Pragmatics, poststructuralism, and hermeneutics: An examination of discursive-consensus formation and its ethical implications

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine how Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Hans-Georg Gadamer deal with the subject of discursive-consensus formation in their work. I argue that while Habermas’s theory of communicative action provides a comparative benchmark on the subject of consensus, and Gadamer’s work on hermeneutics supports him to an extent, Derrida’s focus on deconstruction and the critique of metaphysics and Foucault’s project of disrupting sedimented discourses present markedly divergent opinions on the subject. As such, I also look at the ethical and political implications of each of their respective positions specific to the issues of consensus, understanding, and dialogue.

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1. Introduction

Poststructuralism and hermeneutics are two philosophical modes of thought that are equally broad, critical, and controversial. Moreover, they are internally constituted by multiple and often opposing positions on everything from identity, to basic ontological and epistemological assumptions about reality, and, specific to the subject of this essay, the prospects for a consensus-based democracy. In examining how the pragmatist, poststructural, and hermeneutic positions deal with discursive-consensus formation, and the political and ethical implications of their respective positions, I will begin with an introduction to Jürgen Habermas whose theories of communicative action and communicative rationality, I argue, form a theoretical and
philosophical benchmark on the subject of consensus and dialogic communication. It is thus from Habermas’s pragmatist framework that the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and philosophies of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida can be measured. While it would be expeditious to argue simply that hermeneutics is amenable to Habermas’s position, with some slight variations, and poststructuralism is anathema to it, my response will attempt to highlight some of the complexities of this debate.

2. A note on methodology

I will begin this essay with introduction to Habermas followed by separate sections on Foucault, Derrida, and Gadamer in which I will, first, summarize the thought of each of these theorists, and second, discuss how their respective approaches converge with and diverge from Habermas’s pragmatic conceptualization of consensus-based dialogic communication. I will end with a discussion of the ethical and political implications of the thought of each of these figures and suggest future possibilities where, perhaps, a melding of these different approaches may become necessary.

3. Jürgen Habermas

As I have argued in the introduction, in order to fully understand the normative and modern character of discursive consensus, dialogue, and debate, I feel that it is necessary to begin with an introduction to Jürgen Habermas’s pragmatic theory of communicative action. His philosophy constitutes an ideal body of thought in which rational debate and consensus-building figure prominently and positively. Understanding or consensus, for Habermas, is based on intersubjective mutuality, trust, and shared knowledge. Essentially, his project can be characterized as an attempt to reinstall and reinvigorate the Enlightenment values of reason and freedom in contemporary discourse which aims at pragmatic consensus. Habermas argues that “discourse becomes democratic through the non-coercively unifying consensus-building force of a discourse in which participants [in the public sphere] overcome their at first subjectively biased views in favor of a rationally motivated agreement” (Habermas, 1980:58).

Communicative action, in this context, is Habermas’s solution to the aporias of modern society, including, for example, the increasing encroachment of economic and administrative imperatives of the system onto the lifeworld, as well as the rise of expert cultures; it is also his vehicle for realizing the promises of the Enlightenment. His framework builds on the work of Marx and Weber to present a theory of society and communication that goes beyond metaphysics and aims to explain action meanings and intentions in such as way as to incorporate the reflexivity and intersubjectivity of the agents involved. Communicative action, according to Habermas, “presupposes the use of language as a medium for a kind of reaching understanding, in the course of which participants, through relating to a world, reciprocally raise validity claims that can be accepted or contested” (Habermas, 1981:99). It also “can be understood as a circular process in which the actor is two things in one: an initiator, who masters situations through

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1 I think beginning with Habermas is also necessary to fully explain what I mean by the concepts consensus and dialogue in my later discussions of Foucault, Derrida, and Gadamer.

2 It should be noted, however, that Habermas does not think of communicative rationality as ideal, but as an inherent part of the communicative process.
actions for which he is accountable, and a product of the transitions surrounding him, of groups whose cohesion is based on solidarity to which he belongs, and of processes of socialization in which he is reared” (Habermas, 1990:135).

Bowning describes this type of communicative action, understood as rational discourse and debate in the pursuit of consensus, as “a means of linking the aims of individual participants in a cooperative way so that they pursue their individual goals under the condition that they can harmonize their plans of action on the basis of common situation definitions” (Bowning, 1996:98). Communicative rationality, in this context, is procedural, concrete, and historically-situated rather than universal, metaphysical, or abstractly theoretical. Habermas regards the consensus of public discourse (or dialogic consensus), taking place in the public sphere, as essential to communicative action.

The relationship between Habermas’s thesis of a communicative action and his earlier concerns regarding the critique of ideology adds another layer of thought that is significant to the issue of consensus. Communicative action, according to Bowning, is related to Habermas’s critique of ideology in two ways: first, dialogic communicative action presents itself as a norm against which strategic actions have to be critiqued in order to unveil their hidden agenda(s); and second, communicative action moves forward from a position of suspicion to a brighter world where, with a specific set of tools (i.e. knowledge of the ‘ideal speech situation’), rationality can reign (Bowning, 1996:102).

Although Habermas is traditionally thought of as a pragmatist, because of his focus on the rational reconstruction of the universal validity basis of speech, his thought – specific to the possibility of reaching consensus through rational debate – has affinities to the hermeneutic position of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Conversely, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida’s poststructural positions are highly skeptical and often openly hostile to the so-called universalism and rationality to which Habermas subscribes. However, there are instances where, for example, Derridian deconstruction (when viewed as a process of refoundation) appears to parallel Habermasian communicative action while, in others, Gadamerian hermeneutics (particularly on the subjects of prejudice and tradition) appears wholly dissimilar to what Habermas refers to as the inherent or necessary “objectivity of Verstehen or interpretive understanding” (Habermas, 1981:53).

One further issue which is important in this context is the influence of Heideggerian thought on the philosophies of all four theorists. Habermas draws upon Heidegger for his ontological analysis of freedom (in that he uses Heidegger’s terms ‘Being in Time’ interchangeably with the lifeworld in, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity), although he faults Heidegger for failing to adequately account for meaning because of his emphasis on linguistic disclosure (that is, on the disclosing function of language as opposed to its coordinating function).

In contrast, Derrida follows Heidegger to a point (and draws on him for his (non)theory of deconstruction), but argues that Heidegger’s concept of Being, as the space of unconcealment, is a veiled expression of logocentrism. Derrida further contends that, insofar as Heidegger asks about the essence of truth or the meaning of Being, he still speaks the language of metaphysics that looks

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3 It should be acknowledged that although Habermas’s conception of rationality is ‘context-specific and historicized’, it is not relativistic—just mildly relative. That is, he does consider some things/entities (e.g. democracy) more rational and ‘good’ than others (e.g. Nazism is irrational and ‘bad’).

4 Strategic action is viewed by Habermas as a type of action/communication which distorts the communication process. Its truth, sincerity, and appropriateness, according to Habermas, must be tested to ensure that it does not facilitate ideological distortions (Habermas, 1981).
upon meaning as something out there that is to be discovered (Derrida, 1982). As to Gadamer, he asserts, in contradistinction to Derrida, that Heidegger did move beyond metaphysics; Gadamer draws on the latter for his account of intersubjectivity, although he critiques him for failing to understand the role of dialogue in facilitating self-understanding (and for his implicit support of Nazism) (Gadamer, 2000:294). Finally, Foucault, who never mentions Heidegger directly, is influenced by him on the issue of how to reconceptualize time and space in non-Cartesian terms, i.e. in a poetic rather than a mathematical mode. We can see this influence, according to Stuart Elden, in the way Foucault writes about history: like Heidegger, he conceptualizes the present in terms of the past and future—that is, as the colliding moment of past and future (Elden, 2002).

4. Postmodernism/poststructuralism: the theoretical location(s) and differences between Derrida and Foucault

It is difficult to classify the philosophies of either Derrida or Foucault within a single paradigm, as neither thinker, I believe, would assent to being classified in any way. The postmodern/poststructural debate underlying this difficulty, while much too complex to delineate here, has been dealt with quite nicely by Niall Lucy, who (in his text, *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Introduction*) discusses the distinction between poststructuralism and postmodernism. Lucy asserts that, on the one hand, postmodernism “thinks it is possible to replace the concept of structure with ‘nonstructure’” (Lucy, 1997:x) and, in doing so, reconfirms its commitment to structural thought through its opposition of such “radically new forms of (non)appearance and their ‘outmoded’ counterparts” (Lucy, 1997:95); on the other hand, poststructuralism “offers a critique of structure, seeing structures as inseparable from the ‘plays’ within them” (Lucy, 1997:x). Consistent with this distinction, both Derrida and Foucault can be thought of as poststructuralists—Derrida because he questions the very notion of structure, thereby undermining the ground upon which postmodernism is based, and Foucault because he also critiques structure (i.e. in his distinction between the ‘ethics of difference’ and the ‘fascism of coherence’).

Although Foucault and Derrida’s philosophies both engage in problematizing, one, linear notions of time; two, the notion of language as a neutral medium; three, the possibility of “essences”; and four, the concept of reality or the real (Edkins, 1999:14–15), their theoretical starting points, the epistemological vehicles they use, and the conclusions they reach are radically different. While Foucault is engaged in the study of how the development of knowledge is intertwined with mechanisms of power, Derrida is much more interested in developing a radical critique whose core objective is to problematize and critique Western philosophy for its logocentric, phonocentric, and metaphysical biases.

In the 1970s, Foucault and Derrida had an interesting, and often tense, debate through their writings on the subject of Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization*—a debate which Derrida initiated. Essentially, Derrida criticizes the limitations of Foucault’s text which he saw as failing in its project of unearthing how madness may have been constituted in a particular manner and how it may have existed differently before its constitution. Derrida argues that Foucault fails to adequately deal with the relationship between his text and our historical structure and argues that madness itself cannot be objectified. He asserts that, therefore, Foucault’s project is an “efficacious and subtle restoration. . . of the act perpetrated against madness” (Derrida, 1978b:35). That is, he accuses Foucault of valorizing and excluding madness and that Foucault, in doing so, actually re-invokes the hierarchy that he is supposedly overturning. Foucault’s response (nine years later) deals with Derrida’s objections by reiterating why madness is necessarily excluded in order to establish its
subjectivity—something Derrida clearly distances himself from, by maintaining that madness is never excluded.

In the following sections, I will separately synthesize the philosophies of Foucault and Derrida and relate their respective positions to the Habermasian model of consensual communicative action.

4.1. Michel Foucault

Foucault’s overall project, particularly in his later writings on truth, meaning, and discourse, is to demonstrate how discourses constitute their subjects and how power is implicated in this process. His objective is to “delineate the context in which what is regarded as a sovereign, rational Cartesian subject is in fact that which is constructed historically and discursively, insofar as it speaks, thinks and lives with a particular discourse” (Keyman, 1997:126). Or, in Foucault’s words, to examine how and why individuals conform to the norms of modern society and the power–knowledge nexus which is established in discourse “that is, in the vast network of conflicting and inter-validating discursive practices constituting reality” (Foucault, 1975:27).

One of the advantages of Foucault’s approach is that it allows for a much greater complexity than do traditional critiques of ideology, in that its focus is not on dominating versus dominated discourses but on analyzing the specific historical relations of power and the discursive practices that sustain or resist them (Edkins, 1999:54). As Foucault argues

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised against it, any more than silences are. . .Discourse transmits and produces power: it reinforces it but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. In like manner, silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions: but they also loosen its hold and provide for relatively obscure areas of intolerance (Michel Foucault, as cited by Edkins, 1999:54).

Using the method of genealogy, Foucault illustrates exactly how discursivity works by reestablishing the systems of subjugation and the hazardous play of dominations (Foucault, 1984:83). To Foucault contrast his approach with traditional approaches to history whose focus is, more often than not, on the search for origins or essences. Genealogy is overtly poststructural in its attempt to reveal something quite different: “not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that [things] have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985:96). As Foucault argues, “the role of genealogy is to record its history: the history of morals, ideals, and the metaphysical concepts, the history of the concept of liberty or of the ascetic life; as they stand for the emergence of different interpretations, they must be made to appear as events on the stage of historical process” (Foucault, 1984:86).

Der Derian, illustrating precisely this point, utilizes Foucault’s genealogical method to disrupt traditional historical analyses of diplomacy and, instead, looks at how diplomacy emerged as a “mediation of men estranged from an infinite yet abstracted power which they themselves have constructed” (Der Derian, 1987:199). Diplomacy, in this context, is seen as a discursive means by which nations have attempted to control difference in the name of identity. Der Derian argues

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5 A good example of this is Foucault’s study of how prisons and the discourse of delinquency in fact produce the delinquent as a pathologized subject, who is denied political status.

6 Der Derian claims that diplomacy allows states to manage Otherness and still maintain a stable identity.
that Foucauldian genealogical inquiry is the only way to adequately study “the multiple strategies of sites and power which produce and are sustained by the diplomatic discourse” (Der Derian, 1987:200).

Foucault’s method, on the whole, appears to be highly critical of the ideal of consensus—although he never addresses the issue directly. His focus is on the instances in which subjects accept particular discourses as truthfully representative of themselves: “the relationship of power can be the result of a prior or permanent consent, but it is not by nature the manifestation of consensus” (Foucault, 1983:220). However, Foucault does, in several of his texts, criticize the normative theme of reason around which notions of understanding and consensus, particularly rational–political consensus, arise. Responding to a critique by a disciple of Habermas, Foucault writes:

I think that the central issue of philosophy and critical thought since the eighteenth century, has been, still is, and will, I hope, remain the question, What is this Reason that we use? What are its historical effects? What are its limits, and what are its dangers? How can we exist as rational beings, fortunately committed to practicing a rationality that is unfortunately crisscrossed by intrinsic dangers? One should remain as close to this question as possible, keeping in mind that it is extremely difficult to resolve (Foucault, 1983:36).

In relation to genealogy, reason or rationality (specific to understanding and consensus) is even more visibly critiqued by Foucault. He writes that knowledge, in the modern world, is not made for understanding but for ‘cutting’:

Examining the history of reason, he [the genealogist] learns that it was born in an altogether ‘reasonable’ fashion – from chance; devotion to truth and the precision of scientific methods arose from the passion of scholars, their reciprocal hatred, their fanatical and unending discussions, and their spirit of competition – the personal conflicts that slowly forged the weapons of reason (Foucault, 1977:78).

Humanity does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare; humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination (Foucault, 1977:151).

As such, a Habermasian inspired consensus is rejected by Foucault and is even described, as this last quotation illustrates, as riddled with coercive domination and violence. Like Derrida, Foucault attempts to contest these globalizing discourses by “revealing how a search for

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7 Foucault also argues that claims of truth or commonsense (which may be presented as having been arrived at through consensus, i.e. democracy) mask a strategy of oppression and normalization. This is also Derrida’s view.
8 In this context, Foucault has also asserted that Habermas’s theory of communicative action is transcendental in nature and argues, instead, for an increased focus on particulars and particularities.
9 Habermas would answer this charge by pointing out that his theory of communicative rationality is distinct from instrumental or strategic rationality. Communicative rationality is social, not conceptual, and is specifically about coming to consensus about validity claims and being able to “interpret the nature of one’s desires and feelings in the light of culturally established standards of value...[and] adopt a reflective attitude to the very value standards through which desires and feelings are interpreted” (Habermas, 1981:20). (Being able to take the position of the Other is also important to Habermas’s theory of communicative action.)
signification, meaning, continuity, and identity regulates and restricts, structures, a multitudinous ensemble of events as a violent imposition of regularity” (Foucault, 1983:67).

4.2. Jacques Derrida

As I have indicated, Derrida’s project is one of a radical critique whose core objective is to problematize and undermine Western philosophy for its logocentrism, phonocentrism, and metaphysical bias. His (non)methodology of deconstruction aims at destabilizing the key assumptions of Western philosophy and problematizing ‘commonsense’ by the insightful use of metaphor and contradiction. Derrida’s deconstructive techniques (including his method of reversing and then displacing hierarchical binaries, thereby illustrating how these binaries frame our thought and confirm relationships of superiority and inferiority) consist of an element of play – playing with words, meanings – in order to render formerly clear ideas ambiguous, by “[t]urning . . . the word on its strange and invisible pivot” (Derrida, 1981:97).

The major tenets of Derrida’s thought consists of three central ideas: that meaning is an affair of language’s systems of difference without positive terms, that writing is prior to speech, and that the logocentric binaries of Western thought must be disrupted (Derrida, 1976). Derrida (1976) uses terms like différence (difference and deferral), trace, supplement, undecidable, arché-writing, and écriture to investigate and radically question traditional conceptions of the origins of language where “speech is seen as natural, direct communication and writing as an artificial and oblique representation of a representation” (Culler, 1982:100). And Derrida utilizes these concepts to decenter and disrupt in a manner that is anything but traditional,

The necessary decentering cannot be a philosophic or scientific act as such, since it is a question of dislocating, through access to another system linking speech and writing, the founding categories of language and the grammar of the episteme. The natural tendency of theory – of what unites philosophy and science in the episteme – will push rather toward filling in the breach than toward forcing the closure. . .all of this refers to a common and radical possibility that no determined science, no abstract discipline, can think as such...(Derrida, 1976:92).

This critique sets the stage for Derrida’s later and more exhaustive writings on metaphysics and especially ‘logocentrism’; the latter, he argues, arose as a result of erroneous assumptions about the origins of language and the traditional representation of writing as parasitic and secondary to speech (for Derrida, this binary opposition, speech versus writing, marks the beginning of logocentrism). Moreover, Derrida’s rejection of metaphysics and his critique of logocentrism are central to his position on the possibility of dialogue and consensus, as well as for his advocacy of deconstruction. His denunciations stem from the belief that, as a mode of philosophical analysis, metaphysics is domineering, imposing, universalistic, atemporal, aggressively self-centered, and intolerant of contradictions. He argues that “[o]nce you grant privilege to some gathering and not to dissociating, then you leave no room for the radical otherness of the other, for the radical singularity of the other” (Derrida, as cited by Caputo, 1997:152). In Derrida’s fundamentally de-stabilized and indeterminable thinking, attempts at reaching understanding or uncovering the

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10 Logocentrism, according to Derrida, is the attitude that logos (reason, speech, thought, law) is the central principle of language and philosophy and that speech, not writing, is central to language.

11 Metaphysics may be called the ‘science of presence’ (as seen specifically in the Western penchant towards universals, essences, fundamentals, etc.—they all contain an element of ‘presence’).
authentic reading of a text are always deferred and disrupted. His grounding in a philosophy of multiplicity and respect for radical Otherness is meant to corrupt any notion of finality or meaningfulness because, for Derrida, contrary to essentialist ontologies and to hermeneutics wedded to stable meanings, there is never a central meaning, and

If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field – that is, language and a finite language – excludes totalization (Derrida, 1992:1124).

The implications this line of argumentation has for the possibility of communicative action and of consensus are profound. However, before engaging with these two issues, I feel it is important to introduce Derrida’s technique of deconstruction which, I believe, is essential to properly dealing with the latter.

Derridian deconstruction has been described as a philosophical position, a political or intellectual strategy, and, alternatively, a mode of reading (Culler, 1982:85). According to Keyman, deconstruction aims to “investigate the nature and production of knowledge and meaning as ‘graspable essences’ that independently precede or follow expression” (Keyman, 1997:132), and endeavors to disrupt the logocentric binaries of modern, Enlightenment thought (i.e. good/bad, true/false, male/female, rational/irrational). The first step involves a reversal of the terms in the dichotomy, thereby subverting value-laden hierarchies, followed by a phase of displacement or transformation. As Derrida argues,

What must occur then is not merely a suppression of all hierarchy, for anarchy only consolidates just as surely the established order of a metaphysical hierarchy; nor is it a simple change or reversal in the terms of any given hierarchy. Rather the Umkehrung must be a transformation of the hierarchical structure itself (Derrida, 1978a:81).

For instance, Derrida, in several of his texts, emphasizes that the binary of inside/outside is dangerous because it is intimately linked to the binary of good/evil, where what is on the inside is seen as good and anything outside is seen as a threat. He argues that such binaries (Derrida often calls them ‘violent hierarchies’) embody différence: “They contain within themselves an ambiguity, a duplicity of meaning” (Edkins, 1999:70), and are thus not fixed containers of meaning. Implicit in the concept of good, according to Derrida, is evil and vice versa. In deconstructing this binary, one would first switch its constitutive terms, thereby giving it a different status and impact, and then move to displace the binary entirely in order to subvert logocentric thought.

To give a concrete example, William E. Connolly, in his book, Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox, deconstructs the binaries of inside/outside and good/evil through an exploration of the politics of identity. He argues, using Derrida, that because modern political identity is based upon these two dichotomies, “doubts about self-identity are posed and resolved by the constitution of another against which that identity may be defined [i.e. the ‘evil’ outside]” (Connolly, 1991:x). Connolly over turns these core binaries by explicitly rendering “prevailing standards of identity more alert to the incorrigible elements of difference, incompleteness and contingency within them” (Connolly, 1991:173). The solution Connolly proposes, as his act of transformation, is what he terms ‘agonistic democracy or non-territorial democratization,’ which would “provide one way to ventilate and supplement the institutional politics of territorial democracy [which he argues is based upon the politics of inside/outside] under contemporary conditions of global life” (Connolly, 1991:xi).

Although deconstruction’s direct relationship to models of consensus making and dialogue is tenuous, it remains an important component of Derrida’s thought and also sets the stage for his
direct engagement with issues of understanding and meaning-making. For Derrida, it is deconstruction that will ultimately excise and transform the metaphysical basis upon which such terms as dialogue and consensus are founded, by seeking to know why consensus has been privileged at this moment in history and whose interests are served by such a privilege.

I think there are two central themes around which Derrida’s opposition to the Habermasian pragmatist ideal of rational speech and consensus are based. The first is Derrida’s opposition to the essentialist or metaphysical criteria of rationality—which I have already discussed at length. However, this particular critique can be extended to Habermas’s criteria of communication as being based on a ‘Will to Freedom’, since they presuppose an ontological reality that he (Derrida) argues does not exist. Derrida, in firmly supporting Nietzsche as the only figure who went beyond metaphysical thought, fundamentally rejects the discovery of preexisting meaning and, instead, exposes the attempt at dialogue for what it really is: meaning in the service of the ‘Will to Power’. What Derrida does believe in (as distinct from Habermas, is “the fundamental non-controllability of a conversation; the non-prescribability of the sign which we exchange with each other; the non-identity of the meanings on which we agree; the fundamentally hypothetical nature of every conceivable consensus” (Frank, 1989:151).

Derrida also questions the pragmatist position in an analytical or empirical sense and argues that it is impossible that such ‘events’ as “in dialogue, knowing that one has been understood perfectly or the success of confirmation by the other” (Simon, 1989:165), really do take place.

5. Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is generally defined as the art or philosophy of interpretation and understanding. However, like poststructuralism, it is a varied and complex philosophical position which resists precise definition. Historically, hermeneutics has been associated with the interpretation of biblical texts and the attempt to expose hidden meanings. In its contemporary form, hermeneutics, particularly Gadamerian hermeneutics, has come to focus much more on the art of mutual understanding. As Gadamer argues, “the task of hermeneutics is entering into dialogue with a text. To understand something is to reach an understanding with another about it, and that can only be achieved through a conversation that sustains the interplay of question and answer” (Gadamer, 1975:378).

Gadamerian thought (on which more below, in the next section) contains a critique of the thought forms of modernity; inasmuch as his hermeneutics includes a rethinking of such traditional universals as truth, reason, value, and progress, it also marks a turn to a particular type of postmodernity. As Madison argues, what principally serves to differentiate hermeneutical postmodernism from other types of postmodernism, including poststructuralism, is that it “does not seek merely to jettison as so much worn-out conceptual baggage the core values of the philosophical tradition and of the Enlightenment; it seeks rather to rearticulate (“reconstruct”) these values in such a way as to avoid both metaphysical essentialism and foundationalism and intellectual arbitrariness and cultural relativism” (Madison, 2001:16). As such, “hermeneutics

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12 Derrida’s criticisms, in this context, are very similar to Foucault’s. Derrida argues that the Western emphasis on logos (truth-based rationality) and reason has led to hegemonic forms of thought and the disrespect for Otherness and difference.

13 Habermas argues that arguments of this sort only reflect what the thinker believes to be true. Actually, poststructural thinkers like Foucault and Derrida, do make truth claims, but since they simultaneously deny the existence of truth, they commit what Habermas refers to as a performative contradiction.
escapes the charge of ‘incommensurability’ by positing that it is possible to articulate a theory of universality which is not dogmatic or metaphysical but, rather, promotes in the practical sphere, an ethics of mutual recognition and reciprocity as philosophical justification for democratic politics” (Madison, 2001:7).

5.1. Hans-Georg Gadamer

The purpose of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, according to Gadamer himself, is to unpack the conditions under which understanding takes place. He asserts that “the ability to understand is a fundamental endowment of man, one that sustains his communal life with others and, above all, one that takes place by way of language and the partnership of conversation” (Gadamer, 1989:22). Gadamer’s focus is accordingly on process, on ‘living language’ or dialogue viewed historically. Underlying his hermeneutical interpretation of understanding is his concept of a ‘fusion of horizons’ which are rooted in historical understanding, prejudice, and tradition; here, “understanding is not to be thought so much as an action of one’s subjectivity, but as the placing of oneself within a process of tradition, in which the past and present are constantly fused” (Gadamer, 1975:258). In the same text (Truth and Method), Gadamer states that

The projecting of the historical horizon, then, is only a phase in the process of understanding, and does not become solidified into the self-alienation of a past consciousness, but is overtaken by our own present horizon of understanding. In the process of understanding there takes place a real fusing of horizons, which means that as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously removed (Gadamer, 1975:273).

Successful communication, for Gadamer, occurs when all participants agree to engage in conversation “for the purpose of letting meaning emerge in an “event” of mutual understanding” (Michelfelder and Palmer, 1989:1). Language use, in this context, is seen as ‘trans-subjective’ in three senses: (1) any particular use of language presupposes a holistic background disclosure that can never be fully articulated or, a fortiori, criticized in tradition and prejudice; (2) dialogic language use is fundamentally “egoless” in that it is “formally directed toward intersubjectivity” and presupposes a shared preunderstanding between interlocutors; and (3) dialogic process is modeled on play, wherein language users are absorbed in their roles and mutually constitute an event whose meaning is independent of the intentions of any participant (Kogler, 1996:98). The end, or ‘telos’ of this process, Kogler argues (as does Habermas), is consensus. In contrast, in Rapaport’s more negative appraisal of Gadamer’s embrace of consensus, the latter’s hermeneutics “looks very much like an interpretive gesture wherein differences are made to adapt to norms of social consensus” (Rapaport, as cited by Michelfelder and Palmer, 1989:13). It is on this point that poststructuralists like Derrida and Foucault take issue with the hermeneutic and pragmatic positions.

In contrast with Foucault and Derrida and their very specific critique of the Habermasian norms of consensus and rationality, Gadamer’s hermeneutic is supportive of Habermas’s basic theses. Gadamer agrees with Habermas on the importance of dialogic communication, and of “the demonstration that hermeneutic self-understanding is linked with transcendental necessity to the articulation of action oriented self-understanding” (Habermas, 1981:44). As well, I see

\[14\] What Habermas means here is that both he and Gadamer agree that self-understanding (of one’s historical place in the world and one’s prejudices, i.e. knowledge about one’s lifeworld) is essential to participating in action-oriented communication with others.
clear affinities between Gadamer’s ‘hermeneutic circle’ (the name he gives to his process of understanding and interpretive communication) and Habermas’s theory of communicative action in that both firmly support the back and forth consensual character of communication. According to White, both Gadamer and Habermas subscribe to this view of communication where “[t]he speaker and the listener form a relationship in which each of them potentially brings his or her entire being to bear in an interpretive project of mutual concern which entails developing the reciprocal openness of participants in relation to their true intentions, motives, and needs” (White, 1979:1168).

Although Gadamer and Habermas appear to agree on most issues related to communication, there are several specific matters on which they disagree. Here, I have not enough space to discuss the specifics of the Gadamer–Habermas encounter, and will restrict myself to a couple of examples. The first has to do with the Habermasian norm of rationality; the second, with tradition or prejudice.

First, Gadamer, unlike Habermas, does not attribute much, if any, authority to rationality as an a priori element of the communicative process. Moreover (not unlike Foucault and Derrida), Gadamer criticizes the legacy of the Enlightenment for providing an ideal of rational justification which has proved impossible to attain: “Reason exists for us,” according to Gadamer, “only in concrete, historical terms” (Gadamer, 1975:276). In Rorty’s words, “a Gadamerian culture would have no use for the faculties called “reason” or “imagination”—faculties that are conceived as having some special relation to truth or reality” (Rorty, 2004:28).15 By denying rationality its a priori role, Gadamer evades the critique of coercion Habermas often suffers because, as Marshal has it, in all cases

Understanding [is viewed] as an infinite dialogue, so that all who participate in it must accept that their views will eventually be superseded. Not one has the last word. . . The suspicion that one may be coerced betrays a fear that one may not be able to hold fast to one’s prior view against whatever the other says. If all one is seeking is to confirm an opinion, then it will indeed be the right move not to risk that opinion by engaging in dialogue (Marshall, 2004:131).

In this sense, Gadamer’s hermeneutics also appears to take issue with the norm of consensus since he argues that a particular interpretation or agreement can never be definitive. According to Gadamer, even though an interpretation may become “validated” within a certain community through consensus, it must always remain open to other possible interpretations.

Second, Gadamer and Habermas’s also differ with regard to the ‘authority of tradition’. Habermas argues that tradition and cultural prejudice unduly infringe on the freedom of actual persons. For Habermas, the objective of rational communicative action is to “dismantle the ideological systems that traditions embody and that, as a consequence, hold freedom in bondage” (Habermas, 1981:14), Gadamer on the contrary, claims that understanding presupposes a set of positive cultural and individual prejudices we can never get beyond. 16 However, if one looks carefully at the language Gadamer uses, it becomes apparent that for him, the nature of authority

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15 Truth for Gadamer does not refer to an objective reality; rather, it is an integral part of the “event” of understanding.

16 Paul Ricoeur who, while being quite supportive of the philosophies of both Habermas and Gadamer, actually advocates a dialectically-based ‘third way’ of understanding and interpretation—which he places in between the approaches of Gadamer and Habermas. According to Ricoeur, “there is or ought to be a ceaseless dialectic between participating in a tradition, as Gadamer would emphasize, and taking a critical distance from tradition to assess it, as Habermas would insist upon. These two emphases do not stand in simple opposition to each other. Each presupposes the other if it is to be practically efficacious” (Dauenhauer, 1998:225).
or tradition is not one of ignorant obedience (as Habermas charges) but of reasoned acceptance—it is based “not on the subjection and abdication of reason, but on an act of acknowledgment and knowledge” (Gadamer, 1989:43):

We must confess that we are always situated within a history in such a fashion that our consciousness never has the freedom to bring itself face to face with the past by an act of sovereign independence. It is rather a question of becoming conscious of the action which affects us and of accepting that the past which is a part of our experiences keeps us from taking it totally in charge, of accepting in some way its truth (Gadamer, 1975:62).

Both these points of contention—rationality and the issue of tradition—illustrate a central conflict between Gadamer’s hermeneutics and Habermas’s pragmatic norm of communicative rational action; perhaps there is a greater affinity between Gadamer and Derrida on the former point.17

6. The ethical and political: Habermas, Foucault, Derrida, and Gadamer

The question of the ethical and political implications of Habermas’s, Gadamer’s, Foucault’s, and Derrida’s thoughts for democracy and an ethical life is extremely difficult to answer in any definitive way. On a literal level, one could argue that both Habermas and Gadamer are much closer, both in their language and theoretical assumptions, to traditional conceptualizations of an ethically-based democratic polity. Thus, Habermas argues that the objective of his theory of rational communicative action is to reconstruct the Enlightenment-inspired arguments for reason and universalism, in order to save representative democracy from authoritarianism. In fact, one could argue that a general preoccupation with the public sphere and the necessary conditions for democracy is a central theme of Habermas’s work. In relation to rational consensus, Habermas argues strongly that the encroachment of money and power on the lifeworld, through growing state and corporate interests, has seriously undermined democracy, moral and communicative action, and the sovereignty of the people:

I have faith in the power of public discourses that uncover topics of relevance to all of society, interpret values, contribute to the resolution of problems, generate good reasons, and debunk bad ones. Of course, these opinions must be given shape in the form of decisions by democratically constituted decision-making bodies. The responsibility for practically consequential decisions must be based in an institution. Discourses do not govern. They generate a communicative power that cannot take the place of administration but can only influence it. This influence is limited to the procurement and withdrawal of legitimation (Habermas, 1992:452).

Likewise, according to Michelfelder and Palmer, Gadamer’s insistence on “the preparation for a form of community where the other can be right”, as well as his constant seeking of unity in understanding through conversation are “in harmony with the “ideal of democracy”…[that is,] participation in something that posits the goal of human solidarity” (Michelfelder and Palmer,

17 Habermas has also argued that Gadamer erroneously assumes that every dialogue between speaking subjects is authentic and genuine. In reality, Gadamer nowhere deals with or even anticipates the possibility of such a pseudo-dialogue or pseudo-consensus infected by ideology. (For a discussion of the link between Habermas’s theory of communicative action and his critique of ideology, see section 3, above.)
Risser similarly argues that “for Gadamer the ideal of democracy is that there are common opinions, that the other is possibly right” (Risser, 1989:185).

As to Gadamer, even though he substantially diverges from Habermas, his philosophy, at first glance, appears to be firmly in line with what one would consider traditional ethical and democratic thought—except that, as a postmodernist, Gadamer refuses to countenance any particular disposition or support any philosophy that is based on rigid a prioris. In addition, Gadamer’s emphasis on a communally defined truth, based in the solidarity of tradition, freedom, and understanding, and restricted by a prior belongingness, is an essential part of what makes his thought both democratic and ethical: “Neither natural necessities nor causal compulsions determine our thinking and our intending—whether we will and act, fear or hope or despair, we are moved in the space of freedom. This space is not the free space of an abstract joy in construction, but a space filled with reality by prior familiarity” (Gadamer, 1981:51).

In contrast, Derrida and Foucault do not make any positive use of the traditional discourse of ethics and democracy in their thought. Both theorists attempt to question, subvert, and destabilize the conventional binaries and discourses which characterize modern life—albeit in different ways. As such, and because they also refuse to replace modern thought with any stable alternative(s), Foucault and Derrida have often been criticized as advocating “an untenable hermeneutic nihilism” (Bernasconi, 1989:247), devoid of any basis for action—political, ethical, or other. According to these critics, Foucault and Derrida’s methodologies (or lack thereof) revel in a “celebration of negativity, a certain nihilism, a delight in destruction/deconstruction, an emphasis in meaningfulness”, as Barrett has expressed it (Barrett, 1991:79). Derrida’s position on the impossibility of definitive understanding (his notion of ‘radical incommensurability’), and his often (mis-)quoted statement that ‘there is nothing outside the text’, should thus preclude any possible political and ethical life.18 Contrary to this, I (and many others) feel that Derrida’s and Foucault’s philosophies are not irredeemably bleak and nihilistic; rather they can be seen as dynamic, political, and ethical.19

As to Foucault, his thoughts, while being skeptical of dominant knowledge and claims of truth, retain the capacity to articulate alternatives which, while not normative, are equally democratic, free, and ethical. Foucault’s works on the ‘ethics of the self’ and ‘resistance to power’ show how his thoughts have been applied to productive transformation. Foucault’s ethics or care of the self involves a politically active subjects acting in a community of subjects for liberty and civic freedom:

The care for the self always aims at the good for others...This implies also a relation with others to the extent that care for self renders one competent to occupy a place in the city, in the community or in inter-individual relationships...I think the assumption of all this morality was that one who cared for himself correctly found himself, by that very fact, in a measure to behave correctly in relationships to others and for others. A city in which everyone would be correctly concerned for self would be a city that would be doing very well, and it would find therein the ethical principle of its stability (Foucault, 1991:7).

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18 Derrida’s contention that there is ‘nothing outside the text’ has often been misinterpreted. What Derrida means by this assertion is that once we see language as a constant movement of differences, we can no longer appeal to reality as independent of language. That is, everything in life then appears to have the same instability and ambiguity.

19 The respect for the Other is one example of how Derrida’s thought can be thought of as ‘ethical’.
In his work on resistance, Foucault’s conceptions of citizenship, duty, and peace, while firmly non-disciplinary, support human rights and social mobilization: “There exists an international citizenship that has its rights and its duties and that obliges one to speak out against every abuse of power, whoever its author, whoever its victims. After all, we are all members of the community of the governed, and thereby obliged to show mutual solidarity” (Foucault, 2001:474). In addition, Foucault’s genealogical method, while still attempting to aim to reveal the unworkings of every possible truth, is a transformative, not a destructive experience—and I would argue that this work is hardly typical of a nihilistic, anti-foundational thinker devoid of any ethical or political agenda.

As to Derrida and his penchant for deconstructive thought, there exist several thinkers who both endorse him and emphasize the presence of an ethico-political agenda in his writings. Eisenstein, for example, contends that Derridian incommensurability may provide lessons in how to suitably interweave roles; for example, it may teach us how to merge the discourse addressed to the privileged with that addressed to the underprivileged: “language [is viewed] not as a homogenous dialogic space [Habermas and Gadamer] but rather as a heterogeneous narrative one [by broadening] our thinking about factual coexistence in socially productive ways” (Eisenstein, 1989:282). As far as democracy is concerned, Caputo points to Derrida’s affirmation of a type of democracy that is always evolving, is always to come, and is based upon “a porous, permeable, open-ended affirmation of the other” (Caputo, 1997:122). Caputo further argues that what critics miss is that the destabilizing agency in Derrida’s work is not a reckless relativism of acidic skepticism, but an affirmative love of the undecidable. Derrida’s reconceptualization of community is one example of how he has refashioned metaphysical conceptualizations of what it means to be ethically and politically engaged:

One might even dream of a community of dreamers who come together to dream of what is to come. Responding to this irrepressible desire, we might say that a “community” in deconstruction would always have to be what he [Derrida] calls “another community,” an “open quasi-community,” which is of course always a “community to come” and a “community without community” (Caputo, 1997:124).

I myself would point to Derrida’s texts on justice, such as Specters of Marx and The Politics of Friendship, which both focus on the relationship between deconstruction and justice; here, deconstruction is seen precisely as the work of justice. In, Specters of Marx, for example, Derrida insists that disjuncture is an essential part of enabling justice: “[t]here must be disjuncture, interruption, the heterogenous if at least there must be, if there must be a chance given to any ‘there must be’ whatsoever, be it beyond duty...where deconstruction is at stake it would be a matter of linking an affirmation...to the experience of the impossible” (Derrida, 1994:35). He also, in this text, delineates what he calls ‘The New International,’ which is a political (non)order, able to open itself to justice and subvert the aporias of modern democracy:

[The ‘New International’] is an untimely link, without status...without coordination, without party, without country, without national community, without co-citizenship, without common belonging to a class. The name of New International is given here to what calls to the friendship of an alliance without institution among those who...continue to be inspired by at least one of the spirits of Marx or of Marxism. It is a call for them to ally themselves, in a new, concrete and real way, even if this alliance no longer takes the form of a party or a workers’ international, in the critique of the state of international law, the concepts of State and nation, and so forth: in order to renew this critique, and especially to radicalise it (Derrida, 1994:85–86).
Note so that in more recent times (2003), Derrida has actually collaborated with Habermas towards jointly elaborating a global political agenda. Both have stated, in interviews and articles, that American world pretensions must be balanced by a unified Europe and that a skeptical philosophical response to the ‘war on terror’ is necessary to preserve democracy and justice.

7. Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that it is difficult to give a definitive answer to the question of how pragmatist, poststructural, and hermeneutic positions deal with discursive-consensus formation, and with the political and ethical implications of the respective positions. Such an answer requires the consideration of bodies of literature that are considerably complex and philosophically complicated. What I have attempted to do here is to relate and compare the thoughts of Derrida, Foucault, and Gadamer, and contrast their core themes to Habermas’s later work on communicative action. My discussion of the ethical and political implications of their thinking is meant to draw on, and supplement, Habermas’s concern for rational consensus, Foucault’s preoccupation with disrupting sedimented discourses, Derrida’s focus on exposing the logocentrism of metaphysics, and Gadamer’s attempt to make understanding the focus of an historically enlightened culture; doing this, I hope to initiate a debate on the future of socio-political change. What is left to do now is to try and develop a philosophical framework which utilizes the skepticism of Derrida, the critical thought of Foucault, the tradition of Gadamer, and the strong communicative pragmatism of Habermas, perhaps in the vein of Manfred Frank, and, as Catherine Zuckert argues, “seek a way of making a new beginning, of moving beyond the “modern and postmodern” to something better, by articulating a new and different understanding of the distinctive character of the West” (Zuckert, as cited by Beiner, 2004:145).

References


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