Habermas, Psychoanalysis, & Emancipation

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Abstract -- Jurgen Habermas asserts that all knowledge is based upon human values. He criticises the values which underlie (positivistic) empirical science and instead suggests that hermeneutics provide a more appropriate basis for human sciences. However, Habermas rejects ordinary hermeneutics for its tendency to reify tradition and language, and to assume that subjects are aware of the meaning of their actions. Instead Habermas proposes a Critical Theory which has the eradication of unnecessary oppression and the maximization of human emancipation as its value. Habermas chooses Psychoanalysis as the model for this project. The following paper sketches this development from empiricism through hermeneutics to psychoanalysis. Although psychoanalysis can be viewed as a type of "depth hermeneutics" it also embodies many characteristics of an empirical science. It is suggested that this may make it inappropriate for Habermas's task. However, the major problem is seen to be the power imbalance in the analytic situation, which leaves the analyst in charge of the interaction, interpretations, and possible emancipation of the patient. Also, it is suggested that the inadvertent consequence of analysis could be to adjust individuals to society rather than emancipate them. It is possible that psychoanalysis could be altered to empower the patient, and thereby be more consistent with the theory for which it is meant to be a model. Or perhaps other theories of intersubjective process and social critique would better fit Habermas's intentions. One such alternative is briefly mentioned.

Jurgen Habermas sees facts and values as being inseparable. He rejects the positivistic claim that equates value-free knowledge with scientific facts. Empirical knowledge, according to Habermas, is only one form of possible knowledge, and all knowledge is formed by the human interests of those constituting it. In *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1972), Habermas compares the interests of the empirical sciences and the hermeneutic sciences with his model for a critical science; psychoanalysis. Habermas's practical intention for critical theory is human emancipation 'from the constraints of unnecessary domination in all its forms' (Habermas,1975, xviii). The following paper is an attempt to assess the suitability of psychoanalysis for the task of human emancipation. After sketching the empirical and hermeneutic models, and the line of thought that leads Habermas to psychoanalysis, I will concentrate on the power relationship in the analytic situation. It is my contention that this relationship, as it stands in current practice, makes psychoanalysis an unsuitable model for emancipation.

Background

Habermas claims that the (positivistic) empirical sciences proceed from a viewpoint of possible technical control which will hold true in all places, at all times, given certain specifiable conditions. Individual experience must be brought into line with the abstract general categories which have been 'discovered' by a science guided by objectification of reality in order to predict and control behaviour. The concrete person is lost in this subordination of the particular to the universal.

Hermeneutics, on the other hand, endeavours to comprehend the full experience of an individual life and then adapt this to the general categories of ordinary language. The process of hermeneutic interpretation 'merely makes a methodological discipline of the everyday communicative experience of understanding oneself and others' (Habermas,1972, p.163). Habermas says that in order to be an explicit procedure of inquiry hermeneutics must be able to delineate what it is in the structure of ordinary language which enables it to communicate even indirectly what is 'ineffably human'. Habermas cites Dilthey, who proposed three classes of life expressions which comprise the 'elementary forms of understanding' present in ordinary communication (Habermas,1972,p.164). These are; linguistic expressions, actions, and experiential expressions.

Linguistic expressions, when they remain united with their context, retain all that cannot be incorporated into their manifest content. This 'all' requires interpretation. Communicative action is an interaction based upon reciprocal expectations about behaviour and the action is related to its mental content in a regular way allowing probable assumptions about its content. ' Hermeneutics deciphers what appears as alien to speaking subjects amidst their mutual understanding because this alien material can only be communicated indirectly' (Habermas,1972, p.164). Therefore, interpretation is possible only in this middle-ground where something in the dialogue is alien, but not everything.

The third and last of Dilthey's 'elementary forms of understanding' is experiential expression. These are expressive responses of the body; examples are the

'immediately corporeal reactions of blushing and turning pale, rigidification, nervous glance, relaxation, and even laughing and crying' (Habermas,1972,p.166). Therefore it is closer than language or communicative action to the moment by moment flow of life, and unmistakably related to a unique person in a specific situation. It is a way of expressing latent meanings.

The hermeneutic inquiry starts from part expressions, attempting to grasp the meaning of the whole person, and then taking back this meaning to the parts to define them more clearly. This back and forth (the hermeneutic circle) continues until the meaning takes account of all the parts and an entire understanding is made clear. This does not rule out various other understandings and does not assume that any understanding can be entirely exhaustive.

Hermeneutics is the art of understanding the 'distance' that 'the subject must maintain and yet at the same time express between itself, as the identity of its structure in life history, and its objectivations' (Habermas,1972,p.166). The result of not maintaining this distance is to be reified by those whom the subject addresses. This is what occurs in the objectification of empirical science.

However, Dilthey wants to avoid the charge that hermeneutic scientists will view life only from their own life experiences, influencing their judgement, and that they may in fact want to influence life. Like observation in empirical science, Dilthey wanted hermeneutics to be pure of subjective interference. Habermas detours around this return to a 'covert positivism' by replacing the observing subject and object by participant subject and partner (Habermas,1972,pp.179-81). The interpreter cannot

jump out of 'his own life activity and just suspend the context of tradition in which his own subjectivity has been formed in order to submerge himself in a subhistorical stream of life that allows the pleasurable identification of everyone with everyone else' (Habermas,1972,p.181). This 'copy theory of truth' is what is attempted by controlled observation in positivistic science.

Habermas and hermeneutics were allied in their refutation of the positivistic underpinnings of empirical science. But Habermas wants to go further. He not only wants to avoid Dilthey's slip back into positivism, he wants to escape the reification of tradition and the danger of relativism that he sees in the hermeneutic project. He does not accept that a subject is always aware of the meaning of his actions. Habermas stresses that the interest guiding his theory is human emancipation. This emancipatoy interest is 'an attitude which is formed in the experience of suffering from something man-made, which can be abolished and should be abolished' (Habermas,1986, p.198). Critical Theory is the science which wants to free man from all unnecessary domination. And Psychoanalysis, as a general theory of 'life-historical self-formative processes' provides the model for this task.

Why Psychoanalysis?

Psychoanalysis bridges the gap between the universal sphere and the comprehension of individual historical processes. According to Habermas, psychoanalysis is the 'only tangible' science which incorporates methodical self-reflection. Meaning can be altered or destroyed by the limitations of capacity, and efficiency of, memory, cultural traditions, or other channels of transmission. Hermeneutics addresses these

'accidental' flaws. Psychoanalysis on the other hand is directed at what is not consciously intended and not accidental. These 'flaws' have a meaning which is due to conditions internal to the person. Psychoanalytic interpretation is concerned with those connections of symbols in which a subject deceives itself about itself. David Ingleby refers to psychoanalysis as an example of 'depth hermeneutics' (Ingleby, 1981, p.61).

Parapraxes or symptoms 'indicate that the faulty text both expresses and conceals self-deceptions of the author' (Habermas,1972,p.219). Obsessive thoughts, repetition compulsion, and hysterical body symptoms demonstrate that all three of Dilthey's elementary forms of symbolic structures can be distorted. Ordinary hermeneutics, according to Habermas, cannot address this level of human experience where the expressions of the author confront him as alienated and incomprehensible. The latent content behind the manifest expression must be deciphered.

From the psychoanalytic point of view, the pressure of the patient's suffering and the desire to lessen it are the preconditions for successful therapy. The therapeutic results of analysis are supposedly due to the dismantling of repression which initiates the return of a lost piece of personal history (this is why analytic knowledge is self-reflection). 'Resistance' stands in the way of free and public communication. Enlightenment in analytic work occurs when the knowledge of the analyst is communicated to the patient so that it becomes knowledge for him.

In analytic work the analyst is the instrument of knowledge. He is engaged in a 'controlled deployment' of his subjectivity. Therefore, he must undergo his own

analysis in order to "cleanse" himself of the very defects he is combating in his patients. The analyst's internal situation could impair his ability to correctly assess the state of his patient. The self-scrutiny of the training analysis supposedly preserves the superiority of the analyst in the psychoanalytic situation and also sets the level of self-reflection which the patient can attain. The patient cannot surpass the doctor in terms of his enlightenment (or emancipation).

Freud's view was that some day psychoanalysis would be replaced by pharmacology. Psychoanalysis, seen as a natural science, leads to the technical utilisation of scientific information. 'If analysis only seems to appear as an interpretation of texts and actually leads to making possible technical control of the psychic apparatus, then there is nothing unusual about the idea that psychological influence could at some point be replaced with greater effects by somatic techniques of treatment' (Habermas,1972,p..247). Freud thought that some day chemicals would be used to influence the distribution of psychic energy.

Habermas, however, does not agree that psychoanalysis could be replaced by technologies formulated on the theories of natural science. He must disagree with Freud on this matter to save the emancipatory aim of psychoanalysis as he sees it. Otherwise his depth hermeneutic enterprise succumbs to positivistic interests. According to Habermas, the experience of reflection is the act which frees the person from being an object for itself. This must be accomplished by the subject itself. It cannot be substituted by any technological project. According to Habermas, Freud must have realised that his 'natural scientific' psychology would sacrifice the intention

of enlightenment; ego developing out of id (Habermas,1972,p.254). If a construction from a general interpretation is correct, the patient will produce certain memories, reflect on forgotten life history, and overcome behaviour and communication difficulties. So these behaviours themselves are the indication of enlightenment, and successful analysis.

Whether the actual work of psychoanalysis resembles Habermas's hermeneutic emphasis or Freud's empirical model is important in assessing psychoanalysis as an appropriate model for emancipation. The question of power relationships in the analytic setting is an important aspect of this assessment.

The Nature of Power in Psychoanalysis

In the psychoanalytic project, the unconscious impulses, the resistance, even the patient himself are spoken of as though they are out to sabotage the work of the analyst. Freud says there is a 'struggle between the doctor and the patient, between intellectual and instinctual life, between understanding and seeking to act...'(quoted in Habermas,1972, p.231). This is very different from the hermeneutic tradition where the inquirer is 'a partner in dialogue, a participant rather than an observer or critic' (Thompson and Held,1982,p.58). Habermas could argue that mutual participation is evident in the working-through of the transference/counter-transference, but this elevates the theoretical psychic reality over the 'actual' setting and still leaves the "valid understanding" with the analyst. The notion of countertransference itself attributes to, or blames, the patient for the inner state of the analyst, or at least assumes that the analyst could tell the difference between his/her own complexes and

projected complexes from the patient. Rather than a project negotiated between the two participants, analysis becomes an unbalanced interaction in which the analyst is instructed to maintain an 'emotional coldness' in order to protect his own psyche from that of the patient (Freud,1912, p.115). This "clinical distance" resembles empirical science and could be justified if we believe the notorious reputation which Freud has given to the unconscious. That the power imbalance and struggle in analysis are necessary to emancipate the conscious from the unconscious enemy.

According to Habermas's reading of Freud, the analytic process does not depend on the analyst's successful influence on the patient but rather on the course of the patient's process of self-reflection. This is somewhat misleading since the patient's process itself is conceptualized by the analyst. From Freud's account, the analytic situation is <u>not</u> guided by the internal process of the patient but quite clearly manipulated by the analyst according to <u>his</u> view of the patient's self-reflection, for example,

> Cruel though it may sound, we must see to it that the patient's suffering, to a degree that is in some way or other effective, does not come to an end prematurely. If, owing to the symptoms having been taken apart and having lost their value, his suffering becomes mitigated, we must re-instate it elsewhere in the form of some appreciable privation; otherwise we run the danger of never achieving any improvements except quite insignificant and transitory ones (quoted in Habermas, 1972, p.234).

It is clear from this passage that the analyst is the one who decides if the process is progressing in the correct fashion. Knowledge becomes instrumental in 'analytic knowledge'; it is the power <u>in the analyst</u> and <u>over the patient</u> to undo self-deception, the tool to unhinge resistance. Emancipation is the goal, and it is achieved by the imposition of authority; analytic knowledge. This view assumes that emancipation can result from a process that is not itself emancipatory and that this is <u>necessary</u>

because we do not naturally strive toward self-enlightenment. Habermas, with Freud, sees humans as caught in an inner conflict; the conscious desire to know against the unconscious motivation to conceal. So the analyst must impose on the patient all the power of his acquired knowledge to assist in this struggle against the patient's own ignorance.

Two other points here are that; psychoanalytic knowledge is seen as appropriate for everyone's self-deceptions, and the analyst is not in a state of deception himself. The training analysis supposedly 'purifies' the analyst. Again, this is an approximation of the positivistic desire for a subject-free, objective, tool of inquiry. It supposes that an individual can ever be appreciably free, in the psychological realm, of the illusions he sets out to reveal. Nina Coltart (1992), a practising psychoanalyst, says 'there is no such thing as a fully-analysed person...' (p.185). In fact there is no convincing reason to assume that the analyst is psychologically healthier than his/her patient. Yet the power imbalance in psychoanalysis demands that this is so, otherwise rather than emancipation the analytic setting could turn out to be a very dangerous place for the patient. He is expected to acquiesce to the analyst's 'expertise' and to trust in it even when it does not match his own experience. Since resistance can be conscious or unconscious, we have the potential situation of the patient and analyst disagreeing - and of the analyst always being right, as Freud suggests;

> We then say to the patient that we infer from his behaviour that he is now in a state of resistance; and he replies that he knows nothing of that, and is only aware that his associations have become more difficult. It turns out that we were right; but in that case his resistance was unconscious too, just as unconscious as the repressed... (quoted in Habermas, 1972, p.243).

The patient realises that his free association is now more difficult but he is not aware of the meaning of this - only the analyst knows the true meaning of the patient's

behaviour. Habermas does not seem to find this problematic. He agrees that a patient's rejection of an interpretation is no reason for its refutation. 'The interpretation of a case is corroborated only by the successful ... completion of self-reflection, and not in any unmistakable way by what the patient says or how he behaves...' (Habermas, 1972, p.266). This sounds reasonable in psychoanalytic terms, but it side-steps the issue of who decides if the analyst's construction is correct. Who decides if the patient has undergone a 'successful completion of self-reflection'? Not only could the analyst be wrong, or blinded by a defence mechanism of his own, he is also dealing with his own interests; philosophical, financial, and issues of status in the eyes of his patients and his peers. As Habermas pointed out, none of us are ever value free, and this must include analysts. Nina Coltart (1992) warns that to use techniques without noting when they fail or when they produce only a negative response is a ' gross error and a neglect of the true state of each patient at that moment ...' (p.189).

There must be some means whereby the patient can reject the imposition of interpretation. It could be possible that psychoanalytic theory is not applicable to his/her current issue. The analyst cannot be the one to arbitrate this situation if this is to truly remain the patient's emancipation. Freud admits that in some rare cases the patient's "no" is legitimate dissent. In that case the analyst must reflect upon his/her own consciousness, and the interaction may revert to a hermeneutic one, with two empowered partners. Usually, however, the patient's "no", or "yes" offers little support for the truth of what is happening. Freud does say that there are 'indirect forms of confirmation' which are trustworthy (Habermas, 1972,p.267), but again these would require interpretation - by the analyst. If the patient's protestations were

accepted as falsification of the offered construction, a valid interpretation is not lost; either an invalid one is discarded or we put aside one that for now, is inappropriate. If it has some validity it will re-surface in some form, and in the process individual integrity and respect for the patient is sustained.

In the frequent sessions between analyst and patient, where the authority rests so completely with one of them, it has been said that what occurs is closer to indoctrination than emancipation (Cioffi,1973,p.129). Unlike hermeneutics, in psychoanalysis there is one accepted form of understanding; the patient learns to see himself in terms of only one theory. Again, Nina Coltart warns, 'We should avoid the danger of brainwashing our patients into submitting compliantly to a technique just because we happen to have learned how to handle it' (1992, p.190). Monique Wittig says this more forcefully by insisting that the analytic relationship is one of force, not consensus; 'In the analytic experience there is an oppressed person; the psychoanalysed, whose need for communication is exploited and who... has no other choice, ...than to attempt to say what s/he is supposed to say' *(*1992*,* p.24).

Habermas says that we are only free when we have freed ourselves from the constraint of tradition and institutions (and the self-deceptions which legitimise them) , yet the way to this freedom is to subordinate the person to the tradition and institution of psychoanalysis. In this subordination the patient is not taken seriously as a responsible person, capable or rational.

In *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1,* Habermas says, 'The presuppositions of discourse can be satisfied only after the therapy has been

successful ' (1984,p.21). That is, when the patient has finally agreed with the analyst (convincingly) they can then re-enter the arena of accepted discourse. He refers to the interaction of therapy as 'therapeutic critique', in which the therapist tries to convince the patient by argument to abandon their self-deceptions. The power imbalance is justified because the patient is not (yet) rational, incapable of meeting the requirements of free and open discourse. This is far-removed from the non-critical, democratic atmosphere of hermeneutic inquiry. It is clear that the benefits of emancipation will accrue only to those deemed "rational". This erosion of an inclusive form of emancipation continues at the social level.

Social Considerations

So far, psychoanalysis seems to share a number of characteristics with the empirical model: 1. The relationship of the analyst to the analysand's unconscious approximates that of the medical doctor to the disease - the pathology is the object of interest, not the whole being as in hermeneutics. 2. Rather than two subjectivities in partnership, the analyst maintains a position of objectivity in the factual and the psychical relationship due to his 'purification' in the training analysis. 3. There is a subordination of the irrational to the rational and therefore a justification for treating the patient differently from the "normal" citizen. 4. And most importantly, the analyst, because of his 'purification' and his specialised knowledge, retains the power of an expert. An aspect of this power and specialised knowledge is that the individual life is subsumed under the abstract general categories of psychoanalytic metapsychology. Wittig maintains that the tendency to 'universalise' itself is only an oppressive artefact of the heterosexual mind and that psychoanalysis adjusts us to a

pre-selected normality (1992, p.27).

An advance in enlightenment requires the critical exposition of commonsense ideas and values. This is why Habermas passed from hermeneutics to psychoanalysis. Hermeneutics seemed to reify tradition without making explicit the tacit knowledge and rules of interaction. Authority and reason supposedly converge in tradition, which is the presupposition for hermeneutics. 'Only self-reflection liberates us from ideologies which the hermeneutic acceptance of traditions cannot free us from' (Thompson and Held,1982,p.94). However, psychoanalysis also must assume the existence of some sort of 'normality' and 'deviance' in order to identify what is a symptom of pathology. This necessitates reference to some culturally determined traditions. So Habermas's depth hermeneutics also, at base, relies upon common sense.

When versions of 'normality' conflict, Habermas assigns the analyst a privileged version. In Melvin Pollner's view, 'It is precisely in assigning his own version a privileged status that the analyst engages in the politics of experience' (1975, p.424). For there is no empirical or logical necessity to agree with the analyst. The agreement may come from enlightenment through self-reflection, or it comes from coercion, based upon the very real suffering which results from being ostracised. The analyst's theory is historically contingent. This is seen clearly in the case of child sexual abuse, the reality of which psychoanalysis was slow to acknowledge, and homosexuality, which quarters of psychoanalysis is still pathologizing (unlike most psychotherapeutic communities and much of the rest of society). In her essay, "French Anti-Psychiatry", Sherry Turkle has also pointed out that the continuum model of pathology in

psychoanalysis '...makes it possible to describe a whole spectrum of behaviours as pre-pathological, including behaviours which a given society at a given point in time finds bizarre, immoral, or politically inconvenient...' (quoted in Ingleby,1981,p.173). It is evident that a training analysis does not address the social context of the analyst, his/her prejudices, or the danger of reification through mistaking historical norms for "natural" conditions.

It could be argued that all psychoanalysis 'normalises' rather than emancipates. The analyst can be seen as an agent of social control, colluding with society to make well-adjusted citizens. David Ingleby has acknowledged this danger and answers that psychoanalysis must be released from its therapeutic use, so that its social dimension and historicity are not obscured (1981,pp.65-70). He maintains that *somehow* a therapeutic technique that normalises at the individual level can emancipate if applied to society. I would maintain that the power relationships and the universal application of such a theory would need to be addressed. It is also worth noting that there are those who contend that the therapeutic situation is repressive to the therapist - he must be respectable, and that this is transmitted unconsciously as the goal of therapy. Some think therapy should lead to eccentricity and the analyst, *if* he or she is emancipated, will model this (Hillman and Ventura, pp. 30-31). Also, in the words of David Smail, '...what ails people is their lives and not their fantasies' (1987,p.400). Smail believes that psychotherapy can *and should* support deviance. This suggests that the failure of psychoanalysis to champion emancipation and the danger of "normalising" is not solely to do with its therapeutic role.

As Habermas points out, it is possible to adjust a healthy individual to a pathological

society. However, Freud concludes that, '... civilisation has to be defended against the individual, and its regulations, institutions, and commands are directed to that task' (Habermas,1972,p.278). Habermas and Freud both believe that the basic human problem is addressed by the 'evolution of institutions that permanently solve the conflict between surplus impulses and the constraint of reality' (Habermas,1972,p.283;Thompson and Held,1982,p92). It could be that psychoanalysis, with its imperfections, is the only hope in trying to achieve this evolution. However, an unexamined assumption here is that there is always some minimal need for external constraints on people. Emancipation is freedom from excessive and unnecessary oppression, not *all* power and authority. This seems to erode the emancipatory project further. Rather than a radical theory, Habermas is left with a somewhat conservative view which may on the social level 'normalise' and adapt citizens, not enlighten them.

To highlight these assumptions I will mention that there are alternatives. The American philosopher and psychologist Eugene Gendlin says we are actually trained to feel that we *ought* to fit into society. Anything that does not fit society's pre-set forms is viewed as merely internal, crazy. This, says Gendlin, is oppression by the external. He claims that change can come from inside people outwards, that order does not have to be imposed (Gendlin, 1984, p.145). According to Freud, if a person was more complicated than a given form (like marriage for example), the problem was the person, that they were somehow pathological. 'Society defines these simplistic forms as "reality" and thereby defines our experienced complexity as unreal and merely internal' (Gendlin, 1984, p.144).

In ‘Process Ethics and the Political Question’, Gendlin (1986) says there is a morality other than the superego. Political theories deny that the body has an order of its own. They imply that social change must originate on the social level. Change must be imposed upon people because it cannot come from them. Habermas seems to adopt this view in his embrace of psychoanalysis. The patient must be pried from his self-deceptions by the power of the analyst. Gendlin has a concept of experiential change which relies on the human body's implicit intricacy. The body is the site of our lived interactions and as such holds much information that is easily accessed, of therapeutic value, and of social consequence. This allows each person to check an external form against their experience of interacting with it, and allows the subject to choose from a variety of theoretical interpretations without being tied to any one. Gendlin offers an alternative, which in spirit as well as method is in keeping with Habermas's interest in emancipation, and his desire to leave behind empirical values, while avoiding the slip into oppression as a means to emancipation. This alternative is an aspect of the existential-phenomenological movement in psychotherapy, representing a credible depth hermeneutic and a critique of psychoanalysis in one (see Spinelli, 2001 for enticing descriptions of the scope of existential approaches).

In this essay several questions have been raised but not answered. Mostly these questions lay beyond the scope of this paper. The intension here was primarily to suggest that psychoanalysis, with its present power structure, is not an appropriate model for Habermas's critical theory . I can not offer a definitive answer as to whether psychoanalysis, in a re-vamped form, could achieve the emancipatory task. However, within the world of psychotherapy, there are now viable alternatives, which on the surface at least, appear to be more sensible models for Habermas's project of

emancipation.

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