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Linguistic Transformation of Frankfurt School Critical Theory: Response to my Critics

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Abstract: The authors makes explicit the original goals and intent of the project, while trying to access what remains relevant, valid, and timely in a work that was written a decade ago. The author defends the assertion that this work remains the only and most comprehensive monograph on the work of one of Germany's most important philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century. The author also argues that the book offers an unparallel reconstruction of the genesis and sources of the linguistic transformation of Frankfurt School, which had been augured and instigated by the pioneering work of Karl-Otto Apel. The essay closes with a response to some very specific and pointed criticism by James Marsh and Micheal Barber.

Keywords: Frankfut School, Critical Theory, Liberation Philosophy, Karl-Otto Apel, Jürgen Habermas, Enrique Dussel

I would like to begin by thanking the organizers and directors of the Society for Phenomenological and Existential Philosophy (SPEP), and especially the committee that selects books to be profiled at SPEP meetings. I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to my two colleagues, Jim Marsh and Mike Barber, for their generosity and friendship. They both noted briefly and in passing how my book came out of a series of common experiences and meetings we had in the early nineties. What needs to be noted is that I formed part of that common experience and context but in the capacity of a junior colleague, who had to and did learn tremendously from both of them. Thus, in part, my work on Apel is marked by their influence on my thinking during those momentous encounters. I am fortunate that my colleagues have been so positive and transversal in their comments. This has made my response easier in some regards, but difficult in others. Their appreciate and positive papers have freed me to undertake a retrospective self-criticism that would not have been possible if I had had to mount a self-defense or self-justification. On the other hand, they also have made it difficult because I am now in the position of having to give an account of what I wanted to achieve in this work. And this turns out to be difficult because I wrote this book a decade ago. I would like to brake down my comments into three sections: 1. I will discuss very briefly the context, genesis, and aims of the work, 2. After ten years of the book, I will address what I think remains important in this work, notwithstanding my own philosophical itinerary since I wrote it, and finally, 3., I will respond to some criticisms and concerns voiced by both James Marsh and Michael Barber.

I

The Adventures of Transcendental Philosophy began as a doctoral dissertation on Karl-Otto Apel that I wrote in Germany, although under the direction of Richard Bernstein and

Agnes Heller from the New School for Social Research. The dissertation was finished in the fall of 94, and was immediately revised and sent to MIT, where it languished for two years. I thought at the time that the book should appear in Tom McCarthy's series on Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought. For whatever reasons, a lot of them probably having to do with McCarthy's own intellectual interests and vision about what he considered relevant in German thought, MIT clearly did not publish the book. Finally, and through the intervention of Maureen McGrogan, the book was taken up at Rowman & Littlefield, where Maureen had gone after she had left Routledge. As many of you know Maureen McGrogan almost singly transformed the face of critical theory in the eighties when she published Butler, Fraser, Cornell, and many others in the series she launched at Routledge. Maureen McGrogan left R&L to retire before I sent her my further revised book manuscript. When the book eventually went on the publication schedule, Martin Matustik negotiated with R&L that it should be included in the series he edits with Patricia Huntington. In retrospect, the book found its proper home: a series that looks towards a New Critical Theory, and that seeks to engage this important intellectual tradition with the new social and intellectual challenges of a globalized, postcolonial and postoccidentalist world.

When I wrote the book, I deliberately worked with a few very clear aims, albeit extremely strong. I wanted above all to offer a philosophical-historical story about the genesis of discourse ethics. The book is explicitly an archeology of the philosophical sources of discourse ethics. In order to do this, I had to reconstruct the philosophical itinerary of the thinker I think gave the first and most complete formulation of discourse ethics, namely Karl-Otto Apel. I wrote the book under the explicit assumption that discourse ethics is one of the most important ethical proposals to have appeared in the last two decades. And that in order to understand its importance I had to reconstruct how it has emerged and what it sought to accomplish. While I came to discourse ethics from liberation philosophy, in the early nineties Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas had began to articulate a dialogic and linguistic version of Kantianism and deontology that offered many correctives to liberation ethic's own Aristotelianism and phenomenologically influenced ethics of alterity.

The book also sought to offer a deeper understanding of the "linguistic transformation of Frankfurt School Critical Theory." I have always found disconcerting that few critical theorists in the United States took Apel to be part of the Frankfurt School, notwithstanding his own self-description as a member of the school. It is curious that Apel, who came to Frankfurt from Kiel at the urging of Habermas and Horkheimer, and taught there for almost twenty years, remained an unknown quantity for US critical theorists. Habermas has written about the key role that Apel played in his own intellectual development. Yet, few in the US have sought to unpack what this influence was and what it meant for the later developments of critical theory. I think that my book on Apel will contribute to a deeper understanding not just of Apel, but also of Habermas.

Another key aim of this work was to explore and ultimately, to chronicle the encounter of a major European, first world philosopher, with a major third World, Latin American philosopher. Since the late eighties, when Apel and Enrique Dussel began to meet almost

on a yearly basis for a decade, I took part in many of these encounters, as also were professors Barber and Marsh. *Adventures of Transcendental Philosophy* aimed, therefore, at thinking through what discourse ethics and the ethics of liberation could learn from each other. Finally, the book aimed at thinking philosophically the challenges of postmodernism, post-occidentalism, and postcolonialism. In my book I wanted to articulate Dussel's challenges to Apel, and discourse ethics, as examples of a type of criticism that we now called postoccidentalist and postorientalist. In tandem, I wanted to assess the extent to which Apel, had, could, and would process Dussel's challenges.

It should not go unsaid that this book, like most books, is literally backed by several others. Before I published my book on Apel, I had already edited two volumes of his collected essays, some of which I translated from the German[1]. These volumes were published by Humanities Press in the early 90s and are to be thought as complementary volumes to my book. In addition, as I wrote my Apel book, I also edited and translated Dussel's book *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor and the Philosophy of Liberation*[2]. In fact, this book, also published by Humanities in the early nineties, was my idea, for no such book exists in Spanish, or any language. Furthermore, as I was completing *The Adventures of Transcendental Philosophy*, I was also working on a third volume of edited essays by Apel, which would focus on discourse ethics, law, and his dialogue with Enrique Dussel. This volume was never completed because Humanities Press went out of business. Still, I translated a few of Apel's essay on this topic, and these translations also form part of the supplement to my Apel book.

II

Given these aims, how well does the work still hold, even after a decade? I think that my work remains the *first* and only almost full assessment and reconstruction of Karl-Otto Apel's philosophical *oeuvre*. The book is not a complete assessment of Apel's work because, as I noted in the introduction, I did not deal with Apel's contributions to the philosophy of science, and the explanation-understanding debate that was extremely important for methodological debates in the sixties. Nonetheless, in German, French, and Spanish, there exist a series of very good monograms. In English, we only have the essays by Fred Dallmayr, and a few references in the works of David Rasmussen[3], and my interlocutors today. I also think that my reconstruction and assessment of Apel's *Transformation of philosophy*[4], or what he has also called the transcendental pragmatic-semiotic transformation of philosophy, remains a key chapter in the history of post-world war II German philosophy. It is my hope that scholars and students in general of continental thought in the 20th century will read this chapter, in which the history of the linguistic turn of post-WW II German philosophy is presented as a story about the extensive and determining influence American thought had on this turn. In many ways, therefore, my book is about the ways in which German philosophers turned to American pragmatism to find resources to bring about an ethical and normative turn in their thinking. In this story, the philosophical heroes were and remain: Charles Sanders Peirce, George Herbert Mead, Josiah Royce, Charles Morris, and to a lesser extent John Dewey and John Searle.

Adventures of Transcendental Philosophy also holds up tremendously well when one considers the chapter on the dialogue between Apel and Habermas. In this chapter, I sought to reconstruct the ways in which, in fact, Apel had influenced Habermas, and how the latter had responded to the former's sometimes pointed and devastating criticisms. By focusing on this decades long exchange, harkening back to the time when Apel and Habermas were graduate students in Bonn under Erich Rothacker, I wanted to offer a unique pathway to understanding the ways in which Frankfurt School critical theory underwent a linguistic turn at the pen of Jürgen Habermas. In chapter 4, where I undertake this analysis, I focused on three main areas of dialogue and tension between Apel and Habermas: the project of a philosophical-anthropological grounding of knowledge interests; the theory of types of rationality, which grew out of the collapse of the philosophical anthropological project; and finally, the architectonic of discourse ethics. In retrospect, and as my colleagues have noted in their respective papers, this reconstruction remains both relevant and informative. I would go further, I think that many of the weakness and aporias of the Habermasian project have been made evident by the kinds of criticism that Apel has leveled at it, and they have been the more devastating and incisive because they were articulated by someone who shared with him many philosophical points of departure. Understanding Apel's criticisms of Habermas will be key to untangling and extricating critical theory from many of its theoretical and philosophical imbroglios. In retrospect, however, I wished I had had more space to expand this chapter so that I could have also discussed, as I in fact had planned, (see endnote 121, pages 138-139) Apel's and Habermas's divergent views on philosophy. I think that we are now in the position to ask what has been Habermas's relationship to philosophy. Or, to put alternatively, how critical theory remains a philosophical project, notwithstanding its socio-theoretical turn at the hands of Habermas. That chapter should have also included a discussion on the differences between Apel and Habermas on the question of the relationship of discourse ethics to politics and law. I think that in this regard Apel and Marsh are closer to each other than they both are to Habermas. Still, *The Adventures of Transcendental Philosophy* was written as Habermas's *Between Facts and Norms* was appearing in German[5].

In retrospect, however, there are parts of the book I could have written differently, or that if I was to write today I would write them differently. Thus, the last chapter in which I triangulate Apel with Rorty, Lyotard and Dussel, should have been written differently. I should have been less reticent at the time to give major play to Dussel, and dispense with the legitimating presence of figures like Rorty and Lyotard. The chapter also should not have been as dismissive and acrimonious towards Rorty. The theoretical disdain and lack of generosity towards Rorty had to do in part because at the time I did not know so well his work, and did not appreciate as fully his project. I have since corrected my view of Rorty's work[6]. I have also corrected my presentation of Dussel work, as two books and numerous essays on him now attest. In fact, and as many of you know, I have been a major contributor to the translation, interpretation, a positive appropriation of Dussel's work in the United States. My commitment to Dussel's work has to do with ethical-political views, but also with the very evident fact that Dussel has been a vigorous and innovative thinker. From the decade long dialogue with Apel, Marsh, Barber, Raul Fornet-Betancourt and Franz Hinkelammert, two other key dialogue partners in these

encounters, Dussel's work emerged profoundly transformed. Dussel's synthesis of his decade of critique and learning has been magisterially articulated in *The Ethics of Liberation in the Age of Globalization and Exclusion,* published in 1998[7]. This work, which I have been translating for the last three years, is in my assessment Dussel's *magnus opus* so far, but it is also a major work of philosophical ethics that stands shoulder to shoulder with the works of Habermas, John Rawls, Alasdair MacIntyre, or any other major ethicist[8]. For this reason, I can safely say that today I would an entirely different work, one in which I would focus almost exclusively on the encounter between Apel and Dussel, dispensing with the other legitimating figures and supporting roles.

III

I would like now to close by very briefly addressing some direct criticisms or questions articulated by my colleagues. Marsh and I share many similar ideas and opinions about the failures of Habermasian discourse ethics. We also share dismay at the ways in which a deontological and normative perspective was used to offer legitimacy to patently imperial wars. Still, I think that Marsh may have assimilated Apel's views too much to Habermas's; Marsh says that I may have been too hermeneutically generous towards Apel. "Apel only inadequately passes the Dussel test, if he passes at all." (8) I think that today this statement is half accurate. In 1994, when Dussel had yet to write his *Ética de la Liberación*, Apel appeared as an avowedly interested and engaged dialogue partner. After having read everything, and I can say that without hyperbole, that Apel wrote for and on his dialogue with Dussel, I can attest that Apel took very seriously Dussel's challenge, what Marsh called the "Dussel test." There are many, many moving passages in Apel's work that attest to Apel's profound concern for the poverty of the world, and the enduring asymmetries between rich and poor. For Apel the poverty, ecological, debt problems of the world were not just ethical challenges, but also philosophical problems that demanded equally rigorous and serious attention. Indeed, his response is to affirm European liberalism, Kantian deontology, and transcendental hermeneutics. But the insufficiency of the answer does not belittle or belie the authenticity of the interest and preoccupation. Even today, and after Dussel's 1988 magnus opus, I would still hold to my hermeneutical generosity towards Apel, because in the end, he did take up the challenge, whereas Habermas, for instance, did not. But this is an entirely different question.

Barber has also raised a series of very important questions regarding Apel's reading of key figures such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Richard Rorty. Barber, like Marsh, explicitly questions the appropriateness and sufficiency of Apel's response to the Dussel's challenge, and in particular Dussel's challenge to the discourse ethics as the kind of ethics for an age of globalizing exclusion. I would have to agree here. I think that world inequality, and world asymmetries in all respects and levels, remain and will remain a major philosophical challenge. Barber also questions Apel's readings of several thinkers. I must agree with Barber's assessment. Having studied practically everything that Apel wrote, I could safely say that Apel was not a particularly good exegete. This was never his forte. Even from the time of his doctoral dissertation, Apel revealed impatience with close readings. He was interested and remains interested in building, in

constructing. It is not accidental that one of his favorite words is "architectonic." Apel, notwithstanding his spousal of transcendental hermeneutics, is not very hermeneutically generous. He approaches a thinker less in terms of what he can learn from them, than in terms of how they fit into a pre-established philosophical agenda. There is, however, one exception, and that is Charles Sanders Peirce. I think that Apel began to read Peirce hoping to make sense of him in terms of the theories about language he had developed while writing his *Habilitation*, but discovered an entirely different continent. Thus, I am not surprised that Barber would find my reconstruction and replaying of Apel's readings of certain key figures wanting. Apel is the kind of thinker one reads not because of his ability to give a comprehensive and original reading of a particular thinker, but for the way in which he is able to put a series of thinkers within a tradition and trajectory. Here the best analogues are Rorty and Habermas, who are also faulted for their misreadings, or lack of hermeneutical generosity. Still, I must agree with Barber that Apel had little to say about the second Heidegger. I actually discussed this with Apel, and he told me that he had ceased to read Heidegger pretty much after the fifties. Still, I think that Apel's non-appropriation of the second Heidegger had to do with what I called in my book the moral bankruptcy of German philosophy during and after the war, meaning WWII. A context of reading is also important, and I would like to underscore that part of my work on Apel had to do with understanding what happened to German philosophy after WWII, after what Apel called the moral catastrophe of German philosophy.

There is one last objection that Barber raises that I must respond and this concerns the dialectic between "subjectivity" and "intersubjectivity," or put differently between "monological" and "dialogic" interpretations of human subjectivity and agency. Barber criticizes Apel, and indirectly my own analysis, for not paying enough attention to the subjective aspects of the appropriation of experiential evidence, and even the very experience of intersubjectivity. In Barber's view, and he quotes Zahavi, there is an irreducible dialectic between intersubjectivity and subjectivity. The "I" is always the uncircumventable presupposition of intersubjectivity. (13). Barber then notes that Apel would or might retort: and "vice versa." I think not. I think, and here I side with Apel and Habermas, intersubjectivity is prior and more primordial than the "I." For Apel and Habermas, the "I" is a by-product of either a semiotic experience in which I-ness is third to experience and sensation, or a learned response to another, as Mead elaborated in his social philosophy. The "I" is a placeholder in a triadic relationship, and it is this triadic relationship that has both primacy and priority, both phenomenological and epistemological. I think that when Barber brings in Dan Zahavi, or his own commitments to a phenomenology of subjectivity, he is actually misrepresenting Apel's own very explicit commitments to the priority and primacy of intersubjectivity. I only need to remind us here of his response to John Searle's attempt to re-introduce "intentionality" as being prior and primordial in speech act theory. In his rebuttal of Searle, for instance, Apel affirms the uncircumventable primacy of intersubjectivity. That said, I agree with most everything in Barber's and Marsh's wonderful papers. I am extremely thankful for their close and generous readings. I also thank them for their wonderful work, which as I said at the outset, was crucial for the formulation of my own ideas and understanding of both Apel and Dussel.

Endnotes

[1] See *Towards a Transcendental Semiotics: Selected Essays of Karl-Otto Apel. Volume 1*. Edited and Introduced by Eduardo Mendieta with Preface by Karl-Otto Apel. (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1994), and *Ethics and The Theory of Rationality: Selected Essays of Karl-Otto Apel. Volume 2.* Edited and Introduced by Eduardo Mendieta with Preface by Karl-Otto Apel. (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996).

[2] Atlantic Highlands, NJ. Humanities Press, 1996.

[3] David Rasmussen has in addition played a pivotal role in the reception and promotion of my own work. He has advised me and been extremely forthcoming with criticisms. He has also been very open to my suggestions and recommendations. His work as the editor of *Philosophy and Social Criticism* has very distinctively shaped and marked indelibly the diffusion, transformation and vibrancy of what is called perhaps inappropriately "continental theory."

[4] Karl-Otto Apel, *Transformation der Philosophie*, 2 volumes (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973).

[5] Jürgen Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1992.

[6] See my "'Take Care of Freedom and Truth will take care of itself': Towards a Post-Philosophical Politics" which is an introduction to a collection of interviews with Richard Rorty I edited, some of which I myself conducted. See, Richard Rorty, *Towards*

a Post-Philosophical Politics: Interviews 1984-2003 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, forthcoming)

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

[8] See my review of Dussel's 1998 ethics, "Ethics for an Age of Globalization and Exclusion" in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol 25, No. 2, pp. 115-121.