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Association Revue internationale de philosophie | « Revue internationale de philosophie »

2010/1 n° 251 | pages 39 à 57
ISSN 0048-8143
ISBN 9782930560021

Article disponible en ligne à l’adresse :
https://www.cairn.info/revue-internationale-de-philosophie-2010-1-page-39.htm

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Men Behaving Badly

BARRY HINDESS

Who, now, would admit to having postmodern affiliations? Outside the realms of architecture, literature, the arts, and limited areas of the humanities academy, postmodern and related terms function largely as instruments of abuse, signaling that the individual, book or paper in question displays, at best, a regrettable lack of seriousness or, at worst, an ingrained hostility to rational thought.

Like neoliberal, postmodern is a label that those to whom it is attached are reluctant to adopt for themselves. Michel Foucault, who disowned the structuralist label in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, thereby consigning himself to poststructuralism, without directly adopting the term, later attached himself to a kind of modernism in his essay on Kant’s ‘What is Enlightenment?’ This reluctance of alleged postmodernists to come out is encouraged by the absence of any generally agreed understanding of what postmodernism stands for. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* begins its entry on postmodernism by asserting ‘[t]hat postmodernism is indefinable is a truism’ but nevertheless proceeds to discuss postmodernism through the works of five French and two Italian figures—while noting that ‘individually they may resist common affiliation’—and one well-known (German) critic. To illustrate this problem of definition, consider for example, Jean- Francois Lyotard’s (no doubt playful) invocation of modernist rhetoric in his definition: ‘I define postmodern as incredulity towards meta-narratives.’ The meta-narratives he has in mind are clearly those of philosophy, broadly understood rather than those of contemporary geo-politics, like the meta-narrative of the ‘War on Terror’, that serves to rationalize a broad range of questionable conduct. Since the modernist disdain for tradition and established convention can hardly do without meta-narrative, Lyotard’s definition suggests that postmodernism may be just another version

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1. The title of a successful British television comedy series.
of modernism. Yet the book in which it first appeared points to a real difference between them, if only by arguing that the postmodern loss of faith in narrative is not a matter of the active rejection and disdain that colors modernist rhetoric, but rather a consequence of the modern fragmentation of knowledge, that is, of ‘the fact that knowledge is no longer principally narrative.’ One effect of this last claim is to undermine the faith in progress (the ultimate modernist narrative), suggesting, in turn, that modernism may be its own worst enemy. Postmodernism, it seems, is not simply a modernism that has mellowed, in the way that some of its earlier torch-bearers have done, but rather one that turns upon itself, a reflexive or ultra-modernism.

Twentieth-century readings of Nietzsche show that the playfulness of authors often invites misunderstanding. It may therefore be prudent to leave Lyotard to his play and turn instead to other evidence of the lack of clear and common understanding. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy notes that since the French postmodernists ‘work with concepts developed during the structuralist revolution in Paris in the 1950s and early 1960s, including structuralist readings of Marx and Freud... they are often called “poststructuralists.”’ Examples of the confusion between postmodernism and poststructuralism can also be found in recent debates, in history and philosophy/political theory about the impacts of postmodernism and its post-humous to post-poned associates. In these cases, we find that postmodern, poststructural, and various other ‘posts’ are frequently run together while contributors circle around the difficulties of avoiding the pitfalls of their opponents’ attempts to describe relations between discourse and its referents.

What more need one say about these debates: that many disown the post-ism tendencies of which they stand accused; that the debates show little evidence

4. Ibid., 26.
5. I comment on one aspect of the latter in this paper. For the former see, for example, the debate (reproduced in Keith Jenkins, ed., The Postmodern History Reader (London: Routledge, 1997) sparked by Lawrence Stone’s note, ‘History and Postmodernism,’ Past and Present 131 (May 1991): 217–18, and Gabrielle Spiegel’s ‘History, Historicism and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages,’ Speculum 65, no. 1 (1990): 59–86.
6. For example, Gabrielle Spiegel’s contribution to the debate in Past and Present, started by Stone (see previous note), was published under the heading ‘History and Postmodernism’. Yet, while her earlier paper in Speculum—to which Stone refers—addresses the place of history ‘in a postmodern theoretical climate’ (ibid., 59) her Past and Present paper focuses on ‘post-structuralism’ which, she begins by saying, ‘has boldly pronounced all authors “dead”’; Lawrence Stone and Gabrielle Spiegel ‘History and Post-Modernism,’ Past and Present 135 (May 1992): 189–208.
7. I recall occasions, thankfully rare, at least in my hearing, in which unkind colleagues have described my views as postmodernist. Yet, when I disputed the usefulness of the term and thus of their accusation, in part for reasons which I give below, this was seen as evidence of a kind of playfulness, and thus as supporting the original accusation.
of rationality; and that supporters of both sides are often accused of going too far?8 The best advice one can offer anyone tempted to join in these debates is to get away from them and do something interesting instead. Yet, like useful advice offered in other areas, this too is likely to be ignored, not least by those of us who are foolish enough to proffer it. Thus, at the risk of falling into the performative contradiction of endorsing one activity and undermining that endorsement in my conduct, this paper focuses on Jürgen Habermas’s well known critique of postmodernism in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*9 for relying on performative contradiction—that is, for presupposing the reason it tries to undermine. This paper asks whether, as the term seems to suggest, Habermas’s complaint about ‘performative contradiction’ is intended to suggest that postmodernism is caught up in the familiar problem of propositional contradiction: namely, that there are no limits to what follows from the affirmation of contradictory propositions. If not, perhaps Habermas’s complaint is directed against something else.

Before proceeding, I should note that there are good reasons for resisting the use of ‘postmodern’ and related terms, not least because both qualifier, ‘post-’, and qualified, ‘modern’, suggest a temporal relation between contemporaries. In its use of ‘modern’, the discourse of postmodernism draws on one of the most destructive features of modernist rhetoric, that is, its tendency to treat many contemporaries as if they belonged in the past. The prefix, ‘post’, invokes the same game. To illustrate this unfortunate modern habit, we might note that, in the first chapter of *PDM*, Habermas follows Reinhart Koselleck in treating this habit as central to modernity’s understanding of time.10 This understanding, it seems, rests on ‘the insight into the chronological simultaneity of historically nonsynchronous developments.’11 Habermas’s use of the term ‘insight’ to describe this historically unusual perception suggests that he does not disagree. He shares the ‘modern’ view, in other words, that some contemporary developments—and even contemporary peoples or ways of life—may belong to different times, some

8. Stone’s 1992 contribution to the *Past and Present* debate, for example, describes Simon Schama as deliberately obliterating ‘the difference between archival fact and pure fiction’; ibid., 192.
10. This use of the term ‘modernity’ as if it referred to a conscious subject is a curious and striking feature of PDM—the first chapter, for example, is headed ‘modernity’s consciousness of time and its need for self-reassurance’—particularly in view of Habermas’ declared antipathy to ‘the philosophy of the subject’ (e.g., *PDM*, 294–326). Would it be too unkind to suggest that this lapse reflects the role that Hegel’s treatment of modernity plays in Habermas’s argument?
11. PDM, 6, emphasis added.
to the present and others to the more or less distant future or past. In practice, as Koselleck’s discussion makes clear, the first self-consciously ‘modern’ Europeans were in no doubt that many of their contemporaries in other parts of the world belonged to the past. It was only much later, in parts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that a few modern Europeans began to imagine that some of their contemporaries outside Europe—in America, Russia or Japan—might be living in the future.

A few pages earlier, Habermas refers to an ‘internal relationship between modernity and rationality… which is today being called into question’, thereby implying that those of his contemporaries who are not yet modern are less rational than moderns like himself and most of his readers. Lest there be any doubt about Habermas’s meaning here, we should note that he had explicitly drawn this implication in the first volume of his *Theory of Communicative Action*. Arguing that rationality at the level of the individual actor depends on the rationalization of the actor’s lifeworld and thus that many of his non-Western contemporaries were condemned to unreason by the unfortunate conditions in which they live, he concludes:

> The more cultural traditions pre-decide which validity claims, when, where, for what, from whom, and to whom must be accepted, the less the participants themselves have the possibility of making explicit and examining the potential grounds on which their yes/no positions are based.14

Another way of putting this disturbing view of what distinguishes those who inhabit modernity from the condition of the rest of humanity is to say that, from its earliest beginnings, the modern age has encompassed the most rational portions of humanity, and it was first restricted to parts of Europe and even smaller parts of America. It has been seen more recently—for example, in theories of modernization or development, both conceived as something that moderns should assist others to achieve—as progressively expanding to incorporate the greater part of humanity. It should not be surprising that many outside

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12. Richard Cooper’s division of the contemporary international order into modern and postmodern states, along with many that are pre-modern is a particularly egregious example; *The Post-Modern State and the World Order* (London: Demos, 1996).

13. PDM, 4.

the west, and more than a few within it, have found something problematic in this Eurocentric view of historical time.\(^{15}\)

If we follow Habermas and many others in imagining that most Americans and Europeans inhabit a modernity that some of our contemporaries have yet to reach and if modernity understands time in this way, then perhaps it is just as well that what Habermas\(^{16}\) has called ‘the unfinished project of modernity’ has yet to be completed. Moreover, if the first part of the label ‘post-modernism’ is intended in a temporal sense, as if to suggest that a privileged minority have passed beyond the limits of modernity, then its pretensions are hardly less offensive than those of the modernism it claims to have surpassed.

After such an introduction, I can hardly be expected to continue with a defense of postmodernism against its many critics. Instead, as noted above, I propose to address one of the best known arguments that there is a problem in the relationship between postmodernism and rationality, and specifically that, in using the tools of reason to criticize reason, postmodernists fall into performative contradiction.\(^{17}\) At first sight, the structure of performative contradiction seems little different from that of the familiar logical argument of *reductio ad absurdum*, which seeks to undermine a proposition by developing an argument that relies on the proposition in question. For example, one shows that there is no highest prime number by assuming that there is such a number and showing that this

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assumption leads to a contradictory conclusion.\textsuperscript{18} Mathematicians and logicians who perform this mode of argument—as they regularly do in undergraduate classes—are clearly indulging in performative contradiction, but few would want to claim that, in doing so, they risk corrupting the young. I will argue that, in the case of Habermas’ polemic against postmodernism, the argument for the prosecution is no better than the crime he claims to have identified.

Habermas addresses the relation between postmodernism and rationality in several places, most especially in the lectures published as \textit{The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity} (PDM) and a number of related essays.\textsuperscript{19} His central argument is that the post-Nietzschean critique of reason has been caught up in a performative contradiction and an associated crypto-normativity. In PDM, the charge of performative contradiction is leveled explicitly against Horkheimer and Adorno and implicitly against various alleged postmodernists. The description in Adorno’s \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment} of the self-destruction of reason’s critical capacity ‘is paradoxical, because in the moment of description it still has to make use of the critique that has been declared dead.’\textsuperscript{20} Habermas suggests that Adorno was aware of the performative contradiction here. Indeed, he observes, ‘Adorno’s \textit{Negative Dialectics} reads like a continuing explanation of why we have to circle about within this \textit{performative contradiction} and indeed even remain there.’\textsuperscript{21}

Without explicitly referring to performative contradiction, Habermas argues that Foucault’s theory of power—which he interprets as asserting that the meaning of validity claims consists in the power effects that they have—undermines its own truth claims:

The basic assumption of the theory of power is self referential; if it is correct, it must destroy the foundations of the research inspired by it as well. But if the truth claims that Foucault himself raises for his genealogy of knowledge were in fact illusory and amounted to no more than the effects that this theory...

\textsuperscript{18} A prime number is a natural number (integer) that is divisible by no integer other than 1 and itself. It is thus not divisible by any other prime. Assume that there is a largest prime, then, it follows that there must be a finite number of primes which can be listed in order of magnitude: \(P(1), P(2)\ldots P(m-2), P(m-1), P(m)\), where \(P(1)\) and \(P(2)\) are the smallest, and \(P(m)\) is the largest of these numbers. Multiply all primes in this list together and add 1. This last number is clearly a prime, since it is not divisible by any lesser prime number and, since it is a prime number larger than \(P(m)\), \(P(m)\) cannot be the largest prime.


\textsuperscript{20} PDM, 119.

\textsuperscript{21} PDM, 119.
is capable of releasing within the circle of its adherents, then the entire undertaking of a critical unmasking of the human sciences would lose its point.22

A few pages earlier, Habermas accuses Foucault of ‘abruptly reversing ‘power’s truth dependency into the power dependency of truth.’23 The theory of power Habermas has in mind here is an account of the relationship between power and truth that he himself has constructed, out of his, not entirely unreasonable, reading, in the preceding pages, of Foucault’s The Archaeology of Knowledge and ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’24 as Nietzsche-inspired texts.

Habermas acknowledges that Foucault sometimes takes a different view of power. In his discussion of Horkheimer and Adorno, he notes, for example, that:

Foucault, too [meaning ‘like Nietzsche’], in his later work, replaces the model of domination, based on repression (developed in the tradition of enlightenment by Marx and Freud) by a plurality of power strategies.25

Yet, rather than examine the consequences of this rejection of the model of power as domination for the idea that he later attributes to Foucault, namely, that truth is a function of the will to power—the idea of the power dependency of truth—Habermas’s aim is simply to stress Foucault’s adoption of a Nietzschean perspective. And again, Habermas notes that ‘in later studies’, Foucault fills out

this abstract concept of power in a more tangible way; he will comprehend power as the interaction of warring parties, as the decentered network of bodily, face-to-face confrontations, and ultimately as the productive penetration and subjectivizing subjugation of a bodily opponent.26

Yet, instead of considering the implications of these different views of power for the analysis he has just sketched out, and especially for Foucault’s alleged belief in the ‘power-dependency of truth’, Habermas insists, offering neither evidence nor argument for the claim, that ‘Foucault joins these palpable meanings of power together with the transcendental meaning of synthetic performances that Kant still ascribed to a subject.’27

22. PDM, 279.
23. PDM, 274.
25. PDM, 127.
26. PDM, 255.
27. PDM, 256, emphasis in original.
Pasquino has argued, correctly in my view, and contrary to Habermas’s reading of these texts, that Foucault’s later writings on power and government represent a radical new departure. In fact, we can identify two ways in which Foucault developed his thinking around the issues of knowledge and power: one is the shift in his later writings on power identified by Pasquino; and the other in his various discussions of the care of the self, including the cultivation of modes of acceding to truth—a line of enquiry already suggested in an appendix to the 1972 edition of *Folie et déraison*. In the first lecture of his course on the hermeneutics of the subject, for example, he indicates that the aim of this second set of investigations is to consider, ‘In what historical form do the relations between the “subject” and “truth”… take shape in the West?’ If these relations may be affected by the actions of the subject concerned—as the idea of ‘care of the self’ suggests—then they will vary in ways not captured by Habermas’s notion of the power-dependency of truth. As for his later work on power, Foucault notes in ‘The Subject and Power’, for example, that to ask ‘how do things happen?’ is to suggest that power as such does not exist. At the very least, it is to ask what contents one has as in mind when using this all-embracing and reifying term: it is to suspect that an extremely complex configuration of realities is allowed to escape when one treats endlessly the double question: what is power? And where does power come from?

Foucault’s apparently naïve question, ‘How do things happen?’ suggests an equally naïve positivism of the kind that Habermas criticizes in Lecture X. Yet,

31. See note 59.
33. Foucault, ‘Subject and Power,’ 217.
34. PDM, 276ff.; but see also this comment from Lecture IX: ‘Foucault owes the concept of an erudite-positivist historiography in the appearance of an antiscience to his reception of Nietzsche which is set down in the introduction to the *Archeology of Knowledge* and in the essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”.’ [But] Nietzsche’s authority, from which this utterly unsociological concept of power is borrowed, is not enough to justify its systematic usage’; ibid, 248–49. Habermas does not tell his readers why they should prefer a sociological concept of power.
it also suggests that the invocation of power is little more than a gesture towards explanation. To say that one side in a dispute prevails because it has more power is to say little more than that it prevails because it prevails. The question, ‘how do things happen?’ can also be adapted to read, ‘what exactly happens when power acts to determine what statements will count as true and what will not?’ The assertion that certain statements are treated as true because of the effects of power is a confession of ignorance in the guise of an explanation.

My point, to repeat, is not to defend Foucault and other alleged postmodernists against Habermas’s critique — it may be that Foucault and the other figures discussed in PDM are caught up in the contradictions of the philosophy of the subject — but it is to bring out some of the limitations of Habermas’s argument. I have suggested that parts of Foucault’s later work appear to undermine the ‘Nietzschean’ view of power and truth that Habermas attributes to him. Yet Habermas’s discussion suggests no interest in exploring this possibility, but is primarily concerned to condemn by demonstrating Foucault’s ‘Nietzschean’ inheritance.35

Yet, it is important to recognize that the charge of performative contradiction is only part of Habermas’s critique. Habermas tells us that ‘Hegel inaugurated the discourse of modernity’36 and later, inverting the gesture through which modernity places contemporaries in different times, he insists that ‘we remain contemporaries of the young Hegelians.’37 Hegel’s understanding of modernity, especially his response to Kant, and later responses to it, is the key to grasping what has gone wrong with the discourse of modernity and produced its unfortunate slide into postmodernism. Thus, Habermas’s discussion of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the French postmodernists who have, in his view, followed them is itself embedded in a broader account of Hegel’s understanding of modernity and the post-Hegelian responses to Hegel. This is the first and most substantial part of Habermas’s critique.38

In this story, Nietzsche’s critique of modernity is presented first, as a response to the ‘failures of Hegel and of Left and Right Hegelianism … to tailor the

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35. At one point, Habermas does seem to recognize that his reading of Foucault may be one-sided: ‘Only in the context of his interpretation of Nietzsche does Foucault yield to the familiar melody of a professing irrationalism’; ibid., 278. However, he does not follow through the consequences of this grudging acknowledgment.

36. PDM, 51.

37. PDM, 53.

38. Habermas’ Preface informs us that the first four lectures, which cover the Hegel to Nietzsche story, were delivered ‘at the College de France… in March 1983’ (ibid., xix) while the fifth lecture, on Adorno and Horkheimer, was added later. Other lectures were delivered at Cornell University in 1984.
concept of reason to the program of an intrinsic dialectic of enlightenment.'

It is presented, second, as opening up two paths: one, that of ‘the skeptical scholar who wants to unmask the perversion of the will to power’—the path of Bataille, Lacan, and Foucault; second, ‘the path of the initiate-critic of metaphysics who pretends to a unique kind of knowledge’—the path of Heidegger and Derrida.

In effect, then, ‘Nietzsche had no choice but to submit subject and critical reason yet again to an immanent critique—or to give up the program entirely. Nietzsche opted for the second alternative.’ Alternatively, just to complicate Habermas’s story, we might imagine that Nietzsche could have opted for a different version of the second, resigning himself to the quiet life enjoyed by ‘The Famous Philosophers’, whom he castigated in Thus Spake Zarathustra for encouraging people to accommodate themselves to their conditions and those who occupied ‘The Chairs of Virtue’ and advised: ‘ Honour and obedience to the authorities, and even to the crooked authorities.’

Habermas treats Heidegger and Bataille as taking up the different paths opened up by Nietzsche—the aesthetic and ‘will to power’ approaches to truth—while Derrida and Foucault are seen as following the lines suggested by these earlier figures. There are lengthy chapters on each of these post-Hegelian philosophers (two on Foucault), as well as on Niklas Luhmann and a long excursus on the advantages of Habermas’s preferred focus on communicative reason over the philosophy of the subject.

Before proceeding to performative contradiction, let me comment briefly on two of the more irritating features of Habermas’s broader argument. First, Habermas presents the discourse of modernity as following a downhill path from the heights of Hegel—suggesting, to this reader at least, that the whole discourse of modernity has been a disaster, brought on mainly by Hegel (and perhaps Kant) with the later assistance of Nietzsche, and that it ought to be abandoned—but I will not pursue this attractive possibility here. Thus, remaining with Habermas’s story, while, in responding to Kant, Hegel may have been the first philosopher to have turned modernity into a philosophical problem, he relies, unfortunately, on a version of ‘the philosophy of the subject for the

39. PDM, 85.
40. PDM, 97.
41. PDM, 85–6.
purpose of overcoming subject-centered reason." The young Hegelians made essentially the same mistake and its consequences are still with us. This story of Hegel’s original sin provides the frame in which Habermas sets his readings of Nietzsche and the post-Nietzschean philosophers.

We are asked to accept, in other words, that the fundamental problem with the understanding of modernity offered by Hegel and the Young Hegelians, including many of our contemporaries, lies in adherence to the philosophy of the subject—that is, to a focus on the knowing and acting subject, rather than on intersubjective communication. ‘No one can escape’, Habermas insists, repeating a claim that recurs throughout this text, ‘the strategic conceptual restraints of the philosophy of the subject merely by performing operations of reversal upon its basic concepts.’ If this is the case, one wonders how imagining a plurality of subjects earnestly communicating with each other is supposed to get round the problem. It is tempting to ask how we might think about intersubjective communication without somehow invoking an implicit understanding of the subject. But the more important point to notice here is that Habermas reads Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the French postmodernists entirely in terms of their failure to escape from that philosophy. Habermas appears not to be concerned by other features of Hegel’s and subsequent thinkers’ understanding of modernity, and especially not by the temporalizing conceit noted above. Adherence to the philosophy of the subject is not the only serious weakness to be found in post-Hegelian/Kantian philosophy, nor is it necessarily the most important, even if it can be identified in the work of French postmodernists.

Second, Habermas’s reading of Nietzsche and the post-Nietzscheans through the lens of the philosophy of the subject is presented without any of the careful textual exegesis that many of us have learned to expect of the best work in the history of political thought—an absence that leads one to wonder what Habermas understands by ‘the better argument’, whose force properly communicating individuals are expected to recognize. Habermas’s style, in contrast, is to proceed through the use of selective quotation to illustrate key points in his location of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and his other victims in his tale of post-Hegelian decline.

43. PDM, 34.
44. PDM, 274.
46. See, for example, PDM, 89; 198.
At one point, Habermas warns us that the path taken in this book ‘will not lead us out of the discourse of modernity, but it will perhaps allow its theme to be understood better. In order to do this I shall have to put up with some drastic oversimplifications’—a comment that leads one again to wonder what Habermas understands by ‘the better argument’ and, indeed, if he expects this book to be read as exemplifying the genre. Unfortunately, as we soon discover, it is not the lecturer but his readers who ‘have to put up with … oversimplifications’. While we might agree that warnings of this kind may be necessary in popular lectures, neither they nor the practices they appear to excuse have any place in serious intellectual debate.

Of course, neither Habermas’s partial understanding of the limitations of the discourse of modernity, nor his expository sleight of hand amount to decisive objections to his argument, but they do lead this reader to wonder how far, in spite of his well-known stress on the force of the better argument, Habermas expects us to take his story on trust—relying, in this case, on the persuasive force of the name of the famous professor.

This last comment brings us to the issue of performative contradiction. It is a matter of elementary logic that the truth of any proposition follows from the affirmation of two contrary propositions A and not-A. This does not seem to be the point of Habermas’s complaint about the work of Adorno and Horkheimer, along with the French postmodernists. Yet, if performative contradiction is not a simple failure of logic, we shall have to ask what exactly is supposed to be the problem.

If the charge of performative contradiction plays a central part in The Philosophical Discourse…., Habermas reserves his most substantial discussion of the concept for a later paper, ‘Discourse Ethics’, whose title suggests that, far from getting at questions of logic or clarity of exposition, the charge of performative contradiction addresses questions of a fundamentally ethical kind. In this paper Habermas informs us that he has derived the idea of performative contradiction, in part, from the work of K-O. Apel, which in turn draws on Jaakko Hintikka’s admirably clear paper on Descartes’s ‘Cogito Ergo Sum’. However, there is

47. PDM, 59. Consider also this example: ‘Heidegger has resolutely ontologized art and bet everything on one card’, while, in contrast, Bataille ‘remains faithful to an authentic aesthetic experience and opens himself to a realm of phenomena in which subject-centered reason can be opened up to its other’; ibid., 104.

nothing in Hintikka’s discussion to support the moralistic tone that colors both Apel’s and Habermas’s arguments. In this paper, after discussing Descartes’s responses to Gassendi and his different formulations of the Cogito argument, Hintikka suggests that Descartes’s apparent inference ‘may be expressed by saying that it was impossible for him to deny his existence.’\textsuperscript{49} Any attempt to do so ‘would have been bound to fail as soon as the hearer realized who the speaker was.’\textsuperscript{50}

There are two issues here. One, which I turn to below, is that the reference to ‘the hearer’ suggests that, in Hintikka’s argument, discourse has a social character. The other is what Hintikka calls ‘existential inconsistency’, an idea that seems to underlie the later notion of performative contradiction. He defines existential inconsistency as follows:

Let \( p \) be a sentence and \( a \) a singular term (e.g., a name, a pronoun, or a definite description). We shall say that \( p \) is \textit{existentially inconsistent for the person referred to by a to utter} if and only if the longer sentence (2) “\( p; \) and \( a \) exists” is inconsistent (in the ordinary sense of the word).\textsuperscript{51}

He continues:

A trivial reformulation of the definition shows that the notion of existential inconsistency really formulates a general reason why certain statements are impossible to defend although the sentences by means of which they are made may be consistent and intelligible.\textsuperscript{52}

And a little later: ‘The inconsistency (absurdity) of an existentially inconsistent statement can in a sense be said to be of \textit{performatory} (performative) character… [since] It depends on an act or “performance”.’\textsuperscript{53} Hintikka therefore maintains that existentially inconsistent statements are pointless because ‘they automatically destroy one of the major purposes which the act of uttering a declarative sentence normally has.’\textsuperscript{54}

Perhaps we should see ‘existential inconsistency’ as the core of ‘performative contradiction’: the word performative, carrying its own suggestion of sociality, is there in Hintikka’s piece and his ‘inconsistency’ is not far removed from Habermas’s ‘contradiction’. Yet, unlike performative contradiction, Hintikka’s existential inconsistency is a feature of sentences, not of the general arguments.

\textsuperscript{49} Hintikka, ‘Cogito’, 10.  
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 14.  
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 11.  
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 12.  
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 13.
in which they appear: ‘The inconsistency of existentially inconsistent sentences means that whoever tries to make somebody (anybody) believe them, by so doing, helps to defeat his own purpose.’

‘Existential inconsistency’, then, is a matter of behaving strangely. Yet, there is nothing in Hintikka’s paper that justifies, or even resembles, the moralistic tone that appears in Apel’s (whose argument I am unable to consider here) and Habermas’ discussion. A striking example of the latter’s moralism appears in the following passage:

Participants in argumentation cannot avoid the presupposition that, owing to certain characteristics that require formal description, the structure of their communication rules out all external or internal coercion other than the force of the better argument and thereby also neutralises all motives other than that of the cooperative search for truth.

What does Habermas’, and his supporters’, charge of ‘performative contradiction’ amount to then? Before addressing this question, I should return to the point, noted earlier, that an important theme of Hintikka’s discussion—one which is taken up by both Apel and Habermas—concerns the social character of discourse:

Normally a speaker wants his hearer to believe what he says. The whole ‘language-game of fact-stating discourse is based on the assumption that this is normally the case. But nobody can make his hearer believe that he does not exist by telling him so; such an attempt is likely to have the opposite result.

If an argument is not persuasive in a social context, it will not be persuasive when individuals try it on themselves:

The reason why Descartes’s attempt to think that he does not exist necessarily fails [i.e. because he cannot make himself believe it] is for a logician exactly the same as the reason why his attempt to tell one of his contemporaries that Descartes did not exist would have been bound to fail as soon as the hearer realized who the speaker was.

We might wonder what role the figure of the ‘logician’ plays in this argument: is it anything more than rhetorical camouflage? Hintikka’s point is that Descartes could not bring himself to deny his existence because others, and he

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55. Ibid., 15.
56. Habermas, Moral Consciousness, 88–89.
58. Ibid., 13–14.
himself, would find the denial ridiculous, and he therefore affirmed the conclusion, ‘I exist’. This, of course, raises the further question, which gets misplaced towards the end of Hintikka’s discussion, of quite how the anticipated reaction of others to its contrary establishes a link between the concluding ‘sum’ and Descartes’s opening ‘cogito’?

For all its faults, Hintikka’s stress on others’ real or anticipated reactions lays the foundations for Habermas’s ‘performative contradiction’. It is therefore worth noting that there are other ways of approaching Descartes’s formula, which neither Hintikka nor Habermas address. One that is particularly important for our purposes, since it represents an aspect of Foucault’s work that Habermas fails to consider in his critique, can be found in Foucault’s response to the criticisms Derrida had presented in L’écriture et la différence. Foucault reads the Meditations, just as Descartes presents the text, as a skeptical exercise aimed at achieving a sense of self that could serve as the foundation upon which an edifice of knowledge might be constructed. For this reason, he suggests, it must be read as making two kinds of move. It presents, first, ‘a group of propositions, forming a system, which each reader must run through if he wishes to experience their truth’, and second:

a group of modifications forming an exercise, which each reader must carry out, and by which each reader must be affected, if he wishes in his turn to be the subject enunciating this truth on his own account.

One effect of this process is that dutiful readers of Descartes’s text will be unable to doubt their existence, not because it would seem odd (improper) to do so—the reason that Hintikka (Habermas) gives—but rather because of the kind of subjects they have become.

Returning now to Habermas’s critique, performative contradiction is an unusual kind of behavior involving little more than what Hintikka calls existential inconsistency. Habermas treats such behavior as morally objectionable and generalizes from Hintikka’s treatment of the uttering of single sentences to take in the construction of complex arguments.

Performative contradiction is a matter of undermining an assumption by acting as if its contrary were true or developing an argument which relies on


60. Michel Foucault, History of Madness (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 563.
that assumption. My suggestion that Habermas regards performative contradiction as bad behavior is supported by one of the rare occasions in which he expresses discomfort about leveling this charge. After noting several aporias in Foucault’s project of genealogical historiography, for example, Habermas adds that ‘Foucault is incorruptible enough to admit these incoherences’, and then goes on to insist, ‘but he does not draw any consequences from them [emphasis added]’. If Habermas’s critique is not centered on the accusation of bad behavior, why, we might ask, does he see this as a question of corruption, and why does he return to the charge in the second part of his sentence?

To conclude, I have argued that there is little more to the charge of performative contradiction than the claim that the individuals concerned are behaving badly. I have also noted Habermas’s view that argumentation relies only on the force of the better argument. In fact, he goes further to derive a normative ‘ought’ from this descriptive ‘is’, arguing in another essay in the same collection that anyone who seriously undertakes to participate in argumentation implicitly accepts by that very undertaking general pragmatic presuppositions that have a normative content.62

Were it not for Habermas’s clear reliance at this point on the work of Apel, this assertion would be a fine example of the cryptonormativism he claims to find in the work of Foucault and the other French postmodernists. Yet the trouble with Habermas’s argument is more serious. If we should be coerced by nothing other than ‘the force of the better argument’, why is it that so much of Habermas’s argument against the postmodernists consists in the charge that they are behaving badly? Surely, at this point, we can accuse him of his own performative contradiction.

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Bibliography


61. PDM, 276.
62. Habermas, Moral Consciousness, 197–98.


