

David Ingram. *Habermas: Introduction and Analysis*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010. xvii + 360 pp. \$26.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8014-7601-3.



Reviewed by David L. Marshall

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Commissioned by Chad Ross

Analyzing and introducing the work of a living philosopher is certainly difficult, and so it is in the case of David Ingram's gloss of Jürgen Habermas. Thoughts are by their very nature processes, and every assertion of a thought is replete with implied continuations, transformations, refutations. History has not yet recorded Habermas's last words, and so the scholarly work undertaken here must to an extent remain provisional. Perhaps understandably, then, Ingram's paraphrases of Habermasian positions often respect the categories accentuated in the work itself. The work of reformulating Habermas's still evolving corpus, coming to understand it, that is, as the unfolding of a problematic only partially understood by the author himself—or as the expression of a historical context—is, therefore, not really delved into here. Perhaps this is not yet possible. On the other hand, one might argue that Dirk Moses's *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past* (2009) did recently succeed to a significant degree in situating Habermas amidst a series of rich, political, German postwar contexts.

Ingram has not deferred such work entirely. Insofar as this rather paraphrastic text has a root, it is a tension articulated by Habermas himself in the following terms: "Is it possible that one day an emancipated human race could encounter itself within an expanded space of discursive formation of will and yet be robbed of the light in which it is capable of interpreting its life as something good?" (p. 324). This, says Ingram, is "the most difficult question for [Habermas's] critical theory," and it expresses an anxiety deriving from "the apparent inadequacy of a purely formal (procedural) critical theory" (p. 324). Ingram's chief claim about his own work is that "throughout this book I have suggested that the enormous appeal of such a theory—its capacity to provide a universal normative foundation for critique—cannot entirely compensate for its lack of content" (p. 324). This is Habermas's own dialectic of Enlightenment, it would seem. One is faced with the prospect of a procedural account of how one should be with others in speech that becomes incapable of articulating its own worth in non-procedural terms.

Having placed discursive and not instrumental reason at the center of his Enlightenment, Habermas thus encounters a crisis of his own making. The dialectic of Habermasian Enlightenment is not the world of means without ends imagined by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno but rather a world of words without motivations. The anxiety is also something like a political fear: how will the pacifists defend themselves?

In Ingram's account, there are at least three different ways in which Habermas has responded to this challenge: he has doubled down on proceduralism; he has alluded to the role to be played by a distinctive kind of "aesthetic reason"; and he has attempted to bridge the divides separating logic and dialectic and rhetoric.

Per Ingram, Habermas's response has been overwhelmingly one of retrenchment into a more and more elaborated account of discursive proceduralism. The core principle has been simply that "a norm is valid when the foreseeable consequences and side effects of its general observance for the interests and value orientations of each individual could be jointly accepted by all concerned without coercion" (p. 132). Unsurprisingly (given the premium placed on consensus), the least controversial applications of this principle have been procedural. The norms universalized in this way have been the norms regulating discourse itself--the rules of quorum, applying to speak, proposing action, arguing motions, gathering evidence, ending discussion, specifying a decision.

Ingram relates that Habermas eventually accepted that his "ideal speech situation" could never be perfectly realized. This amounted to a concession that the "ideal speech situation" was more a transcendental condition of possibility for discourse than a description of how discourse might function. That is, even if one did not believe that such conditions would ever be fully achieved, one had to *assume*--in order to begin the language game of discourse--that participants in discourse

would have equal opportunities (1) to make and respond to assertions, (2) to give and to call for reasons for assertions, (3) to explain relationships between assertions and perspectives, and (4) to permit and to forbid.[1]

Such descriptions of the conditions of possibility for discourse might still function as aspirations, however. Quasi-utopian institutionalizations of speech thus remained central to Habermas's concerns: not just the original "public sphere" itself, but also judicial entities such as the International Criminal Court and proposals to transform the General Assembly of the United Nations into an elected body. At issue in Habermas's discussion of such topics has been the democratic and discursive *legitimizability* of such institutions.

Despite the massive investment of this book in paraphrasing Habermas's commitment to proceduralism, it does not seem as if Ingram himself is ultimately much convinced by this doubling-down. "We need," says Ingram, "concrete images--alternative models of democratic society, for instance--and not just theoretical-limit concepts in order to judge the structural unhappiness or injustice of society" (p. 324). Such concrete images would make use of the power of the aesthetic, a category in which (on Ingram's account) Habermas seems to have been moderately interested. But what is this "power of the aesthetic," so often alluded to, so rarely theorized with sharpness and dexterity? Is it simply a modulation of desire and aversion, inclinations towards and away from objects encountered in the senses? Is it an abiding in the beholding of an object such that the soul of the beholder is remade in the image of that which is beheld? Is it a contextualization of conceptual principles in the sensuous categories of the spatially and temporally proximate and contiguous? Is it a capacity to think the particular, to transform its apparent contingencies into working hypotheses? These are all worthy lines of inquiry,

and they can be combined, perhaps, but they have to be handled with precision and care.

What Ingram thinks here, or what Ingram thinks Habermas believes on this point is unclear. Nor is it entirely obvious when he is paraphrasing Habermas and when he is proposing a more or (perhaps) less friendly amendment to the Habermasian account. And, remarkably given its immense erudition, the German tradition begins in this presentation to appear a little provincial, even repetitious. Ingram recycles a number of the commonplaces of German aesthetics. *De rigueur*, one begins with Immanuel Kant's third critique, specifically, with imagination's finessing of the distance between reason and sense, and, more specifically, with Kant's gesture to *sensus communis* as a capacity to see one's own positions in the context of other possible positions. In this tradition, the power of the aesthetic is its capacity to speak in popular vernaculars; it is "Friedrich Schiller's idea of art as the vehicle for an aesthetic education in which not specialized experts but lay persons receptively appropriate it to come to terms with problems of alienation" (p. 327). Paraphrasing Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (and perhaps Martin Heidegger, in a way), Ingram relates that the power of the aesthetic is the moment in which art disrupts perceptual routines, revealing the world anew. The power of the aesthetic is also reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's conception of aura, that "authoritative capacity" of objects prior to the "dissociation of symbols from their life-giving context" (p. 324). This is, says Ingram, a capacity "to capture a seemingly infinite expanse of meaning, value, and purpose" (p. 324). This is a very strange, although not uncommon, gloss of Benjamin. In fact, he *wanted*, among other things, a politicization that would liquidate the auratic and authoritarian qualities of art objects; he *wanted*, that is, to liberate those objects from their "parasitic subservience to [context specifying] ritual" because for him a Nazi aestheticization of politics was not the only possibility that lay in this direction. And, of course, this lineage cannot be

rehearsed without a nod to Hannah Arendt's appropriation of Kantian judgment for political theory and practice (p. 328).

And, of course, this lineage cannot be rehearsed without a nod to Hannah Arendt's appropriation of Kantian judgment for political theory and practice. These are gestures. They are not yet lines of inquiry, not in the manner that Ingram presents them.

The less provincial version of how it might be that the sensuous, the imaginative, the affective could constitute the historically instantiated (and therefore less than ideal) speech situations that Habermasians want to regulate has been, as Ingram intimates, rhetoric. One of the chief virtues of Habermas's general approach to language use, says Ingram (somewhat mysteriously, for it is not a claim that he really explains), is its ability to overcome strict distinctions between logic and rhetoric, where logic is a concern for "*normative* questions concerning right reasoning" and where rhetoric is a concern for "*factual* questions concerning psychologically persuasive reasoning" (p. 147). A page later we hear that, in fact, Habermas's model, "cannot fully bridge the gap between logic and rhetoric," after all (p. 148). "Bait, switch?" One wonders. If one is going to praise Habermas for the boldness of his attempt to overcome the antipathy between logic and rhetoric, one needs to lay out a detailed account of that attempt before one can then conclude that, in fact, it fails. What Habermas does not have, says Ingram, is an understanding of "the social psychological aspects of successful argumentation that touch on aspects of character, empathy, and emotion" (p. 148). This, Ingram says (too briefly), is what the rhetoricians have been focused on "since Aristotle" (p. 148). What Habermas also lacks according to Ingram is "an examination of social institutions, focusing specifically on how they efficiently organize the collective pursuit of knowledge" (p. 148). All of this is worthy of investigation, but Ingram leaves it basically unexplored.

We are given only the first tidbits of a line of inquiry: "Habermas ... prefers the model of substantive argument developed by Stephen Toulmin as more congenial to actual instances in which one person tries to persuade another" (p. 129). This sounds like intellectual inheritance. Actually, however, one of the frustrations of Ingram's book is a certain imprecision in citation. On at least three occasions (Alexander von Humboldt, p. 72; Toulmin, p. 129; Arendt, p. 143), he indicates that Habermas finds a particular thinker, text, or concept useful and then proceeds only to give the bibliographic information for the non-Habermasian source *without disclosing where Habermas's reception of this source is to be found*. Where is the Habermasian reception of Toulmin? One can piece this back together oneself, of course. The answer is the 1973 essay on "Wahrheitstheorien" (which Ingram mentions without specifying the link). Such reception histories are important. They are not simply matters of intellectual historical scruple. They constitute lines of inquiry and specify the constrictions under which thought flourishes.

If one is interested in the Habermasian inheritance of divisions among logic, dialectic, and rhetoric, one pays attention when Ingram relays that "Habermas (following Robert Alexy's interpretation of Aristotle's tripartite scheme) mentions three sorts of rules governing, respectively, the *logical product*, the *dialectical procedure*, and the *rhetorical process of argumentation*" (p. 133). Here again, however, one is on one's own if one wants to locate precisely where it was that Habermas attached himself to this lineage. In this case, when the source is located—*Moralbewußtsein und kommunikatives Handeln*—one discovers that Habermas appeared to attribute his inheritance of the Aristotelian terminology of logic, dialectic, and rhetoric to Brant R. Burleson's "On the Foundations of Rationality: Toulmin, Habermas, and the *A Priori* of Reason" and not to Robert Alexy's "Eine Theorie des praktischen Diskurses." [2] In fact, however, when one reads the articles by

Burleson and Alexy, one finds no mention of Aristotle by either author and no explicit application of the distinctions among logic, dialectic, and rhetoric. This kind of imprecision is surely ironic. Is care in paraphrasing and citing the assertions of others not one of the basic commitments of the discourse ethicist?

Even as it could have facilitated such work much more efficiently, Ingram's book does hint at why one might want to investigate Habermas's theorization of discourse between logic and rhetoric more fully. Ultimately, however, the book is more stimulus than achievement. Without a precise and historically articulate sense of the alternatives to the Habermasian position in the interstice between discursive facts and discursive norms, it is very difficult to do justice to the debate.

Notes

[1]. Jürgen Habermas, "Wahrheitstheorien," in *Wirklichkeit und Reflexion*, ed. Helmut Fahrenbach (Pfullingen: Neske, 1973), 255-256.

[2]. Brant R. Burleson, "On the Foundations of Rationality: Toulmin, Habermas, and the *A Priori* of Reason" *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 16 (1979): 112-127; and Robert Alexy, "Eine Theorie des praktischen Diskurses," in *Normenbe-gründung-Normendurchsetzung*, ed. Willi Oelmüller (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1978).

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