

Communicative Action: A Way Forward for Inter-Religious Dialogue

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Abstract

This article explores the theory of communicative action of the philosopher Jurgen Habermas as a way forward for inter-religious dialogue. Communicative action based on the intersubjectivity, rationality and force of argumentative speech stands in contrast to the boundary marking of hermeneutic idealism. Communicative action distinguishes between the particularity of one's lifeworld and the universality of a system paradigm. Communicative action is seen as a way for inter-religious dialogue to explore the importance of various religious traditions. Whilst arguing that communicative action requires an individual to step outside the solipsism of her own lifeworld, this article also acknowledges the importance of an individual's particular religious interests.

Early in 2008, Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury and leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion, made headlines throughout the world following a lecture he delivered at the Royal Courts of Justice in London (Williams 2008a). The Archbishop suggested that aspects of sharia law should be used by Muslims in the United Kingdom to resolve personal and domestic issues such as marriage and property disputes. The Archbishop said he thought that the use of sharia law was an inevitable development in Britain. Media reaction to the Archbishop's speech was extreme, with some commentators saying that he was giving heart to Muslim terrorists (*The Sun* 2008). The Archbishop did receive support for his views from a number of prominent people, including the Lord Chief Justice, Lord Phillips of Worth Matravers (Beavan 2008). Lord Phillips argued that the Archbishop's comments had not been clearly understood by all and that "a point that the Archbishop was making was that it was possible for individuals voluntarily to conduct their lives in accordance with sharia principles, without this being in conflict with the rights guaranteed by our laws." Lord Phillips added that it was "not very radical to advocate embracing sharia law in the context of family disputes" since "there is no reason why principles of sharia law, or other religious codes, should not be the basis for mediation or other forms of alternative dispute resolution (Ibid.)."

In a subsequent statement from the Archbishop (Williams 2008b), it was made clear that the speech really concerned taking other people's religions seriously. The Archbishop argued that if society wants to achieve cohesion then such a serious attitude to other religious traditions needs to be encouraged. The Archbishop acknowledged that Islamic courts already existed in Britain dealing with divorce and financial matters and that greater use of these courts was inevitable. He made the point that there was a clear need to protect the rights of all parties while at the same time acknowledging there were limits to a unitary legal system in an increasingly plural society. The Archbishop clearly stated that he was not proposing a supplementary jurisdiction to deny other people their rights.

This whole episode provokes some challenging questions about inter-religious dialogue. Why does a serious, nuanced voice raised in a public debate find itself so fiercely criticized and howled down? Is there a deep-seated fear of other religions, which actually debilitates serious inter-religious debate? Is the very nature of serious and critical inter-religious debate itself in question? Is there a place for society to name and face its fear and ignorance of other religious traditions? As Andrew McGowen points out, the Archbishop's real concern in his lecture was to ask fundamental questions about the relationship between the practices and identities of faith communities, including the Christian Church, and the fundamentals of civil law in a pluralist society (McGowen 2008).

The work of the modern philosopher Jurgen Habermas, which asks how reliable knowledge is possible, may assist in answering this question about the nature of inter-religious dialogue (Habermas 1971, 3). Habermas explored the apparent divisions in knowledge under the three headings of "empirical-analytic", "historical-hermeneutic" and "self-reflective", explaining these notions by reference to what he called "cognitive interest". Particular cognitive interests impel different ways of knowing. The cognitive interest in control in the empirical-analytic or technical way of knowing was the storing up of essential facts and figures in order to manage one's world. In the historical-hermeneutic or interpretative way of knowing the goal was to understand one's world, whereas the cognitive interest of the self-reflective or critical way of knowing was emancipation. In this critical way of knowing the goal is knowing oneself rather than prosecuting partisan knowledge that people often accept in an uncritical manner because it is safe or politically correct or the product of indoctrination.

The third way of knowing alerts us to the power of overturning unreflective action in favour of a more critical or self-reflective approach. Habermas goes on to develop these ideas in two major works that address his theory of communicative action as a means of examining the integrity of a discourse (Habermas 1984 and 1989). Indeed, in translating Habermas's books into English, Thomas McCarthy has coined the term 'hermeneutic idealism' to describe the process where this critical approach to discourse is not followed. McCarthy speaks of hermeneutic idealism as a way of conceptualizing of reality that is dependent on one's own (or one's 'communal groups') beliefs, values and interpretations, whilst at the same time remaining blind to their causes, backgrounds and those wider connections that would contextualize them and help those holding them to see that they are in fact just one set of beliefs, values and interpretations in a sea of related and unrelated sets (McCarthy 1984 xxvi).

Where hermeneutic idealism remains the focus of one's way of knowing, the integrity of any discourse is threatened. This seems to be exactly the case in some of the criticism of Rowan Williams's speech. For some, it seems that reality is totally dependent on their own beliefs, values and interpretations whilst the broader issues relating to an increasingly pluralistic society and the role of inter-religious dialogue remain unconsidered in any critical manner. For others, such as Lord Phillips, it is possible to approach the discourse in a critical manner while at the same time asserting the rights of others in society.

Not all religious leaders share this view. In his 2003 "Commencement Sermon" as the new Dean of St Andrew's Cathedral in Sydney, Australia, Phillip Jensen, spoke against

the principles of inter-religious dialogue, saying that “we must stop the stupidity of stretching social tolerance into religious or philosophical relativism.” For Jensen this meant that “if other religions are wrong, they are the monstrous lies and deceits of Satan devised to destroy the life of the believer” (Jensen 2003). Jensen’s views suggest a distinct hermeneutic idealism and an inability to engage in inter-religious dialogue in a critical manner. The negative reaction to Rowan Williams’s speech and the content of Phillip Jensen’s Commencement Sermon raise the issue of hermeneutic idealism versus a more critical approach to truth. Is this critical approach to the “truths” of other religions merely relativism, as Jensen asserts, or are there are other ways of examining inter-religious dialogue? Habermas helps us here by suggesting the use of a dialogue approach, which is based on his theory of communicative action.

A dialogue approach has the potential of allowing what Habermas calls the intersubjectivity of communicative action and therefore suggests that inter-religious dialogue, if it is to present a critical interest, needs to allow for the expression of the varied voices of different traditions (be they religious or otherwise) without privileging any one voice over others (Habermas 1984 and 1989). In short, this means not permitting any one hermeneutic interest to have privilege over other interests. Such an approach presents a way forward for inter-religious dialogue since it attempts to bring a critical focus and intent to the discourse of inter-religious dialogue while at the same time acknowledging the diversity of interests within the various religious traditions without privileging any. A process of dialogue can operate as communicative action, where dialogue places emphasis on the intersubjectivity of shared meaning and understanding rather than seeking ownership of any one interest.

Habermas acknowledges that, since the beginning of the modern Enlightenment era, Western thought has often taken the view that science and technology hold out the promise of limitless advances, with accompanying moral and political improvement. Not all commentators, including Habermas, agree with this vision. Stephen White, for example, points out that one of the most distinctive features of the intellectual activity of the final years of the twentieth century has been the doubts raised about the conceptual foundations of Western modernity, with hard questions being asked about these predominant understandings of reason, subjectivity, nature, progress and gender (White 1995, 3). Habermas does not, however, advocate the abandonment of the project of the Enlightenment, but rather argues for its redirection. This he does in his two volume work, *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Here he puts the case that reason can be defended only by way of a critique of reason. His concept of rationality is thus one that is no longer tied to and limited by subjectivistic and individualistic premises, but rather he argues for an integration of what he calls the “lifeworld” and “system paradigms.” Habermas views the fundamental problem of social theory as being the question of how to connect in a satisfactory manner the two conceptual strategies of “lifeworld” and “system” (Habermas 1989, 151). Systems are understood to be open and to maintain themselves, even in the face of unstable and hypercomplex environments, through interchange processes across their boundaries. Systems, such as religious traditions, are concerned with the maintenance of society, and their fundamental nature and identity is the means by which a society stands or falls. The concerns of system paradigms include matters such as culture,

social integration and socialization, and it is these that function as boundary-maintaining systems for the society as a whole. System paradigms steer society in powerful and persistent ways with universal significance, whereas lifeworlds are often characterized by the separation of culture, society, and personality (Habermas 1989, 152). “Lifeworld” for Habermas has a particularity about it and is made up of the “culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretative patterns” often sedimented in texts, traditions and cultural artifacts or in organized institutions, systems and structures, such that ideas are embodied in cultural value spheres, in personality structures and in social institutions with their particular conflicts and interests based on the organization of authority and political power (Habermas 1989, 124, 108 and Habermas 1984, xiv). Religious traditions often correspond to this description of lifeworlds. Lifeworlds often differ from the normal world-concepts or systems in that lifeworlds are often associated with particular individuals or groups of people and the traditions they see as sacred. World-concepts or system paradigms are seen as more fundamental, involving criticizable validity claims, based on a frame or categorical scaffolding that serves to order problematic situations, involving “suppositions of commonality” (Habermas 1989, 125 and Habermas 1984, 102). Inter-religious dialogue often seeks to tap into these fundamental suppositions of commonality as people explore the dimensions of shared and different religious experience. Communicative action therefore points beyond the particular to the more universal aspects of society. Habermas says that:

the aspects of the rationality of action we found in communicative action should now permit us to grasp processes of societal rationalization across the whole-breadth, and no longer solely from the selective viewpoint of purposive rational action (Habermas 1984, 335).

World-concepts and system paradigms point beyond the circle of those immediately involved and have claims valid for outside interpreters as well, whereas lifeworlds are seen as being already substantially interpreted and as such often prevent those in such a lifeworld from stepping outside of it (Habermas 1989, 126). Lifeworlds, therefore, are the unquestioned ground of everything given in a person’s experience and the unquestionable frame in which all the problems a person has to deal with are located. Lifeworlds are said to be both intuitively present, and therefore familiar and transparent, as well as being vast and incalculable webs of presuppositions that need to be satisfied if an actual utterance is to be meaningful, that is, valid or invalid. Lifeworlds are very much taken for granted, and maintain themselves beyond the threshold of criticizable convictions (Ibid. 131). Lifeworlds, therefore, can take the form of sacred truth, such as that often found in religious traditions. For those who find it impossible to free themselves from the naïve, situation-oriented attitude of being actors caught up in the communicative practice of everyday life within their lifeworld, it is impossible to grasp the limitations of that lifeworld since these actors cannot get behind the context of their lifeworld and examine it with critical intent. Further, they see their lifeworld as a context that cannot be gotten behind and so their critical interest is limited by their hermeneutic idealism (Habermas 1989, 133). This seems to be the case for someone such as Phillip Jensen.

Habermas's response to this decline of the paradigm of consciousness, where a person is prevented by the very constraints of their lifeworld from stepping out of their lifeworld and engaging with world-concepts, is to propose an explicit shift to the paradigm of language – not to language as a syntactic or semantic system, but to what he calls language-in-use or speech or communicative action (McCarthy 1984, ix). Habermas says that:

the concept of *communicative action* refers to the interaction of at least two subjects capable of speech and action who establish interpersonal relations (whether by verbals or by extra-verbal means). The actors seek to reach an understanding about the action situation and their plans of action in order to coordinate their actions by way of agreement. The central concept of *interpretation* refers in the first instance to negotiating definitions of the situations which admit of consensus. ... Language is given a prominent place in this model (Habermas 1984, 86).

Communicative action involves a shift of focus from the teleological to the communicative dimension, where the analysis of language as social action is the basic medium of communication. The teleological aspect refers to the realizing of one's aims or the carrying out of one's plan of action, whereas the communicative aspect refers to the interpretation of a situation and arriving at some agreement (Habermas 1989, 126). Rationality therefore, for Habermas, "has less to do with the possession of knowledge than with how speaking and acting subjects *acquire and use knowledge*" (Habermas 1984, 8). For Habermas, this involves intersubjective recognition for the various validity claims of those who may hold differing positions and views, and for the reasons and grounds for these differing positions. Habermas argues that:

In communicative action, the very outcome of interaction is even made to depend on whether the participants can come to an agreement among themselves on an *intersubjectively valid* appraisal of their relations to the world. On this model of action, an interaction can succeed only if those involved arrive at a consensus among themselves, a consensus that depends on yes/no responses to claims potentially based on grounds (Ibid. 106).

Habermas argues that it is possible to reach agreement about differing and disputed positions by means of argument and shared insights that do not depend on force, but rather on reasons and grounds. It is this process of critique or argumentation that allows communicative action and rationality to proceed (Ibid. 17-18). Agreement between parties then rests on the sharing of common convictions and functions as a communicatively shared intersubjectivity where reflection on one's own affective and practical nature means that people act in a self-critical attitude (Ibid. 287). Habermas says that:

this concept of *communicative rationality* carries with it connotations based ultimately on the central experience of the unconstrained, unifying, consensus bringing force of argumentative speech, in which different participants overcome their merely subjective views and, owing to the mutuality of rationally motivated conviction, assure themselves of both the unity of the objective world and the intersubjectivity of their lifeworlds (Ibid. 10).

Not only does this result in mutual convictions, but also “in coordinating their actions by way of intersubjectively recognizing criticisable validity claims, they are at once relying on membership in social groups and strengthening the integration of those same groups” (Habermas 1989, 137). There are therefore important benefits deriving from communicative action, not only for mutual understanding but also for group integration and harmony between inter-religious traditions.

This way of acting, however, means that, in order to adopt a critical interest and engage in communicative action, people would need to objectify their lifeworld as a boundary-maintaining system rather than assuming that their lifeworld is *the* system and the way things are in a universal sense. Here Habermas distinguishes between “instrumental mastery” and “communicative action,” in that instrumental mastery is often employed in the appropriation of a hermeneutic, whereas communicative action maintains a critical focus (Habermas 1984, 11). This means “an interpreter can go beyond this *subjectively* purposive-rational orientation and compare the actual course of action with the constructed case of a corresponding *objectively* purposive-rational course of action” (Ibid. 102). Communicative action or communicative rationality therefore, Habermas argues, pays attention to the seams between system and lifeworld, since it is the seams that hold the potential for emancipation from the power of particular hermeneutic interests as well as resistance to more self-critical attitudes. These “seams” are the points of intersection, where there can be both harmony and conflict, and it is these seams that could form the basis for the inter-religious dialogue that is the argumentation of communicative action and rationality.

Any process of inter-religious dialogue is therefore severely constrained by a desire to maintain control and ownership of the system in the sense that the system is seen by some to be equivalent to the lifeworld of an individual, group or tradition. Habermas therefore states that “in the context of communicative action, only those persons count as responsible who, as members of a communicative community, can orient their actions to intersubjectively recognized validity claims” (Ibid. 14). This greater degree of communicative rationality in turn expands, says Habermas, “the scope for unconstrained coordination of actions and consensual resolution of conflicts” (Ibid. 15).

Habermas argues that the Enlightenment’s promise of life informed by reason cannot be redeemed so long as the rationality that finds expression in society is deformed by capitalist modernization or by the laws of history (McCarthy 1984, xxxvii). Ownership exerts itself through “hermeneutic idealism,” where the view or views of some participants in society are taken, by these participants and others, to be *the* view or *the* system paradigm, and where such a perspective only succeeds in blinding the participants to

causes, connections, and consequences that lie beyond the lifeworld of the everyday practice of an individual, groups, or institutions. For Habermas, therefore, intersubjective understanding based on communicative expression cannot be carried out in a solipsistic manner. Participation with others in a process of reaching understanding, such as inter-religious dialogue proposes, is therefore seen as essential. Where understanding is seen to be hermetically sealed in a particular religious tradition or hermeneutic interest, the lifeworld remains closed and can only be opened when there is a desire and competence to speak and act in a spirit of participation and where there is communication which encourages people to become at least potential members of a lifeworld (Habermas 1984, 112). This means that the “processes of reaching understanding are aimed at a consensus that depends on the intersubjective recognition of validity claims; and these claims can be reciprocally raised and fundamentally criticized by participants in communication” (Ibid. 136). This suggests that the purpose of rational communicative action is not egocentric ownership of knowledge or power, but the act of reaching understanding. Participants can still be oriented to their own interests, but they do this under conditions that harmonize their plans of action on the basis of common situational definitions (Ibid. 286). This is what Habermas calls “an ideal communicative community,” where critical interest is beyond the understanding of a particular hermeneutic interest and where communicative action performs the task of coordinating and mediating (Habermas 1989, 2). This suggests that such critical interest brings about “the emergence of a higher-level form of life characterized by a linguistically constituted form of intersubjectivity that makes communicative action possible” (Ibid. 10-11). In such a form of life, language functions as a medium of not only reaching understanding and transmitting cultural knowledge, but also as a means of socialization and social integration. These take place through acts of reaching understanding where the authority of the holy (that is, the lifeworld and its particular hermeneutic interest) is gradually replaced by the authority of an achieved consensus (Ibid. 24-5 and 77). This suggests a moving beyond a particular hermeneutic interest (that is, the holy) and into the area of the binding and bonding force of criticizable validity. When this occurs there is a movement towards social integration that is no longer dependent on institutionalized values but on intersubjective recognition of validity claims (Ibid. 89). When a situation is communicatively mediated, the action norms of the participants depend on shared situation definitions that refer simultaneously to the objective, the normative and the subjective facets of the situation in question. Dialogue or communication rationality in action does not therefore mean the abandonment of subjective meaning or particular technical or hermeneutic interests and the focussing on the intersubjective alone, but rather an acknowledgement both of the “ego” of the speaker who has expressed his or her experiences (the subjective aspect of a hermeneutic interest) but also of the “ego” that refers to someone as a member of a social group who is entering into an interpersonal relation (the intersubjective) with (at least) one other member (Ibid. 90). Communicative action seeks this type of shared understanding.

More recently Habermas has addressed the tension between secular society and religion in a world post 11 September, 2001 (Habermas 2001). He argues that in such a world faced with terrorism, the world “must find a common language beyond the mute violence of terrorism” which takes the form of “a world-wide, civilizing power of

formation” (Ibid. 2). Such a “work of reflection” as he calls it “is a process that runs its course through the public spheres of democracy” (Ibid. 3) and as such has the power to be useful to “both believers and non-believers” whom he argues “will press upon each other their ideologically impregnated world-views and so will stumble upon the harsh reality of ideological pluralism” (Ibid. 4) where people try “to see the issue from the other’s perspective” (Ibid. 6). Here then is Habermas reflecting on the nature of communicative action in the face of world tension and terrorism and offering a way forward through the critical rationality of communicative action.

For Habermas, this process of dialogue is vital since the dialogue of communicative action has the potential to prevent citizens being “isolated monads acting on the basis of their own self-interest” and “persons who used their subjective rights only as weapons against each other” (Habermas 2005, 35). Instead, argues Habermas in his dialogue with Ratzinger, people need to acknowledge “the identical dignity of all men that deserves unconditional respect” and “which goes beyond the borders of one particular religious fellowship” (Ibid. 45) and which rests on “a coordination of action based on values, norms, and a vocabulary intended to promote mutual understanding” (Ibid. 45-46). The imperative for action, expressed some years earlier though an appeal to communicative action has found a new impetus in the face of world terrorism and in a situation where Habermas himself, a professed atheist, practices the critical rationality of communicative action of which he speaks in a dialogue with the man who, as Pope Benedict XVI, would become the next leader of the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, Habermas argues that religious communities in their renunciation of violence as part of the propagation of their faith are entitled to be called reasonable where such a role of the faithful functions within a pluralistic society (Habermas 2001, 3). Habermas therefore concedes a role for religions in the face of modern terrorism and argues that “without this reflective ‘thrust,’ monotheisms within ruthlessly modernizing societies develop a destructive potential” (Ibid. 3). Whereas Habermas recognizes a role for religions, at the same time he deprecates hermeneutic idealism. For Habermas, “love cannot exist without knowledge of another, nor can freedom exist without mutual recognition” (Ibid. 7). This allows him to say therefore, as a person in dialogue with religious traditions, that religion “has something to say even to those who have no ear for religion, among whom I count myself” in the sense that “the gift of a divine form to man is taken to mean that no hindrance be placed on man’s right to self-determination” (Ibid. 8).

Rowan Williams’ speech to the Royal Courts of Justice is also an attempt to enter into the critical rationality of communicative action as he reflected on the need for dialogue in his own situation in the United Kingdom. Like Habermas’ reflection, Williams’s speech represents an attempt to step aside from one’s own position and to engage in a serious manner with the lifeworld of other speakers in the discourse of communicative action. As such Williams’ words, like those of Habermas, make a valuable contribution to the intersubjectivity of inter-religious dialogue.

Jurgen Habermas’ theory of communicative action serves as a way forward for inter-religious dialogue in that it provides a theoretical framework for moving apart from one’s firmly held lifeworld and engaging with a system paradigm, that is, the religious experience of human beings and the meeting together of those who accept different religious

traditions. Habermas' work also suggests that the danger of hermeneutic idealism can often be, in a Habermasian perspective at least, the relativism that some such as Phillip Jensen accuse others of holding.

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