

Problems and Prospects in Critical Theory: Eduardo Mendieta's Study of Karl-Otto Apel

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Abstract: After a brief summary of the contents of the book, I critically reflect on some of its conclusions. I agree that Apel's critique of Habermas's weak conception of philosophy is correct. I do not agree that Apel's dominantly deontological conception of philosophy responds adequately to Dussel's critique, and I argue that Dussel's is a superior conception of ethics and critical theory.

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It is a great pleasure to comment of Eduardo Mendieta's fine book on Karl-Otto Apel, whom I had an opportunity to meet and interact with in several conferences devoted to the relationship between critical theory and liberation philosophy. In addition to Eduardo and Enrique Dussel, the best known exponent of liberation philosophy, Mike Barber was also part of those discussions.

I found those conferences seminal in their influence on my own work. At that time, I was engaged in trying to free myself from the clutches not only of Jürgen Habermas' reformism and uncritical capitulation to late imperial capitalism, but also from his one-sided deontological ethic and excessively linguistic concepts of the human subject and the life-world. The necessity of these moves was reinforced when Apel told me in February of 1991 that both he and Habermas supported the U.S. in the Gulf War, then raging with great ferocity. That revelation led me to having thoughts of a Derridean supplement in the sense that apparently external stances on the war point to deep internal inadequacies in their philosophies. That sense of things has been reinforced for me over and over again in the last 13 years. And I say that, while gladly owning up to a positive debt to both thinkers. We are, or I am, standing on the shoulders of giants here. But it is a kind of double gesture that I will be making here today: "yes" to Eduardo's book and to the greatness of Apel as a philosopher, "no" to deep inadequacies and limits. Critical theory, I think, needs to go in a different direction and has indeed gone in a different direction.

In any event, at that very, relatively early time in 1991, it became apparent to several of us, Mike Barber, Dussel, myself, and Eduardo, that what had to happen was a linking of transcendental deontology in Apel's and Habermas' sense with the goodness of liberation in Dussel's application, communicative rationality with a radically transformative critique of capitalism and imperialism. I worked out my own version of that integration of *Critique, Action, and Liberation*¹ and *Process, Praxis, and Transcendence*² and Dussel did also in his *Ethics of Liberation*, which Eduardo Mendieta, along with others, is in the process of translating³.

I was helped in this encounter with Dussel and Apel to formulate my own version of what has come to be known as New Critical Theory, which is a Northern, First World attempt to overcome an antinomy between a Habermasian sense of rationality and

critique which, it turns out, is not that critical; and a post-modernism that at its best is radical but insufficiently rational and evidential. Two lines of discussion, therefore, intersect in our discussion today, that between liberation philosophy and critical theory and that between post-modernism and Habermasian critical theory, on the other hand, and New Critical Theory, on the other. From these two different lines of discussion, several books have emerged: Mike Barber's *Ethical Hermeneutics*⁴, and introduction in English to Dussel's work that is equivalent of Eduardo's book on Apel; *Perspectives on Habermas*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn, in which I have a concluding essay, "What's Critical about Critical Theory?"⁵; Martin Matustik's fine book *Jürgen Habermas: a Philosophical Political Profile*⁶; Eduardo's co-edited book with Linda Alcoff *Thinking from the Underside of History*⁷, in which Alcoff, Barber, Mendieta, Dussel, Matustik and I have essays; Wilkerson and Paris's co-edited *New Critical Theory*, in which Mendieta, Dussel, Matustik and I have essays⁸; and my own recently published *Unjust Legality: A Critique of Habermas's Philosophy of Law*⁹.

I mention all of this only to indicate there is a rich context for today's discussion, which context, perhaps, embodies a certain development, growth, and maturation from which we can, perhaps, reap fruit. Not only is there a context of philosophy and social theory, but also one that is social and historical and real, in which a national and international regression have occurred; two wars and an ongoing occupation in the Gulf; ill-advised adventures in Afghanistan and Kosovo, a worsening world poverty, a self-contradictory, terroristic war on terrorism which refuses to recognize the situated context of imperial terrorism, the terrorism of the emperor as opposed to the pirate (to use Chomsky's terms), the much more destructive First World terrorism to which Third World terrorism has to be seen as a response. Which version of critical theory best enables us to understand and criticize and critically transform this horrendous situation, post-modernism, Habermasian-Apelian critical theory, or a version of critical, liberatory theory such as Dussel's that integrates the transcendental and communicative with the liberatory and radically transformative. The issues, to say the least, are not merely academic.

To the end of reaping such rich, succulent fruit, Eduardo's book makes a salutary contribution. It gives us not only clear, interesting accounts of Apel's development as a philosopher, but, enables us, in the last two chapters especially, to philosophize with and against Apel in encounters with Habermas, post-modernism, and Dussel. Mendieta's effort is not only accurate and clear and fair to Apel where it has to be, but also suggestive, challenging and provocative. The despoiled, starving, exploited Third World other emerges in his book in such a way as to challenge us in the First World tempted to tame critical theory into a scholasticism, the First World critical theoretical Nero fiddling while the Rome of the New World Disorder burns. To turn this book into an object of that kind is to misuse it. (In addition to Habermas and Robert Brandom as safe scholarly objects, Midwestern Critical Theory adds Apel). The book deserves a better fate than that.

Mendieta's book is divided into five chapters. The first deals with Apel's early philosophical development, influenced by Martin Heidegger and Erich Rothacker and his dissertation, "Dasein und Erkennen." Chapter two is devoted to the habilitation, "The Idea of Speech in the Tradition of Humanism from Dante to Vico." Chapter Three deals with Apel's development of his proposal for a transformation of philosophy, focusing on

the main argument of his work, *Transformation der Philosophie*¹⁰. Chapter Four treats the decades-long interaction between Apel and Habermas, and the last chapter discusses the encounters between Apel and post-modernism, especially Francois Lyotard and Richard Rorty, and between Apel and Dussel.

In his dissertation, Apel undertakes an epistemological-anthropological reading of Heidegger's philosophy by means of which he, Apel, hoped to develop a normative theory of science and a theory of intersubjectively valid knowledge. Apel tries to achieve this goal by exploring the question of the intersubjective pre-giveness of objects in general, the role of the a priori, and an anthropological theory of science. In this early period of Apel's development, a confrontation emerges between Kant's monological account of the basis of synthetic a priori judgments and Heidegger's own articulation of the intersubjective constitution of objects. Mendieta shows how the later account of knowledge interests, shared with Habermas, has its roots in this early work.

As a result of the encounter between Kant and Heidegger, the question of language becomes central for Apel. Consequently the habilitation of Vico, unsurpassed in its historical and analytical depth, has more than a historical-reconstructive status. Apel also attempts a conceptual reconstruction with normative intent of a transcendental conception of language enabling him to overcome aporias of the encounter between Heidegger and Kant. Here four traditions of language conceptualization- Christian logos mysticism, Italian language humanism, nominalism, and Leibnizian *mathesis universalis* – emerge that continue to be effective and operative in contemporary conceptualizations of language and speech.

In Chapter Three, the focus is on Apel's first formulation of his original position. This is shown to emerge from an encounter between Wittgenstein and Heidegger. Here Apel redefines the concept of language transcendently. Major philosophical gains emerge from this move. For Apel, Wittgenstein's critical discussion of the notions of meaning and Heidegger's elaboration of the pragmatic dimension of understanding converge with the overcoming of methodological solipsism and the abstractive fallacies of philosophy.

In an insightful way, Mendieta says that "*Grosso modo*, one may speak of two major periods of Apel's philosophical career: that before and that after Peirce." (xiv) As a result of the encounter with Peirce, Apel is enabled to criticize and redefine Kantian's transcendental philosophy with greater depth and clarity. As a result, Kantian transcendental philosophy is transformed in terms of a semiotical, pragmatic reformulation of the Kantian question, that is, to quote Mendieta, "The conditions of the possibility of monological experience have now become the conditions of the possibility of intersubjectively valid experience as conditions given in and through the normative use of language." (xiv)

In Chapter Four, Mendieta discusses Apel's interaction and collaboration over the years with Habermas by focusing on their different interpretations of knowledge interests, Apel's critique of Habermas's emancipatory interest, their respective theories of rationality, and their different formulations of discourse ethics. Running through this discussion is a basic disagreement over the role of philosophy in relation to the so-called reconstructive social sciences. Apel develops a strictly philosophical theory of rationality grounded transcendently-pragmatically, whereas Habermas approaches the question of rationality through the reconstructive sciences. As is well-known to students and

followers of Habermas, these sciences are hybrid; they are partly monological and partly hermeneutical, partly empirical and partly normative. Apel's objective here is that a theory of society can be elaborated on such uncertain foundations but not a theory of rationality. A theory can and must be approached transcendently, through reflection on the very conditions of reason.

In their discussion of discourse ethics the last decade, these differences have become more pronounced. Apel thinks that Habermas's refusal to accept a philosophical grounding of discourse ethics threatens the viability, consistency, and range of communicative action. Whereas Habermas would like to assimilate philosophy into social analysis, Apel affirms the autonomy of philosophical thinking in order not to slip into a quasi-metaphysical conceptualization of reason that subordinates it to a historical telos. Apel's claim here is that the transformation of Peirce's semiotics into transcendental semiotics has in turn transformed Kant's transcendental argumentation into a transcendental-pragmatic argumentation that looks at the procedures for the justification of ethical judgments in terms of pragmatic consistency and not in terms of logical consistency: within such analysis and reflection performative self-contradiction is a crucial test for the universality both of the real communication community and of the counterfactually presupposed ideal communication community.

This is all to the good. I think we are in debt to Apel and Mendieta, in whom I sense not only sympathy but also agreement with Apel here, for their insistence on the autonomy of philosophy in the face of its watering down by Habermas. In the working out of my own philosophy, I argue for a strong transcendental version, but have not taken on Habermas as much on this issue as on his social theoretical claims. There is a legitimate philosophical ambition on Apel's part that we need to reclaim.

For this reason, I agree very much with the way Mendieta argues for Apel's position by playing it off against such post-modernists as Rorty and Lyotard. Their problems with self-contradiction and performative inconsistency, i.e., they try to argue communicatively that there is not universal validity to rational communication, or they try to argue universally that no meta-narratives are possible, are too well-known to this audience to go into much detail. I also think that Apel's transcendently grounded argument through the use of the performative contradiction can be linked to Habermas's descriptive, hermeneutical and ethical arguments that there are many different kinds of legitimate rationality, i.e. strategic or communicative, or, within communicative rationality, scientific, moral, and aesthetic discourse, to argue for a rich differentiation within modernist rationality against post-modernist attempts to reduce rationality to one kind, usually an illegitimate, pathological version. Here Apel and Habermas show themselves to be the much truer friends of difference, in contrast to post-modernist posturing on this issue. And there is a legitimate achievement to be noted here, the salvaging of a defensible form of communicative rationality against the post-modern critique. And, like many of you, that is an achievement with which I associate myself, as witness and participant.

For these reasons, I note a small disagreement with Mendieta here. Because both Apel and Habermas are recognizably modernist in a critical, fallibilist sense, self-grounding, meta-narrative, universalistic, and normative, I do not see what is to be gained by calling them, more specifically Apel, "Post-modern", as Eduardo does. (142-43) Although I am not accusing Mendieta of this, there is an unfortunate tendency in U.S.

discussions to legitimate ourselves by calling ourselves “post-modern”, in our corrupt academic and institutional culture taken over by this fashion. Because bad philosophy or anti-philosophy is just that, whether in the ancient sophists or the contemporary for of that, the borrowed glory from such association is really inglorious. Imagine Plato calling himself a “neo-sophist”. We need to absorb a little of Apel’s self-confidence in the grand vocation of philosophy. We need to have the courage of our convictions, and be really Socratic against this intellectual fashion, which is not even really, when looked at deeply, liberating.

The second contrast in Mendieta’s last chapter is between Apel and Dussel, and here, as I indicated in my opening remarks, Mendieta draws in many years of interaction. Mendieta presents the two philosophers as basically complementary in a most friendly sense, Apel’s emphasis on self-grounding versus Dussel’s Third World other as breaking in on and challenging that identity, Apel’s deontological grounding of philosophy and democracy versus Dussel’s metaphysical, teleological grounding, Apel’s relatively benign account of modernity versus Dussel’s more critical account, in which the North is the dominating center and the South is dominated periphery; and Apel’s early concerns about nuclear catastrophe as the greatest danger versus Dussel’s recent claim that the more pressing problem is a situation in which “three quarters of the world live in the most extreme poverty while the remaining quarter pillages more than its share of planetary wealth.” (166)

Eduardo here is too easy on Apel, perhaps because he feels bound by the principle of hermeneutical generosity mentioned earlier in his text (xvii). While similarly committed, as a commentator I have more leeway and a concern that hermeneutical generosity does not turn into uncritical, hermeneutical blindness. In my opinion, Apel only inadequately passes the Dussel test, if he passes it at all. Apel’s Ethics B, in which he applies universal norms arrived at in his justificatory ethics, Ethics A, still leaves this basic ethics deontological, does not give an account of why world poverty is unjust, and does not give a hermeneutical, critical account of the way the South has entered into the history of the North internally through a process of exploitative imperialism and massive transfer of wealth and resources. Apel, therefore, while he overcomes Eurocentrism theoretically (here I agree with Eduardo), gives into it practically and historically and politically. This criticism is also true of Habermas, as I argued in the essay “What’s Critical about Critical Theory?” mentioned above.

What is impressive about Dussel in this interaction with Apel is that he genuinely learned from the encounter and moved with it, incorporating a deontological moment linked with a material element and feasibility element. He was open to Apel as other, in a way that Apel was not to him, except in minor ways. Dussel’s theory is the more comprehensive.

He is, therefore, complementary to Apel in more critical ways in that he corrects him, by showing how a communicative praxis must lead to radical social critique if it is to be faithful to itself. In this way he saves critical theory from itself and redeems it. In Dussel’s hands critical-liberatory theory moves on to the cutting edge of social theory again and enables it to confront the New World Disorder normatively and critically-transformatively. In his hands critical liberatory theory ceases to be a story of how to learn to live with late capitalistic imperialism and love it, or at least to tolerate it.

I end with a marvelous, moving quotation from Dussel's *Ethics of Liberation*, which manifests both its rigor and relevance:

The globalization is that of a formal, performative system (the value that valorizes itself, the money that produces money, D-D'; fetishes of capital) which raises itself up as the criterion of truth, validity, and feasibility and destroys human life, trampling on the dignity of millions of human beings and not recognizing their equality or much less affirming itself as co-responsible for the alterity of the excluded and accepting only the peripheral nations, even if the debtor people perishes, *fiat justitiam, pereat mundus*. It is a massive assassination; it is the beginning of a collective suicide.

It is for this reason that we believe it is necessary to erect a principle that is absolutely universal, which is completely negated by the prevailing system which globalizes itself; the duty of producing and reproducing the life of each human subject, especially the victims of this mortal system, which excludes them as ethical subjects and only includes the increase of the value of exchange. It is a fetishization process that has carried out a total inversion¹¹.

Endnotes

¹ Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.

² Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.

³ Enrique Dussel, *Ética de la liberación en la época de la globalización y la exclusión* (Madrid: Trotta, 1998), the translation is forthcoming with Duke University Press.

⁴ Michael Barber, *Ethical Hermeneutics: Rationality in Enrique Dussel's Philosophy of Liberation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998).

⁵ Lewis Edwin Hahn, ed. *Perspectives on Habermas* (Chicago, ILL: Open Court, 2000).

⁶ Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001.

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- ⁷ Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000.
- ⁸ William S. Wilkerson and Jeffrey Parias, eds., *New Critical Theory: Essays on Liberation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).
- ⁹ Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001.
- ¹⁰ Karl-Otto Apel, *Transformation der philosophie*, 2 volumes (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973).
- ¹¹ Dussel, *Ética de la liberación en la época de la globalización y la exclusion*, 567-8. My translation.