Even a passing familiarity with the phenomenological tradition and Frankfurt School critical theory suggests a number of affinities. For instance, thinkers in both traditions are deeply interested in the constitution of meaning, the relational structure of experience, and the intersubjective conditions for engaging with the world, oneself, and others. Despite the similarity in themes, however, the engagement between phenomenologists and critical theorists exhibits a conspicuous one-sidedness. Except for Gadamer’s debate with Habermas in the mid-1960s, scholars working in the phenomenological tradition have largely tended to ignore critical theory. Heidegger, for instance, did not pen a single remark about any member of the Frankfurt School—despite having been personally acquainted with several of its members and being aware of their work (Demmerling 2013, 374). Critical theorists, on the other hand, have been anything but silent about phenomenology. For the first generation of the Frankfurt School (e.g. Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, Marcuse), phenomenology represents precisely the way in which thinking should not be undertaken. Horkheimer, for example, takes Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* (Husserl 2011) to be the paradigm of ‘traditional theory,’ which a critical theory aims to overcome (Horkheimer 1975, 190, cf. also Habermas 1972, 303–317). For his part, Adorno (1982) criticizes Husserl’s views of intentionality and the role he attributed to phenomenology as a foundational enterprise in *Ideas I* for involving irreconcilable commitments that render his project incoherent. His view of Heidegger is even more severe. In a letter to Horkheimer, Adorno describes him as “a cunning con-artist who has read a great deal” (Horkheimer 1998, 202). Although his engagements with phenomenology were limited, Walter Benjamin also held Heidegger in low esteem (2016, 344), but had an abiding interest in Husserlian phenomenology (Benjamin 2016, 302; cf. Fenves 2012). Subsequent generations of Frankfurt School critical theorists have modulated without altering the trend. Habermas, for instance, takes Heidegger to be “the most influential philosopher since Hegel” (Habermas 1983, 53), but nevertheless sees phenomenology as a “monological philosophy of consciousness,” which his formal pragmatics of communication is supposed to replace (Habermas 1987, 119 f.).

Silence and (ad hominem) critique thus appear to define the historical relationship between these two movements. This entry will seek to understand philosophically the reasons for this historical one-sidedness, by outlining the idea of a critical theory and then by examining the criticisms members of the Frankfurt School have leveled against phenomenology. From this examination, a set of fundamental philosophical themes will emerge that critical theory and phenomenology share.
Overview of Frankfurt School critical theory

From its inception, critical theory has aimed to develop an inter- or transdisciplinary theory of society (for a good overview of critical theory’s development from Marx to Habermas, see Rasmussen 1996, 11–38). This form of collaborative research draws on sociology, social psychology (initially Freudian psychoanalysis), Marxism (especially the work of Karl Korsch and Georg Lukács), and various sub-disciplines of philosophy, to offer what Max Horkheimer called “a critical theory of society as it is, a theory dominated at every turn by a concern for the reasonable conditions of life” (Horkheimer 1975, 198–199).

Critical theorists thus aim to integrate two distinctive orientations towards ‘society.’ On the one hand, they embrace the sociological task of understanding society in terms of its basic institutions, their integration, and the social practices that unfold within them (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, Habermas 1984 and 1987, Honneth 1995). On the other hand, theorists aim to extrapolate from this understanding of society a normative perspective that makes criticism and social transformation possible but remains endogenous to it. Or, in the words of Raymond Geuss, “a critical theory […] is a reflective theory which gives agents a kind of knowledge inherently productive of enlightenment and emancipation” (Geuss 1981, 2). Geuss’ synthetic definition highlights the three features of the Frankfurt School’s approach to theorizing that are supposed to integrate the normative and descriptive orientations involved in understanding ‘society.’ First, insofar as critical theorizing is ‘reflective,’ it aims to be a praxis in the Marxist sense, i.e. a theoretically informed practical engagement with one’s situation that is guided by an “emancipatory interest” (Habermas 1971). Second, the kind of knowledge produced by critical theory—its cognitive content—is inherently normative. This distinguishes it from traditional theories, where ‘knowledge’ is understood descriptively, i.e. as value-neutral, accurate representations of facts, which facilitate successful interventions in the world aimed at achieving some extrinsic goal. Third, critical theory addresses concrete social actors, with whom it shares an emancipatory interest, in order to help them recognize their predicament and motivate social change.

In brief, critical theorizing starts from empirical instances of social failure (disrespect, misconceptions, exclusion/alienation from social practices constitutive of social spheres or identities, etc.), which are accessible to a first-person experiential perspective. Moreover, its proposals for addressing or redressing such failures involve realizing a potential latent in a social situation that has been obscured by contingent historical developments.

Adorno and phenomenology

Interestingly, the first generation of the Frankfurt School developed their interdisciplinary project in counterpoint to the phenomenological movements of their day. However instructive, the personal relations between Frankfurt School thinkers and phenomenologists do not necessarily explain this intense philosophical engagement (cf. Demmerling 2013, 374–381), which is at its most sustained in Adorno’s and Habermas’ work.

Adorno wrote two books on Husserl. The first, his PhD dissertation submitted in 1924 under the title The Transcendence of the Material and the Noematic in Husserl’s Phenomenology (Die Transzendenz des Dinglichen und des Noematischen in Husserls Phänomenologie [Adorno 1990, 7–79]), criticized Husserl’s account of givenness. In it, Adorno alleges that

on the one hand Husserl demanded the founding of all thing-like being only by going back to immediate facts. On the other hand he considers things as “absolute
transcendents” that might show themselves epistemologically only in their relation to consciousness, but whose own being should in principle be independent of the consciousness.

(Adorno 1990, 370, qtd. in and trans. by Wolff 2006)

On Adorno’s analysis, these two commitments yield a paradox. Husserl’s ‘things’ are not strictly speaking given in experience and yet cannot be bracketed out entirely. As Wolff explains,

things are not experiences; whereas experiences are immediate data, the things are given only indirectly. The disjunction necessitates, first the methodological suspension of all judgements about the reality of things, […] which should be followed up by studies of the rich plurality of states of consciousness.

(Wolff 2006, 558)

Adorno, however, insists that there is no real way to get this strategy off the ground, since the epoche presupposes what it wants to bracket. As Adorno argues, what is given after phenomenological reduction are remembered experiences of transcendent things. As re-presentations, however, they still refer to what has supposedly been bracketed. Adorno contends that the same problem affects Husserl’s noema. That is, a noema supposedly prescribes an object, while consciousness is able to entertain the noematic sense independently of the object prescribed. How this is possible remains a mystery, on Adorno’s view. He thus concludes that Husserl’s notion of givenness is incoherent.

After his Habilitationsschrift on Kierkegaard, Adorno returns to Husserl several more times (e.g. Adorno 1940). His final engagement is documented in Against Epistemology: A Metacritique. Adorno ranked this work second in importance only to his Negative Dialectics (Adorno 1970, GS V: 386). The reason is not difficult to discern. If the dissertation stood firmly within the Neo-Kantian tradition of Adorno’s dissertation advisor, Hans Cornelius, Against Epistemology marks Adorno’s transformation into a critical theorist. As Petra Gehring notes, the book documents “Adorno’s programmatic self-understanding in which he hones aspects of his understanding of dialectics and his view of philosophy’s critical relation to the world” (Gehring 2011, 354).

In Against Epistemology, Adorno intensifies the dissertation’s criticism of Husserl. The metacritique now insists that Husserl is committed to a form of thinking that capitulates to the social forces driving late capitalist societies. Husserl, Adorno contends, internalizes the reifying tendencies that Marx diagnosed in commodity fetishism. To wit, the essences and origins that phenomenological reflection aims to uncover result from the same flawed method of analysis that Marx attributed to the assessment of a commodity’s exchange-value: Husserl mistakes the product of concrete historical relations and processes among social actors for an intrinsic property of things themselves. The reification of meaning and consciousness, so Adorno claims, is the consequence of severing the connections between the concrete, historical development of human reasoning (the historical genesis of meaning) and this form of reasoning’s rationalized structure. This results in misunderstanding the nature and properties of the meaning-unities being entertained.

As Miller reconstructs the argument, “Adorno chides Husserl for hypostasizing the distinction between what [Adorno] calls ‘genesis’—the origin of concepts in a process of social-historical development—and ‘validity’” (Miller 2009, 105), i.e. the legitimate use of these concepts. This kind of error, Adorno insists, creates a blind spot: “the real life process of society is not something sociologically smuggled into philosophy […]. It is rather the core of the contents of logic itself” (Adorno 1970, 26).
Adorno thus sees Husserl’s effort to describe meaning-unities phenomenologically as an Idealistic expression of Marx’s fetishism of the commodity-form. To show this, he targets three core ideas in Husserl’s early work that exemplify this reifying tendency: the theory of logical absolutism from the Prolegomena to Pure Logic, the idea of perceptual fulfillment in *Logical Investigations*, and the related notion of categorial intuition. From a phenomenologist’s perspective, Adorno’s interpretation of Husserl in *Against Epistemology* is no doubt the definition of uncharitable. It juxtaposes early and later texts without flagging the shifts in Husserl’s thinking, imports an entirely foreign terminology into the discussion, and oscillates between close readings of specific passages and large-scale sociological considerations (for an overview of Adorno’s argument in *Against Epistemology*, see Gehring 2011; for a reconstruction of Adorno’s analysis that is sympathetic to Husserl, see Miller 2009; for an account of how Adorno misinterprets Husserl, see Hodge 2008). The text is nevertheless significant because it makes explicit a wedge issue between phenomenology and critical theory. The argument hinges on Adorno’s conviction that some version of historical materialism is true: philosophical reflection cannot be uncoupled from the concrete historical forces responsible for one’s social situation and one’s intellectual capacities without thereby falsifying the contents of experience. Objects of experience are ontically constituted ‘behind one’s back’ such that they have a kind of independence and richness that resists our theoretical gaze. Failure to attend to the historical and material processes involved in the constitution of a thing and a subject’s cognitive capacities makes meaningful philosophical engagement impossible. But Husserl goes to great lengths to exclude precisely these processes in the works Adorno canvases.

Adorno’s approach distinguishes itself from Husserlian strategies in three ways. First, it shows the extent to which Adorno embraces a subject–object (S–O) model of experience, which phenomenology’s analyses of intentionality are supposed to bypass or overcome. Adorno uses the S–O relation to introduce a dialectical component into thinking—foreign to phenomenology—and fold the sociological situation of thought into a consideration of ‘experience’ as a reciprocally transformative relation. These represent the second and third differences from phenomenology. The ineliminability of S–O relations (whose flipside is the inherent falseness of all forms of subjective immediacy), together with a focus on the sociological (historical and cultural) conditions in which thinking dialectically unfolds (and subjects are ‘interpolated’), are thus the central commitments of Adorno’s thinking that distinguish him from the phenomenological movement. This leads Adorno to propose an alternative account of experience as the culmination of a reciprocal relationship between subject and object, which needs to be dialectically unfolded (for reconstructions of these ideas, see O’Connor 2004, and Bernstein 2002).

Interestingly, the criticisms Adorno levels at Husserl from a broadly Marxist perspective bear striking similarities to Heidegger’s objections to Husserlian phenomenology (for an interesting effort to synthesize Heidegger’s fundamental ontology with Lukács’ Marxism, see Goldmann 2009). Indeed, Heidegger develops his own fundamental ontology from a similar set of coordinates. He insists, for instance, that ontological structures only become thematic through an analysis of one’s ontic engagements, that the entities one encounters have an irreducible historical character, that the significance of an entity is not exhausted by one’s relationship to it, and that one inherits coping strategies and goals rather than spontaneously constituting them for oneself. The ontic-ontological character of Dasein, the historicity of Dasein’s environment, life and understanding, and the recognition of Dasein’s thrownness thus seem to offer a hermeneutical vantage from which to integrate Adorno’s position into phenomenology.

The literature discussing the similarities between Adorno and Heidegger is already vast (see, for instance, Macdonald and Ziarek 2008, O’Connor 1998). It is important to note, however, that Adorno develops his mature position in opposition to Heidegger’s work. And the oppo-
tion follows the same pattern we found in his criticisms of Husserl: dialectics, not ontology. There is no way to finesse this difference. For his part, Heidegger saw hermeneutical phenomenology as superseding dialectics altogether. “Dialectic,” Heidegger tells us in the second introduction to *Being and Time*, is “a genuine philosophical embarrassment, [which] becomes superfluous” for phenomenology (Heidegger 2010, 25). In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno responds, “this makes the very word ‘thinking,’ which Heidegger will not renounce, as unsubstantial as the thing to be thought: thinking without a concept is not thinking at all” (Adorno 1973a, 97).

Adorno’s insistence on dialectics, and the S–O relationship that concepts mediate, make it nearly impossible to bridge the gap that separates him from Heidegger, for whom the very categories of ‘subject,’ ‘object,’ and ‘concept’ are parasitic on a primordial form of practical engagement and non-discursive understanding. Hence, even as we identify overlapping ideas in their works (e.g. Macdonald 1997 and Macdonald 2011), we nevertheless find ourselves confronted with a stark *Either/Or*. For their philosophical procedures are fundamentally at odds. As O’Connor argues,

> the difference between Adorno and Heidegger can be characterized as a difference between critical and phenomenological versions of transcendental philosophy. […] Adorno’s philosophy tends to emphasize a particular rational structure of experience […] missed by traditional philosophy. […] Heidegger, by contrast, constructs a different model by elaborating a […] phenomenological description of the conditions of experience.

*(O’Connor 1998, 44)*

The difference in approach and focus leads O’Connor to conclude that any similarities between the thinkers are purely coincidental (*ibid.*).

Their incommensurable approaches clarify the rivalry between Adorno and Heidegger. As Tilo Wesche argues, the rivalry illuminates their respective efforts to introduce a new orientation to post-war philosophy in Germany (Wesche 2011, 365). Adorno’s criticisms of Heidegger thus take on an added social significance insofar as they give voice to the broader historical and sociological concern for life and social action “after Auschwitz” (see *Negative Dialectics*, 361f.) that Heidegger has famously remained silent on. In doing so, Adorno deploys roughly the same interpretative strategies he used against Husserl. Now, however, he is careful to separate his overt polemic against Heidegger (*Jargon of Authenticity*) from his more philosophical criticism of Heidegger’s hermeneutical phenomenology (*Negative Dialectics*) (Wesche 2011, 364).

Adorno’s criticisms follow the same general strategy used against Husserl. On the one hand, Adorno contends that Heidegger’s hermeneutical phenomenology merely ‘updates’ Husserl’s method by transforming the latter’s *eidei* into *existentialia* (Adorno 1973a, 62f). This transformation, however, still reifies consciousness. It insistson being *first philosophy* and emphasizing the purity of its philosophical descriptions (Adorno 1973a, 74–75). On the other hand, the ontological difference Heidegger imputes to Being and beings renders them both transcendent (like Husserl’s ‘thing’ and ‘noema’). Adorno even invokes the same ‘sociological mechanism’ of free-market exchange he used to criticize Husserl (Adorno 1982, 26 and 172), to characterize Heidegger’s thinking as “a highly developed credit system” (Adorno 1973a, 76):

> one concept borrows from the other. […] The debtor, says a faded joke, has it all over the creditor, who must depend upon the debtor’s will to pay—and so, for Heidegger, blessings flow from everything he owes. That Being [Sein] is neither a fact nor a concept exempts it from criticism. Whatever the critic would pick on can be dismissed as
a misconception. The concept [of Being] borrows from the factual realm an air of solid abundance, of something not just cogitatively and unsolidly made—an air of being ‘in itself.’ From the mind that synthesizes it, entity [das Seiende] borrows the aura of being more than factual: the sanctity of transcendence. And this very structure hypostatizes itself as superior to the reflective intellect which is accused of dissecting entity [das Seiende] and concept with a scalpel.

(ibid.)

Like his mentor, then, Heidegger is accused of internalizing an economy of thought without accounting for the process of its internalization, and for generalizing—reifying—this economy as a transcendental analytic of subjectivity. The framework of concepts, moreover, has been immunized against any form of criticism, since its foundational concepts do not have empirical touchstones (i.e. success/falsification conditions). This pre-empts focused conceptual analysis and makes any empirical application impossible. Like the Bible, the analytic of Dasein and the ontological difference upon which it is founded purport to explain everything and invite a reverential interpretative response. On Adorno’s view, it is therefore Ideology.

Leaving aside the accuracy of Adorno’s critique, we should note that it remains motivated by a ‘sociological eye’ trained to identify functional identities underwriting disparate human engagements. If he can demonstrate that the functional identity he imputes to disparate fields of social production—philosophical thinking and free-market exchange—actually obtains, Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology have a serious problem: although they may elaborate a logic or set of competencies, they do not explain them nor do they open onto a normative consideration of whether one should accept them. Furthermore, it is clear that his opposition to Husserl and Heidegger hinges on the conception of critical theory with which we began. The dialectical account of one’s subjective experience develops a reflective theory of society in which the contributions of concrete social institutions and practices to one’s first-person experience are explicitly addressed. Such an account of society, if successful, would deliver knowledge productive of enlightenment and emancipation. Herein lies the force of Adorno’s criticisms against Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology. His assessment that phenomenology cannot deliver the kind of normative knowledge conducive to emancipation because its interpretative strategies reproduce in thinking the very practices that exploit us in our social life could be damning indeed. The same goes for his contention that phenomenology’s claim to delineate the origins, essences, and unique interpretative structures of human experience or existence is tantamount to ideology. But the bottom line is that Adorno’s vision of post-war German philosophy stands or falls on his efforts to demonstrate these theses.

Habermas and phenomenology

Many contemporary critical theorists think that Adorno’s project is a failure. The most powerful articulation of this failure can be found in Habermas’ *Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas 1984, 339f.). Habermas argues that Adorno can only treat objects of experience as individuated according to their potential contributions to instrumental action, since his ‘sociological eye’ apprehends every human engagement as instantiating a S–O relation. As we just saw, Adorno’s criticisms of the phenomenological tradition support Habermas’ observation. But reducing all forms of rational engagement to the teleological structures of means–ends reasoning and the entrenched social practices patterning contemporary social life leads Adorno down a dead end, Habermas contends. If reason is exhaustively characterized by ‘identity-thinking,’ i.e. a lone subject’s capacity to represent and intervene in the world for prudential reasons, there seems to be
no room for an alternative. Adorno’s thesis that previously successful instrumental action and its associated conceptual resources are historically sedimented in our contemporary practices, limiting and deforming our current engagements, entails the idea of a totally administered society (e.g. ‘the culture industry’). Adorno himself saw no real escape from this predicament—which explains his heavy investment in subjective aesthetic expression as a mere intimation (not full articulation) of an emancipatory alternative (Habermas 1984, 384f). Habermas argues, however, that the predicament Adorno and Horkheimer find themselves in is avoidable, since it is a consequence of a faulty philosophical starting point: “the program of early critical theory founded not on this or that contingent circumstance, but from the exhaustion of the paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness” (Habermas 1984, 386).

Habermas uses ‘philosophy of consciousness’—or its equivalents, ‘monological theory’ and ‘philosophy of the subject’—to denote S–O models of experience and action that we have inherited from early modern philosophy, culminating in German Idealism (For his comprehensive account of the ‘philosophy of consciousness,’ see Habermas 1987b, 294–326.):

Under ‘object’ the philosophy of the subject understands everything that can be represented as existing; under ‘subject’ it understands first of all the capacities to relate oneself to such entities in the world in an objectivating attitude and gain control of objects, be it theoretically or practically. The two attitudes of mind are representation and action. The subject relates to objects either to represent them as they are or to produce them as they should be.

(Habermas 1984, 387)

The limitation of this philosophical paradigm comes from reducing social interaction to a single dimension of engagement in which meanings are attributed to things on the basis of an isolated—Cartesian—subject’s interests (notice that this criticism also targets Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology; see Habermas 1972). This obscures the equally important intersubjective and communicative dimensions of human activity, which are central to hermeneutical phenomenology. Indeed, Habermas locates the normative knowledge that critical theory aims to produce and the emancipatory potentials it hopes to realize precisely in this intersubjective and communicative dimension of social interaction. His theory of communicative action fleshes out this dimension.

The emphasis on an intersubjectively shared world connects Habermas’ work to Heideggerian and Husserlian approaches. Moreover, his criticism of Adorno and Horkheimer has a phenomenological analogue. Heidegger’s critique of the representational conception of intentionality unfolds in much the same way as Habermas’ critique of the Frankfurt School’s first generation (Dreyfus 1991, 46–59, and 1993). In both cases, S–O relations are denied foundational status. Instead of conceiving intentional relations exclusively in terms of the mental attitudes and representational capacities of a (transcendental) subject, both Habermas and Heidegger emphasize the practical and communicative dimensions of an actor’s social interaction with others. They also foreground the hermeneutical processes involved in reaching understanding and the intersubjective nature of a shared world which this process entails.

The relationship is not accidental. As Habermas acknowledges, his early philosophical outlook is deeply indebted to Heidegger (Dews 1986). His first published article, “Thinking with Heidegger against Heidegger: On the Publication of Lectures Dating from 1935” (1991), identifies the positive contributions that Heidegger’s hermeneutical phenomenology might bring to critical theory, while rejecting his post-Kehre thinking. (Habermas viewed Heidegger’s later works as motivated by extra-philosophical ambitions tied to his involvement with Nazism.)
For a discussion of this early piece, see Lafont 2008; for Habermas’ further engagements with Heidegger, see Habermas 1983, 1987b, and 1991.) As Cristina Lafont has shown, Habermas and Heidegger share two fundamental commitments: the rejection of the philosophy of consciousness (i.e. the S–O model of experience) and a conception of language as ‘world-disclosing’ (Lafont 1999). Furthermore, both thinkers connect these two ideas by rethinking the way in which social actors share a world. “The most important feature of the hermeneutic notion of the world,” Lafont writes, is that “the world is always intersubjectively shared because it is linguistically articulated. It is by virtue of sharing a natural language that Dasein can share the same world with others” (Lafont 2008, 165).

“Thinking with Heidegger against Heidegger” thus involves rethinking what it means to share a world by sharing a language. On the one hand, “it is precisely this hermeneutic model of a linguistically articulated and intersubjectively shared lifeworld that will allow Habermas to break with the priority of the philosophy of consciousness” (Lafont 2008, 166). Yet, on the other hand, the very same hermeneutical insight about the way in which a shared language and the web of significance enveloping the world engender meaningful communicative interaction seems to preclude the critical vantage central to the Frankfurt School’s project. Upholding the School’s explicitly critical orientation means that Habermas cannot simply adopt a hermeneutical conception of a shared world and of our intersubjective participation in dialogue and tradition. The very possibility of hermeneutically articulating an emancipatory interest is the core of Habermas’ debate with Gadamer in the late 1960s (Habermas 1980, Gadamer 1976). For his part, Gadamer argues that the privileged perspective that critical theorists hope to inhabit requires them to step outside of a shared tradition and overstep the role of a reflective dialogue partner. But “the hermeneutic perspective of a symmetrical dialogue oriented toward understanding prohibits its participants from ascribing to themselves superior insight into the ‘delusions’ of other participants that would eliminate the need of validation of their own views through dialogue with them” (Lafont 2008, 169). In other words, the very idea that critical theorists have access to a transpersonal emancipatory interest is incompatible with a hermeneutic understanding of reaching understanding. If correct, Gadamer’s criticism shows that the project of critical theory is ad hoc (Gadamer 1976, 275)—and indeed apiece with the ‘traditional’ scientific theorizing that critical theorists explicitly reject.

One can plausibly read *The Theory of Communicative Action* as addressing precisely this problem, insofar as it aims to account for its own normative foundations so that the kind of vantage critical theorists need can be extrapolated from within a shared social space without presupposing a view from nowhere (for a discussion of Habermas’ systematic aim and its articulation, see Finnlayson 2013). The result is Habermas’ theory of society as both ‘Lifeworld’ and ‘System.’ The two-aspect theory seeks to satisfy critical theory’s demand to provide a descriptive understanding of society, while also identifying the normative resources and potentials which make possible social criticism and change. Thus, the System aspect promises to satisfy the descriptive orientation, while the Lifeworld aspect provides the normative one. Interestingly, however, Habermas approaches these tasks in a different order from the previous critical theorists. Instead of beginning from a sociological description of the functions of social action in order to identify implicit normative content, Habermas starts with the normative structure of our lifeworld. He argues that the various sociological subsystems subtending contemporary society grow out of the normative structures of our shared lifeworld interactions, as the lifeworld’s stock of knowledge, practices, and meanings increase in sophistication and become autonomous regions of social practice.

In short, Habermas espouses a notion of the ‘lifeworld’ inspired by Husserlian phenomenology and an intersubjective process of reaching collective understanding that overlaps with
Heidegger's hermeneutical phenomenology and Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, while seeking to satisfy critical theory's central requirement for a sociologically informed, reflective theory of society. The interactive relationship between 'lifeworld' and 'system' is meant to make good on the hermeneutical project of reaching understanding from within the shared resources of a tradition, where participants have equal normative/moral/interpretive authority. It also thematizes the material and historical constitution of meaning within the lifeworld, along with the processes involved in maintaining and reproducing these shared significations. In this way, Habermas hopes to address Adorno’s criticism according to which phenomenology is blind to the material conditions that generate and reproduce meaningful experience, while jettisoning the philosophy of consciousness. If successful, the theory effectively answers Gadamer’s objection by identifying a transpersonal emancipatory interest at the core of the practices involved in reaching understanding—namely, the possibility of uncoerced agreement based on acknowledging successful acts of justification—and shows why a hermeneutical approach “throws light on experiences a subject has while exercising his communicative competencies, but […] cannot explain this competence” (Habermas 1980, 186).

The crucial step in Habermas’ approach involves reconceiving what ‘reaching understanding’ involves. Consistent with Ernst Tugendhat’s (Tugendhat 1967) criticisms of Husserl and Heidegger, Habermas inverts the priority given in phenomenology to pre-propositional understanding and pre-discursive interpretation over propositionally structured knowledge. For Habermas (as for Tugendhat, Apel, Brandom, etc.), a propositionally structured understanding antedates—as an empirical fact about socialization/learning or as a counterfactual meant to render complex social action intelligible—our pre-reflective attitudes and practical engagements with the surrounding world. For him, ‘knowing-how’ presupposes ‘knowing-that,’ where ‘knowing-that’ in turn is subject to socio-historical forces that do not appear within the knowledge claims themselves. This shift accomplishes three things. First, it allows Habermas to conceive of rational action along speech-act theoretical lines (Habermas calls his tweaked version of speech-act theory a ‘formal pragmatics of communication’). In this view, every action instantiates a set of social commitments that can be articulated propositionally. These commitments, which Habermas calls ‘validity-claims,’ delineate the conditions or ‘rules’ an activity must satisfy in order to be considered successful. Meaningful action thus entails an effort to satisfy the validity-claims informing it and hence an acceptance/rejection or affirmation/denial of the validity-claims themselves.

Second, insofar as every act presupposes a stock of interconnected validity-claims (pertaining to the accuracy of an actor’s beliefs about the ‘objective world,’ the normative rightness of her practical engagements, and the sincerity or truthfulness with which she holds her basic commitments), it also implies a shared space—of reasons—in which other social actors can take a stand on one’s practical activities. The speech-act theoretical interpretation of social action thus allows Habermas to avoid an S–O relationship and to introduce a shared world in which one’s actions unfold alongside those of others, draw upon a shared stock of interpretative and practical resources, and address others as symmetrically situated participants in one and the same social space. This space of meaning and reasons, upon which symmetrically situated social actors draw, constitutes his version of the lifeworld (for a comparative overview of the notion in Habermas and Husserl, see Russell 2011).

Finally, since the validity-claims implicit in one’s practical engagements encourage a public form of rational assessment, they make intersubjective understanding possible. This allows Habermas to reinterpret the hermeneutical process of reaching understanding in connection with a normative, emancipatory potential. For insofar as any action instantiates a stock of
validity-claims that are publicly available, every actor must, in principle, be prepared to justify or criticize an action in light of the validity-claims she takes to underwrite it. The practices of justification that comprise one’s social situation further flesh out the intersubjective character of social action and the manner in which actors share a world. For the practices involved in giving and taking reasons create the possibility of understanding—construed as uncoerced consensus. Habermas’ ‘formal pragmatics of communication’ thus replaces the hermeneutical goal of reaching interpretative understanding with the ideal of uncoerced consensus formation brought about by the communicative process of justifying and criticizing an action (or proposed action) in light of its publicly available validity-claims and a society’s accepted justificatory strategies.

As one can imagine, the complications of Habermas’ theory increase exponentially from here on (for an excellent study of Habermas’ philosophy of language, see Cooke 1997). For our purposes, suffice it to note that all social action involves a distinctively communicative dimension that is founded in a shared stock of publicly available meanings (i.e. validity-claims), interpretative practices (including justificatory practices), and symbolic structures that comprise Habermas’ ‘lifeworld.’ His conception differs from the various conceptions of the lifeworld we find in phenomenology, however, in that it gives priority to discursive structures and ties directly into the intersubjective processes of reason-giving involved in consensus and collective will formation. Habermas’ ‘lifeworld’ also introduces two developmental arcs, via the processes involved in one’s socialization, which cultivate the requisite social competences needed to participate in society, and the processes of a society’s development, which generate, institutionalize, and modify these competences. For what counts as a reason or justification depends upon one’s social and historical situation (Habermas 1984, 273f.). The capacity to attribute validity-claims to another social actor and to justify or criticize an activity in light of the validity-claims attributed to it requires one to learn how to give and take reasons relative to the institutions and codified practices of one’s society.

The two developmental arcs of individual socialization and sociological change introduce the second dimension of Habermas’ theory: the ‘system perspective.’ It describes social development and interaction in functional terms—descriptive, and yet implicitly normative—to explain the macrological social forces informing the genesis, maintenance, and reproduction of social actors’ practical abilities and shared world. In Habermas’ view, then, a systems-theoretical perspective is simultaneously a necessary theoretical supplement to our lifeworld interactions and an outgrowth of them. It is necessary because it makes the material and historical mechanisms structuring our lifeworld activities available to inner-worldly actors in the form of knowledge about their forms of life. The need for precisely this kind of knowledge motivated the Frankfurt School’s criticism of phenomenology. For instance, Adorno insisted that the social forces of commodity fetishism do not appear thematically to agents and cannot be explained phenomenologically or by an ‘immanent critical’ analysis of one’s first-person point of view. And Habermas’ objection that hermeneutics foregrounds the basic competencies agents must possess in order to participate in a shared world but cannot explain them involves a similar sociological claim.

The systems-perspective resolves this issue by making the requisite knowledge concerning the constitution of our social world available to us. It describes the macrological forces shaping social practices and individual action. Following Talcott Parsons, Habermas identifies four functionally differentiated spheres of social interaction: an economic sphere of activity that adapts to shifting empirical conditions, a political sphere that sets collective goals and delineates the methods for their attainment, a social sphere that integrates various groups, institutions, and
identities into cohesive units, and a cultural sphere that maintains and reproduces meaningful relationships among members/institutions of a society (Habermas 1984, 5–6). Over the course of their empirical development, the different subsystems comprising ‘society’ rationalize life-world practices. Consequently, Habermas assigns sociological analysis the task of understanding this process and describing society as a whole (ibid.). This comprehensive account of ‘society,’ which satisfies one of critical theory’s two orientations, describes the functional differentiation of validity-claims, social activity, and practices of justification in a way unavailable to hermeneutical and phenomenological engagement, even though phenomenological/hermeneutical analyses presuppose or allude to it (e.g. Gadamer’s ‘Tradition’ or Heidegger’s ‘Gestell’). It also produces knowledge that social agents may use to justify or criticize social action as part of their intersubjective engagement with others within the lifeworld.

In effect, then, the increasing complexity of social life catalyzes a cognitive and practical division of labor. The functional differentiation among sub-types of human action and their associated validity-claims, according to their specialized contributions to society, allows us to introduce a robust sense of progress and diagnose illicit justificatory strategies or deformations in the intersubjective lifeworld practices to reach understanding. For instance, a justification for action that relies on the commitments of different social spheres or blocks agents from introducing other salient validity-claims into the discussion would involve an illicit strategy that coerces assent. Since these processes of rationalization and illicit transfer of justificatory strategies are beyond the scope of one’s first-person experiences, phenomenological or hermeneutical analysis has no access to them. And yet knowledge of these transformations is available to participants in dialogue.

Phenomenology and critical theory – wedges and commonalities

The brief overview of Adorno and Habermas identifies two substantive wedge issues separating phenomenology and critical theory, while also signaling a number of points of contact. The first wedge concerns how one is to account for the basic competencies informing our first-person experiences and participation in the shared practices comprising our world. For their part, members of the Frankfurt School insist that these competences need to be accounted for sociologically through a process of socialization, the historical entrenchment of previously successful activities, and their subsequent historical refinements in light of distinctive social pressures. Prominent members of the phenomenological tradition (e.g. Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer) do not appear to accept this claim. In fact, they appear to bracket out any kind of consideration of how concrete social structures constitute, maintain, and reproduce the very competencies they uncover. This tendency is especially clear in Husserl’s work, but can also be found in Heidegger and Gadamer, insofar as they insist on uncovering origins, sources, or existential structures that pattern our intersubjective engagements without explicitly investigating the sociological contexts in which these engagements unfold.

A second and closely related wedge issue concerns the character of meaning itself. As we saw, critical theorists are committed to a cognitivist, discursive account of meaning or experience, whereas the phenomenological tradition has pressed forward in the opposite direction, conceiving of meaning in non-propositional, non-discursive terms. Indeed, phenomenologists treat discursive accounts of meaning and action as parasitic on a more primordial form of worldly engagement. This difference motivates Adorno’s objection that Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology involve a false sense of immediacy. Habermas echoes Adorno’s sentiment in that he too takes our pre-predicative engagements with the world and others to presuppose a discursive knowledge.
The primacy critical theorists attribute to discursive content, moreover, turns on their views of socialization and the social reproduction of our contexts of action. Although it might be tempting to think that **thrownness**, **projection**, and **fallenness** offer a phenomenological version of the Frankfurt School’s account of an actor’s competences, it is important to underscore the crucial difference: even though this hermeneutical characterization makes essential reference to intersubjective features, Heidegger (and Gadamer) develop it exclusively from a first-person perspective—hence the decisive move to a notion of authenticity. From such a perspective, we cannot say anything about the concrete character of one’s social situation, let alone identify an emancipatory potential that all agents could share. Indeed, in Heidegger’s analysis, the social setting determining Dasein’s concerns and basic orientation opens up onto **care** as a condition of possibility for any action whatsoever. But this says precious little about any given social situation or how the historically determinate concerns distracting Dasein emerge from a specific social situation.

The wedges illuminate why the interaction between phenomenology and critical theory has been one-sided: there is no obvious way for a phenomenologist to adopt the techniques of analysis and investigation developed by critical theorists without giving up what is distinctive about phenomenology; at the same time, the first-personal perspective from which one experiences **social harms** is essential to critical theory, whose aims could therefore be furthered by certain elements of phenomenological analysis. Phenomenology promises to clarify the very structures and experiences that critical theorists would like to help alleviate.

Hence, despite the wedges, there still remain a number of points of contact between the two traditions and shared lines of flight. We have seen in some detail that critical theorists are not averse to deploying phenomenological ideas, such as the ‘lifeworld.’ After Habermas, Rahel Jaeggi’s recent *Kritik von Lebensformen* (Jaeggi 2014) offers distinctive ways to synthesize socio-logical situations and intersubjective patterns of action and experience to satisfy the Frankfurt School’s goals. Cristina Lafont too has convincingly shown that critical theory and Heideggerian phenomenology share a similar set of philosophical coordinates concerning ‘language’ and ‘truth’ (Lafont 2000 and 1999). Recent work by Nicholas Kompridis (2008) builds on this insight and reformulates critical theory’s focus on ‘emancipatory critique’ via Heidegger’s account of truth, promising to reopen the dialogue between these two traditions. Another important point of contact can be found in critical theorizing concerning the social transformations in temporal expectations of action brought about by social acceleration (Rosa 2013, Hammer 2017). In tracking the way technical developments influence one’s experience of time and the temporal parameters of action, critical theorists have stumbled on a theme long familiar to phenomenologists, from whom they might learn.

The wedge issues aside, critical theory and phenomenology share a fundamental effort to open up a dimension of social engagement that purposive theories of rational action and rational choice foreclose. The common insistence on the intersubjective nature of human engagement represents a powerful challenge to the thesis of (methodological) individualism, which is central to teleological approaches to action. Phenomenologists and critical theorists thus share the same opposition to decision-theoretical models of rational action and rational choice. Similarly, the wide appeal of the notion of recognition (Honneth 1996 and Ricoeur 2005) provides another opportunity for critical theorists and phenomenologists to come to the same table, just as recent interest in vulnerability and receptivity as critical theoretical concepts could stand to gain a lot from phenomenology’s long history of investigating these notions. In brief, however fraught their past engagements, critical theory and phenomenology have enough in common to keep the lines of dialogue open.
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