarding the social and practical dimension of language with what is essentially a neo-Kantian vision of context-transcending validity. In the tradition from Kant to Hermann Lotze, Heinrich Rickert, Emil Lask, and later twentieth-century neo-Kantians, a central concern of philosophical reflection has been to reconstruct the conditions under which speakers are able to make objective (or universal) validity claims. Austin, to be sure, takes virtually no interest in the idea of context-transcending validity. His lesson, rather, is that all speech acts, including the making of assertoric claims, are social achievements, requiring for their success a set of social conditions that invariably remain local and indexed to particular social practices. A performative may be felicitious in one context while impossible to bring about in another. While Habermas agrees that speech acts are social achievements, he is adamant that they nevertheless purport to transcend their local contexts of emergence and claim universal validity. Indeed, in every speech act, he argues, an implicit claim to universal validity is present, a claim to which hearers in order to understand will have to rationally (that is, by attending to the reasons provided in favor of the utterance) relate.

The second major revision of Austin's account undertaken by Habermas consists in turning the orientation toward ordinary language into a full-fledged theory of meaning. Although he tended to believe that meaning resides exclusively in propositional content, Austin never purported to establish such an account. Moreover, it is not likely that Austin, who always remained skeptical of the philosophical demand for generality, ever believed that it could be provided. According to Austin, rather than establishing sweeping generalities meant to cover all language use, the philosopher of language should respond to particular quandaries, arising in particular situations presenting obscurity and misunderstanding. As for the later Wittgenstein, philosophy should be understood less as a constructive than as a therapeutic exercise. Habermas, however, argues that meaning precisely is constituted at the illocutionary level of the speech act. This, he argues, is the level at which speakers relate to each other with a shared interest in achieving mutual understanding.

Unlike Austin, Habermas does not think that the distinction between the locutionary and the illocutionary is best thought of as characterizing different acts. As Austin himself came to realize, though not in the stage-setting opening sections of How to Do Things with Words, even the making of assertoric claims takes place in illocutionary acts (which are socially regulated acts of "doing things with words"); hence, the idea of the locutionary act as being separate from the illocutionary act does not make sense. According to Habermas, the locutionary is better thought of as the propositional component of the illocutionary act – the proposition being utilized in the illocutionary act. The perlocutionary, however, rather than, as Austin thinks, being the act achieved by performing the illocutionary act, is by Habermas defined as the effect an illocutionary act has on other(s) within a teleological action context. For perlocutionary effects to occur, the speaker must, as it were, instrumentalize the illocutionary act and use it with the intention of strategically influencing other agents.

At this point, certain noteworthy difficulties arise. Of great importance for Habermas is the idea that while illocutionary acts are fundamentally communicative, the attainment of perlocutionary ends is fundamentally strategic. While to the communicative orientation
there corresponds the category of communicative action, to the strategic orientation there corresponds the category of strategic action. Both types of action take place in what Habermas calls social action situations. They must both be distinguished from instrumental action, which neither occurs in social action situations nor is mediated by language. However, it is not immediately clear what it means to say that illocutionary acts can be instrumentalized for the sake of achieving perlocutionary ends. Habermas seems not to be able to claim that illocutionary acts can function as mere means for the sake of obtaining an external end. He holds, after all, that illocutionary acts are oriented toward achieving mutual understanding.

The problem with strategic action, one might argue, is that it hovers somewhere between purely instrumental action and communicative action. In that it treats other agents’ response to one’s own utterance as a means to furthering one’s own end, it is affiliated with instrumental action. However, in that it depends on the successful performance of a communicative act, it gets close to being a communicative action. Habermas’s way out of this quandary is to claim that the strategically acting agent is covering up his intentions. He deliberately does not disclose to the hearer that the illocutionary act is used strategically. It is thus the speaker’s attitude that decides whether an act is communicative or strategic. One may wonder whether this is satisfactory. Perhaps all apparent communicative action actually is strategic. Perhaps there is no use of language that is not aimed at influencing behavior. If so, the very distinction collapses.

In the early formulations of the theory, Habermas also ran into difficulty by claiming that communicative action, unlike strategic action, is non-teleological: it is conducted for no external purpose. However, Habermas has later admitted that all action is teleological; thus, even communicative action is performed for the sake of an end, in this case mutual understanding (Verständigung). Here, the end is obtained cooperatively as dialogically oriented agents seek mutual understanding or agreement concerning the claims at stake.

It is important to step back for a moment from the development of Habermas’s argument to see exactly what’s at stake regarding the distinction between strategic and communicative action. In the case of strategic action, agents objectify each other; while the context of action is social, the accompanying attitude is success oriented (or instrumental). In the case of communicative action, agents treat each other as accountable and ultimately free to rationally engage with the claims and arguments at stake. Thus, Habermas employs the philosophy of language in order to reformulate an essential Kantian commitment to the potential autonomy of all rational agents. As participants in rational discourse, agents recognize each other as both free and equal – free to respond rationally to a claim, and free in so doing, while also equal (formally) in the capacity to do so. Moreover, insofar as agents relate to each other on these terms, they view each other as ends in themselves, dignified members, as it were, of a quasi-Kantian kingdom of ends, united by a shared, unavoidable commitment to the value of reason itself. This, if anything, is the rational core of humanity itself – a core that Habermas, following Kant, believes will be cultivated under conditions of enlightened modernity. Habermas’s view thus contrasts starkly with that of many of the earlier Frankfurt School thinkers. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, in particular, considered enlightened modernity as a barely disguised framework for exercising instrumental reason. Enlightenment, they famously argued in their coauthored 1944 Dialectic of Enlightenment, reverts back into myth, an order marked by domination and ideology.

Yet to what exactly does the rational dimension of everyday discourse amount? What does it mean to say that communicatively oriented agents behave rationally? Why is it that everyday discourse can be said to have this rational component? Habermas’s answer is that the understanding of utterances depends on being able to take up a rational stance toward the claims to validity that necessarily accompany them. For understanding to be possible, a
hearer must relate to the reasons supporting the utterance. Without this rational stance, no understanding would be possible.

I noted earlier how Austin (and later also Habermas) opposed the truth-theoretic, semantic approach to meaning found in Frege, Russell, and others. On such a view, the meaning of a proposition is its truth-conditions. However, as Michael Dummett points out in his anti-realist critique of truth-theoretic accounts of meaning, since we know the meaning of many propositions whose truth-conditions we will never be able to ascertain, a theory of meaning should focus not on truth but on “assertibility” or justification. We know the meaning of an utterance, Dummett claims, when we know what it means to rationally accept it in light of reasons or evidence. In Dummett’s (1976: 110) formulation,

an understanding of a statement consists in a capacity to recognize whatever is counted as verifying it, i.e. as conclusively establishing it as true. It is not necessary that we should have any means of deciding the truth or falsity of the statement, only that we be capable of recognizing when its truth has been established.

Habermas adopts a version of this view, arguing that understanding an utterance is to engage with the reasons for its possible rational adoption. In the absence of such engagement, the utterance remains unintelligible. Although an explicit reflection on such reasons is the prerogative of so-called discourses (Diskurse), which Habermas distinguishes from everyday communication in which speakers against a vast background of agreement take the rational support of each other’s utterances for granted, the intelligibility of an utterance is a function of its rational acceptability.

Habermas accordingly thinks that this means that speakers, in performing communicative acts, necessarily have to claim validity for their utterances. They have to claim – implicitly or explicitly – that the reasons that, if called for, can be adduced in favor of adopting an utterance are of such a nature that the utterance deserves to be rationally accepted by all rational speakers. In constative speech acts, speakers lay claim to universal truth about some state of affairs; in regulative speech acts, they lay claim to universal normative legitimacy; while in expressive speech acts, they lay claim to truthfully manifesting their subjective (inner) thoughts and feelings. (Unlike constative and regulative speech acts, expressive speech acts are not backed up by means of conceptually articulated reasons; rather, what supports them is the consistent behavior of the speaker over time.)

To the various types of speech acts correspond differing “formal worlds” – an objective, a social, and a subjective – while a pervasive background of tacit knowledge will have to be shared among participants in a communication community for actual communication to be possible.

When validity claims are being raised, hearers are put in a position of being able to freely answer “yes” or “no” based on the reasons provided. They then rationally accept or reject the utterance. In engaging with reasons, partners in communication experience what Habermas refers to as a “peculiar non-compulsive compulsion of the better argument” (einer eigentümlicher Zwangloser Zwang des besseren Arguments). Reasons motivate, but only insofar as agents freely consider their force in the light of already existing principles and commitments. Unlike causal impact, to let oneself be motivated by reasons is to act freely: it is to commit or determine oneself on the basis of reasoning alone.

Despite claiming otherwise, it should be noted that Habermas hardly provides an account of sentence-meaning. The reason is that in order to be employed in speech acts, sentences (or propositions) must already be meaningful. How might hearers start engaging with reasons adduced in support of an utterance unless they already have some grasp of the propositional content being expressed in it? The close tie between understanding and rational
engagement also seems problematic. While an utterance might be fruitfully understood in the light of its reasons for acceptance, agents normally do not seek justification before they claim to understand. Rather, they first understand – or at least possess some comprehension of the utterance – and then seek to justify. Yet if that is correct, then how can Habermas account for such everyday understanding? Given his rationalist, anti-realist theory of meaning, he seems forced to leave this question open.

Of course, a deeper understanding may occasionally require scrutiny of what it is that might motivate rational speakers to rationally accept the utterance. However, a deeper understanding of this kind – perhaps what hermeneuticians such as Gadamer ask us to obtain when reading a text – is quite different from simply getting at the surface meaning. Habermas seems to require too many conditions to have been satisfied for understanding to be possible.

Habermas’s theory of ordinary language contains a number of sophisticated and highly developed sub-domains. The most important by far is his account of formal pragmatics, which is the both a priori and a posteriori science of presuppositions of argumentation, or norms, that rational speakers necessarily have to assume are satisfied when seriously entering into, and participating in, rational discourse. Habermas has made a numbers of efforts trying to specify exactly what these norms are. To engage in a detailed discussion of formal pragmatics would exceed the limitations of this chapter. However, for the picture to be at least roughly complete it must be mentioned that in addition to semantic-level rules specifying logical consistency requirements and the like, Habermas identifies rules stipulating inclusiveness, openness to argument, and a prohibition of all forms of coercion. The claim is not that these rules are always followed when agents enter into discourse with one another. Rather, anyone who seriously engages in discourse must implicitly accept the rules, regardless of whether they actually are being observed or not. The rules, in other words, are valid “counterfactually.” They specify what would count as an ideally rational discourse while also constraining speakers in nonideal contexts.

Discourses specialize in the task of rationally redeeming validity claims. Overtly argumentative, they typically take place in settings such as scientific, legal, or moral debate. Over the course of his career, Habermas has viewed such discourses as validity-tracking exercises. By providing participants with opportunities to be freely oriented toward the best possible arguments, they are, even when nonideal, islands of reasoning in a world often plagued by deliberately nonrational forms of engagement such as ideological group-thinking or propaganda. It should be noted, however, that on Habermas’s view such discourses are not common occurrences. Not only do they require a highly developed attentiveness to reasons and reason-giving, which is something that only certain institutional frameworks (such as those of science or law) encourage, but engaging in discourse is possible only when agents have, as it were, bracketed much of their everyday, tacit understanding of things. Of course, no agent can ever completely set aside all such tacit lifeworldly knowledge. The lifeworld is the inherited background from which one can never fully extricate oneself. Yet in discourse an agent is supposed to divorce a claim from its normal use and focus on it solely with a view to see whether it lends itself to rational justification.

Thus, discourses sanitize claims. When subjected to discourse, claims about religious phenomena, for example, which play an important role in ritual practices and invite a number of affective and emotional stances, are treated as purely cognitive, demanding a rational justification purporting to hold good for all rational speakers. Likewise, responding adequately to moral claims (as I will soon refer to in more detail) requires a commitment to the priority of thin over thick concepts, permitting a proceduralist search for universalizable moral norms. Engaging in discourse turns language away from the ordinary contexts in which words normally are intelligible.
In the older tradition of ordinary language philosophy, the attempt to use words outside the ordinary was viewed not only with suspicion but as a central source of confusion. According to Stanley Cavell, who draws on Wittgenstein, such “extraordinary” employments of words tend to generate skepticism. Rather than accepting the ordinary conditions of sense-making, to speak out of the ordinary is tantamount to seeking an alternative source of intelligibility, in Habermas’s case one based exclusively on an appeal to “reason.” Habermas, in other words, because of his rationalism, is a deeply ambivalent philosopher of ordinary language. On the one hand, he follows Austin in recommending a return to the way in which words are used in institutionally regulated ways of sense-making. On the other hand, however, his intuitions about rationality lead him to construct a wedge between ordinary communication and discourse such that being rational starts to seem at odds with the desire to make full sense.

**Ordinary Language Philosophy and Formal Pragmatics**

For Habermas, a paradigm case of making sense – of acting intelligibly – is when a speaker raises a controversial claim to validity to which a hearer, on the basis of rationally responding to the reasons offered (or at least implicitly offered), is able to answer “yes” or “no.” Meaningful utterances are determinate and cognitively bipolar: they appear either as valid or invalid, and their meaning is a function of the hearer’s engagement with the reasons why they are the one or the other. “Yes, what you say is true because...” or “No, what you say is untrue because...” In both cases the hearer, to the extent that he or she has understood the meaning of the utterance, will have viewed the utterance in terms of its capacity for being either valid or invalid.

I mentioned that Habermas admits that in everyday life, when their shared background accounts for much of their integration and action coordination, participants in communication tend not to engage explicitly in the language game of giving and assessing reasons. However, even in cases where reasons remain implicit, the meaning of an utterance is supposed to be a function of its rational acceptability in terms of reasons adduced. I also mentioned that Austin does not assign to ordinary language philosophy the task of providing a theory of meaning. For Austin, if ever there is a task for such a theory, it is to provide an account of what it is for propositions or sentences to be meaningful, independently of the force with which they are used in illocutionary acts. At the end of *How to Do Things with Words*, however, Austin points out that the earlier distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts makes no real sense: locutions, being embedded in contexts of action, are always used in performing certain acts. Sentences, for example, are being used to make statements; thus, they will be put forward, not only as locutions with a claim to being true, but also in illocutionary acts as they are presented with a certain force. According to Austin (1975: 139),

> Once we realize that what we have to study is not the sentence but the issuing of an utterance in a speech situation, there can hardly be any longer a possibility of not seeing that stating is performing an act.

The statement “It is hot in here,” when made in the living room of someone’s private home, may refer to the temperature and so be viewed as a simple locution. However, depending on the context and the expectations and interpretations the communicating agents have of each other, in short of the sensibilities they possess, it may also be taken as an exhortation (to open a window, to turn on the air-conditioner), an expression of irritation, disappointment, or dismay (if someone habitually overheats the room), or perhaps as a remark on the sexual atmosphere (if the interlocutor is in a state of undress, looking invitingly at the speaker). In all these cases,
there are shared norms and proprieties appealed to in making the utterance, and they must count as instantiations of illocutionary speech acts. However, the speaker can hardly be said to refer directly to rules supposed to govern the utterance. As Wittgenstein (1958) argued in the *Philosophical Investigations*, appeals to the application of a general rule would never be sufficient to explain our capacity to go on with words in ever new ways. At best the rule would have to be interpreted to fit the specific case. Yet since the act of interpretation would generate an infinite regress of interpretations, with each new interpretation having to be interpreted, the capacity to continue in ways that are normatively secured – “correct” or “adequate” – must instead rest in the shared responses and judgments of speakers belonging to the same life-form. “Knowing how to go on,” as Wittgenstein occasionally puts it, is a matter of belonging to a community, being socialized into it such that one is capable, in particular cases, of appearing to others as a representative speaker. Concepts are not (or at least not totally) circumscribed by rules; rather, their adequate application in judgments is a matter of sensitivity – not primarily to the meaning of the concept itself but to what it is that the particular situation calls for. In speech, therefore, agents reveal their sensibilities to each other – the extraordinarily fine-grained ways in which they are attuned (and, in some cases, not attuned) to the features and salience of what it is they are faced with. According to Habermas, speakers reveal their capacity to use concepts by understanding how their application is rationally licensed by other discursive commitments that they may have. In this sense, the meaning of concepts is exhausted by the material inferences licensing their application in particular cases. In the contrasting view of classical ordinary language philosophy, represented by Austin and Wittgenstein, attentiveness to reasons alone, when reasons are supposed to motivate the acceptance or rejection of the utterance as universally valid, is not sufficient to constitute a mastery of concepts. To make oneself intelligible in a particular situation – that is, to make what Austin calls a linguistic move – requires a sensibility irreducible to discursive reason-giving.

Following Alice Crary (2007: 21), I would argue that Habermas submits his account of ordinary language to an abstract epistemological requirement: the regularities constitutive of a sound conceptual practice, as Crary (2007: 21) puts it, “must transcend the practice in the sense of being discernible independently of any subjective responses characteristic of us as participants in it.” Speech acts, by claiming universal validity on the basis of reasons purporting to be acceptable to all rational speakers, are in Habermas’s view presented as always already being in the process of transcending, or abstracting from, the subjective (perceptual and affective) endowments we draw on in thinking and acting. The epistemic goal of speech acts is, for Habermas, the establishment of universal validity, and only insofar as they aspire to such a status do they emerge as intelligible. Speech acts unsupported by such context- and subjectivity-transcending claims to validity are simply unintelligible.

If we accept, however, with Austin and Wittgenstein, that the mastery of concepts is essentially dependent on the exercise of subjective forms of responsiveness, then the picture looks very different. Rather than viewing our entitlement to objectivity as dependent on the acceptance of the abstraction requirement, it becomes possible to understand it as mediated by our subjective propensities (qua individuals) to employ concepts in specific cases.

In order to further clarify the contrast between these two (in my view competing) accounts of ordinary language, I will turn at the end of this paper to the nature of moral judgment. According to Habermas, who is a deontologically oriented formalist and cognitivist along Kantian lines, valid moral judgments aspire to be universal: they should rest on reasons that every rational speaker could accept independently of subjective dispositions and ethical background. Although Habermas believes that a performative attitude is required for agents to be able to relate discursively to such judgments, the structure of moral discourse is intended to provide a neutral space for dealing with moral concepts. According to Habermas, a rational speaker attentive to the relevant reasons for adopting a particular
moral judgment should in principle be able to recognize correct and incorrect applications of a moral concept even if he or she has no grasp of the attitudes in terms of which the concept may become intelligible in the first place.

In his attempts to mediate between Kant and Hegel, universalist formalism, and an ethics of ethical life and situatedness, Habermas admits that participants in moral discourse cannot be viewed as mere noumenal subjects, pure creatures of reason putting forward claims without any membership in actual communities: they do have ethical identities as well as a commitment to systems of value that necessarily will have been mediated historically by the ethical experiences of concrete communities. However, participants in moral discourse can only be accepted as rational to the extent that they aim to transcend such identities and affiliations. It is in the turn to the supposed objectivity (or validity) generated by an exclusive orientation toward good reasons, where good reasons are reasons that purport to be rationally persuasive to all rational speakers, that such participants undertake the difficult yet, in Habermas’s moral theory, required transcendence of their own concrete ethical commitments:

Participants in processes of self-clarification cannot distance themselves from the life histories and forms of life in which they actually find themselves. Moral-practical discourse, by contrast, require a break with all of the unquestioned truths of an established, concrete ethical life, in addition to distancing oneself from the contexts of life with which one’s identity is inextricably interwoven.

(Habermas 1993: 1)

Ultimately, a moral norm is valid only when it deserves the rational assent of all speakers. It is by withstanding all possible rational criticism that such norms prove their acceptability. On this view, what distinguishes episodes of thought and speech as moral is the use of moral concepts in ways that are indifferent to the sensitivities that, according to classical ordinary language philosophy, are necessary in order to employ concepts intelligibly. However, by excluding subjectivity or by viewing subjective response as generative merely of subjective or contingent properties, the view recommends a withdrawal from the moral world itself.

The readiness to accept an abstraction requirement has been shared by more thinkers identifying with the ordinary language movement than Habermas. According to Searle (1969: 12), the aim of ordinary language philosophy is to express generalities that can be formulated as rules. In his view, to master a language is to master rules for the correct application of words in particular circumstances. Nothing about these rules refers to individual responses or attitudes. For Cavell, on the other hand, who draws more directly on the works of Wittgenstein and Austin, the task of ordinary language philosophy culminates in the attempt to rethink what it is we say when, and the implications thereof. This endeavor does not rest on an appeal to impersonal rules. Like a phenomenological investigation, its authority can never be greater than what the individual is able to vouch for. According to Cavell, the responsibility a speaker has for making himself or herself intelligible cannot be forfeited.

For mutual understanding to be possible, there must be a life-form in which there is, as Wittgenstein puts it, agreement (Übereinstimmung) in judgments. It is true that we generally agree in our responses. However, the life-form, as Cavell (1976: 52) argues in a famous passage, does not universally guarantee that we find each other intelligible.

We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing
routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation – all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls “forms of life.” Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this.

Following Cavell and developing his view, Crary suggests that as speakers are applying moral terms in ways that reflect their subjectively mediated response to, and acknowledgment of, a situation or context at hand, they can be said to express a moral worldview. The way you respond to morally salient events reveals how the world morally appears to you. If this is true, however, it follows that learning to master a language is, as Crary (2007: 43) puts it, “inseparable from the adoption of a practical orientation toward the world – specifically, one that bears the imprint of the speaker’s individuality.” Such a practical orientation, rather than aiming for a neutral point of view, includes the speaker’s particular emotional attachments and the things he or she cares about and value – and how he or she speaks will be a function of those commitments. Thus, in Leo Tolstoy’s novella “The Death of Ivan Ilych,” for example, the reader is being asked to look at death not in terms of plain moral doctrine, but rather in terms of how one emotionally responds to the various characters, in particular Ivan Ilych himself. It is the response to death that matters, not the judgment passed on it, and the characters become intelligible to us insofar as we relate to their actions and responses. The simple solicitousness displayed by the peasant Gerasim suggests a different moral worldview from that of Ivan Ilych’s friend, Peter Ivanovich, who refuses to be implicated in the realities of Ivan’s predicament. True moral behavior always harbors an individual or subjective component – a form of judgment that is responsive to key features of the concrete situation or task at hand.

**Concluding Remarks**

I have suggested that Habermas’s claim to be a philosopher of ordinary language in the tradition from Austin and Wittgenstein can only be true if a number of qualifications are attached. If the original impetus behind the turn to ordinary language was to consider language in the context of its actual use, rejecting all abstraction requirements, then Habermas, with his orientation toward constitutive idealizations and context-transcending validity claims, is at odds with this tradition.

I have not claimed that a principled moral stance of the kind defended by Habermas is necessarily incoherent. It may well be successful. The thrust of my reflections has rather been that it sits uneasily with a commitment to ordinary language philosophy, at least if this commitment is informed by an agreement with central tenets of the teachings of Austin and Wittgenstein.

It is worth keeping in mind, however, that Habermas’s theory of rationality is comprised of a number of commitments. Although Habermas’s vision is clear and well articulated, the way he argues for it is no doubt eclectic. Eclecticism can be good thing when thinkers manage to construct a promising theoretical edifice out of elements that turn out to cohere with one another. Sometimes, an eclectic thinker is able to move the discussion forward in deeply original and compelling ways. However, if the elements do not cohere, or are too disparate, eclecticism can be a dangerous approach. It may encourage false or problematic reconciliations of theoretical viewpoints that in fact are at odds with another. The tension between ordinary language philosophy and neo-Kantian theories of rationality may in Habermas be of the latter nature: they simply do not fit together very well.
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If one looks at the history of the Frankfurt School more broadly, the turn toward an account of intersubjectivity, cashed out in terms of a theory of language, seems to have been a justified move. The philosophical theorizing of the early Frankfurt School remained largely indebted to the monological subject/object tradition harkening back to Descartes and Kant. This is especially true of Horkheimer and Adorno, in whose works one scarcely finds any reflections on intersubjectivity, at least not of the kind that one finds in Habermas. Habermas’s great vision has its historical origin in the Enlightenment. It is that of a critical public space in which reason is exercised through the use of speech. The vision is no doubt highly laudable. However, to think that its full articulation requires the incorporation of ordinary language philosophy may have been a step too far.

References


Further Reading


Bowie, A. (2003), Introduction to German Philosophy: From Kant to Habermas. Oxford: Polity Press. (Excellent overview of the philosophical background to Habermas.)


Mead, G. H. (2015), Mind, Self and Society. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. (Classic study of the nature of intersubjectivity that deeply influenced Habermas.)