CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Intersubjectivity - interactionist or discursive? Reflections on Habermas' critique of Brandom
Authors	Strydom, Piet
Publication date	2006-03-01
Original Citation	Strydom, P. (2006) 'Intersubjectivity - interactionist or discursive? Reflections on Habermas' critique of Brandom', Philosophy and Social Criticism, 32(2), pp. 155-172. doi: 10.1177/0191453706061090
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0191453706061090 - 10.1177/0191453706061090
Rights	© 2006, SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.
Download date	2026-11-10 14:47:01
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/7709



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Intersubjectivity --- interactionist or discursive? Reflections on Habermas' critique of Brandom

Piet Strydom

Abstract

This article argues that there is a marked ambivalence in Habermas' concept of intersubjectivity in that he wavers between an interactionist and a discursive understanding. This ambivalence is demonstrated with reference to his recent critique of Robert Brandom's normative pragmatic theory of discursive practice. Although Habermas is a leading theorist of discourse as an epistemically steered process, he allows his interpretation of Brandom's theory as suffering from objective idealism to compel him to recoil from discourse and to defend a purely interactionist or dialogical position. It is argued that the ambivalence in question is related to Habermas' incomplete theorisation of communication as a process of structure formation that unfolds sequentially through time on different levels. His architectonic of communicative intersubjectivity is marred by a missing concept. His characteristic concept of coordination is insufficient and must be complemented by a concept of synthesis at the discursive level.

Key words

Brandom; communication; coordination; discursive synthesis; Habermas; Luhmann; objectivism; process; sequentiality; structure formation; time

Introduction

In a recent essay, Jürgen Habermas (1999a, 2003a) develops a detailed analysis and differentiated critique of Robert Brandom's normative pragmatics as presented in his major work entitled *Making It Explicit* (1994). A central aspect of Habermas' critique is directed against Brandom's alleged objectivistic understanding of discursive practice. The angle from which Habermas undertakes this critique and seeks to correct Brandom's position is represented by his intersubjectivist point of view. Rather than trying to defend Brandom, I propose to devote these reflections to a critical analysis of Habermas' position as put forward in the core part of his essay --- that is, particularly section V(2) (2003a: 161-66) --- focused on the structure of communication. In the following, I leave largely open the question whether Brandom actually takes an objectivist approach to discursive practice which derives from his metaphysical conceptual realism and the related tendency toward a neo-Hegelian objective idealism which assumes a movement of the concept over the heads and behind the backs of the participants in communication, as Habermas argues. My focus is rather the conspicuous ambivalence in Habermas

regarding an interactionist or dialogical and a discursive approach to intersubjectivity and the theoretical implications flowing from it. Above all, a proper understanding of intersubjectivity, particularly the process of communication whereby it becomes established, is at stake. The central point of the argument is that Habermas fails to theorise the process of communication adequately. Although proceeding from the basic distinction between interaction or dialogue and discourse, he tends to regard the process in a one-dimensional manner as involving the interactive or dialogical coordination of the intentions and actions of the participants alone. This raises the question of the missing dimension of the process, namely the moment of synthesis of the different contributions into a collectively acceptable outcome at the discursive level which is essential for and therefore presupposed by the actual attainment of intersubjective coordination.

In order to present the argument in a comprehensible manner, I first briefly review Habermas' critique of Brandom, then characterise his proposal to correct Brandom's objectivistic tendency, and finally embark on a more detailed analysis and critique of Habermas' position.

Habermas' critique of Brandom

In *Making It Explicit*, Brandom systematically develops an innovative pragmatic analysis of language by focusing on discursive practice in the sense of the activities of giving and asking for reasons or mutual justification on which the social life of a speech or language community depends. Accordingly, he follows the various interrelated roles of speech acts in discourse --- from speakers expressing utterances or making claims and thus undertaking something and entering into commitments, via interpreters attributing claims and commitments to speakers, to all the participants mutually evaluating and assessing or keeping score of each other's position in and contribution to their common discourse.

Habermas' critique --- at least, the particular aspect of it I select here as being relevant --- turns on a discrepancy he discovers in Brandom's methodological approach. On the one hand, according to his own account, Brandom starts by adopting the orientation of a second person which enables him to analyse the utterances of a speaker from the perspective of an interlocutor or interpreter participating in discourse. He emphatically holds, for instance, that the basic explanatory challenge of his normative pragmatic model of discursive practice centrally involves the practical attitude of taking and treating speech acts as having the significance of claims (Brandom 1994: 141--42, also 161--65; Habermas 2003a: 134--35). Another, or others, must hear a speech act, listen to what is being said, understand the claim it raises, and respond to it. On closer inspection, however, Habermas (2003a: 162) finds on the other hand that Brandom actually constructs the first person-second person or I-thou relation as a first person-third person relation: a first person makes an utterance and a third person, who plays the role of an observer or spectator rather than an addressee, attributes or imputes the claim

implied by the utterance to the speaker and then evaluates its validity and assesses its import.

That the attribution, evaluation and assessment tasks are not carried out by a second person, as Brandom initially intimated, is borne out for Habermas by the fact that a person is able to fulfil the role of a second person only if an 'I' orients him- or herself towards him or her as a 'thou', only if a first person addresses a second person with the expectation of a reply. The shift from a first person-second person relation to a first person-third person relation instead in Brandom's actual analysis implies in Habermas' view that he not only confuses two distinct levels of communication, but also ignores the grammatical role of the second person. On the whole, then, Brandom neglects the complex interrelation of the first, second and third person perspectives, which means that he operates with an inadequate concept of communication.

From this circumstance, Habermas (2003a: 160, 163--65) draws the conclusion that Brandom adopts an objectivist, theoreticist and methodological individualist approach which is unsuited to the analysis of discursive practice. The last word is given to a spectator or observer of a speech act who attributes a claim to a speaker and evaluates it, thus making possible an objectivistic description of the process of communication or discursive practice. The spectator or observer is actually assuming the role of a theoretician who regards understanding an utterance not as the hermeneutic interpretation of a text, but rather as an operation of imputing his or her own interpretation and evaluation to the speaker. The process of communication or discursive practice itself is conceived as emerging from the inferences which each individual participant draws for him- or herself based on their observation of one another, rather than as the outcome of a cooperative accomplishment.

Habermas' corrective proposal

Essentially, Habermas' proposal is to adopt intersubjectivism as a corrective to Brandom's objectivism.

Habermas' (2003a: 162--64) prime target is Brandom's reputed tendency to treat communication or discursive practice in terms of the relation between a first person and a third person or between a speaker and an observing interpreter. As against this particular emphasis, he insists instead on the primacy of the relation between a first person and a second person. A first person, on the one hand, is a speaker who connects an intention with an utterance and, as an interlocutor, uses his or her assertion to demand a public reply, whether positive or negative, from an addressee. Such a response is necessary to either confirm what is at stake in the intention of the speaker or to bring him or her to revise it, and thus to produce an obligation relevant to the continuation of the exchange between the two parties. A second person, on the other hand, is one who is drawn into communication by a speaker's orientation toward him or her, thus becoming an addressee who is expected to respond in a meaningful way to the speaker's utterance. Habermas

stresses the status of both the first and second persons as performers who are directly involved in the interaction and whose perspectives structurally interpenetrate so that their roles are interchangeable. This contrasts sharply with third persons who are disinterested interpreters, observers or spectators who are uninvolved, at best just registering what is being said by the performing interlocutors and waiting to see what transpires between or among them.

It is this distinction between directly involved parties to an exchange or a dispute who adopt a performative attitude towards one another, on the one hand, and observing bystanders or spectators who interpret what is going on between or among interlocutors, on the other, that leads Habermas (2003a: 163) to claim that Brandom confounds two distinct dimensions of communication. Whereas the latter at first had in mind the direct communication between speakers and addressees, his emphasis shifted and then became fixed on the indirect communication between the speakers and the spectators listening to them. Habermas' intersubjectivist corrective to Brandom's alleged objectivistic tendency is to keep these two dimensions strictly apart and to make the direct communicative relation between speaker and addressee the paradigmatic case.

The second component of Habermas' proposal is to embed the first person-second person relation in the broader context serving as its carrier or substrate. As against Brandom's tendency --- as reputedly exhibited by his models of baseball, court proceedings, and ballroom dancing[1] --- to treat communication or discursive practice as a self-sufficient process comprised of the contributions of individuals who mutually observe, inform and evaluate each other, Habermas (2003a: 162--66) elaborates the first principle of the theory of intersubjectivity. Communication or discursive practice is a cooperative process of learning which unfolds within the limits of a social environment and the constraints of an independently existing world. Within its social environment, the process on the one hand takes place against the background of an intersubjective lifeworld or within the shared meaning horizon of a linguistically disclosed world. On the other, it is guided by a community of justification which directs it toward the goal of a discursively achieved agreement. If successful, the process culminates in a collectively accepted result which allows the coordination of the plans and actions of the independently deciding participants. For Habermas (2003a: 164, 165), the specificity of linguistically mediated communication, which according to him is not adequately appreciated by Brandom, lies in such coordination and more generally the social integration which follows from it. For Habermas, this emphasis directs the attention toward the dependence of communication on the necessity of keeping consonant those beliefs and opinions of participants that are relevant for coordinating their plans and actions. Central to the intersubjectivist conception of the process of communication or discursive practice, then, is the possibility for the participants to converge in their recognition of the same validity claim and to come to share knowledge of that which they are communicating about.[2] It is only on this basis, according to Habermas (2003a: 166),

that the intersubjective justification of a claim raised in the process of communication or discursive practice could allow the burden of the warrant for its validity to be shouldered collectively.

It is advisable in the present context, finally, to highlight an additional, albeit remarkably brief, clarification Habermas makes to his account of communication or discursive practice embedded in an intersubjective context. Despite its brevity, it is of central importance for both an understanding and a critical assessment of Habermas' critique of Brandom, as will become apparent later. The clarification concerns the structure of communication or discursive practice and its social significance. On one occasion, Habermas insists that 'the complex interconnections of the first, second and third person perspectives' (2003a: 162) must, by contrast with Brandom, be borne in mind throughout. And on another, he suggests that the 'grammatical role' (163) of each the three types of person involved in communication, including the second person ignored by Brandom, need to be considered in principle. More formally, the reference here is to the linguistic system of personal pronouns which he discussed in various places in his earlier writings (e.g. Habermas and Luhmann 1971: 193--94; Habermas 1987: 35--6, 102--5). The social significance of these structural parameters of communication or discursive practice should be obvious. The establishment of interpersonal relations within the framework of first, second and third person perspectives through the use of personal pronouns brings to the fore a whole intersubjective world by actualising a deep-seated network of relations of not just membership but also potential membership in a social group.

Critique of Habermas

Habermas regards Brandom's *Making It Explicit* as an innovative, detailed and tenacious elaboration of a programme of formal pragmatics he himself among others has been envisaging since the nineteen-seventies. Sharing a pragmatic approach, Habermas thus fully accepts Brandom's focus on the social practices of a linguistic community in which subjects capable of speech and action engage. Brandom's specific concern is what he calls 'linguistic' or 'discursive practice' and conceives as acts of communication which involve 'giving and asking for reasons' and are regulated by the participants' mutual 'scorekeeping' (1994: 5, 141). In his analysis, Habermas speaks interchangeably of discursive practice, discourse, argumentation, communication, communicative exchange, linguistic communication, everyday communication and interaction. This varied usage, which is present also in the original German version of the essay under discussion (Habermas 1999a), at first sight looks like a case of conceptual looseness. Indeed, in my view, it is the source of a particular ambivalence and hence lack of clarity and even mismatched analysis in his critique of Brandom.

Light is shed on this conceptual imprecision by a basic theoretical distinction on which Habermas' position rests since 1970 --- namely, the distinction between

'communicative action' (or interaction) and 'discourse' (e.g. Habermas and Luhmann 1971: 114--22; Habermas 1974: 16--9; 1979: 3--4). Here discourse is conceived as a special, reflexive form of communication which indeed takes place in and through the medium of communication, yet stands in a relation of opposition to ordinary everyday communication in so far as it stops the latter in its tracks, problematizes it, opens it up, induces reflection on its implicit assumptions, makes the latter explicit and thus explains and clarifies communication by reference to those very assumptions (Strydom 2000: 42--9). I am convinced that this distinction between interaction and discourse is crucial also for understanding what is actually happening in Habermas' critical engagement with Brandom's work. A close examination of the relevant writings of our two authors shows, to my mind, that whereas Brandom focuses on discourse, or the 'discursive practice' of 'giving and asking for reasons' (1994: 5), Habermas for the most part criticises Brandom from the point of view of interaction. Instead of discourse, he holds to a theory of everyday communication or interaction, or one might say a theory of dialogue. Rather than a discursive intersubjectivist position, therefore, he assumes an interactionist or dialogical intersubjectivism.

In the development of his critique of Brandom's objectivist conception of the process of communication and his concurrent theoreticist attitude, Habermas seems to fall in the trap of interactionism or dialogicism due to a forgetfulness of discourse. Various pieces of evidence can be mustered to support this interpretation. His undivided attention to the first person-second person relation from an internal lifeworld perspective is of first importance here. Not only is the relation between the first and second person for him the essential component of communication, but he also sees the understanding by an addressee of what a speaker means, which in turn requires something like the hermeneutic interpretation of a text, as the essential quality of this relation itself and hence also of communication. In the course of the development of this relation in the process of communication, therefore, he regards the first and second person as converging in their understanding of the claim at stake up to the point where they share the same knowledge. The emphasis here is on the I-thou relation, mutual understanding through hermeneutic interpretation, convergence and sharing. There could be little criticism of this approach if communication in the sense of internal lifeworld or everyday communication were in question, but at issue between Habermas and Brandon is more than such interaction or dialogue. What is happening here is that Habermas generalises communication in the sense of interaction or dialogue to the level of discourse, with the result that he obliterates the latter and thus misses this second dimension of communication. His own axiomatic distinction which is crucial for grasping the multi-dimensionality of the process of communication falls by the wayside.

A brief analysis delivers evidence backing up this claim. Notwithstanding the assumption of a shared horizon of meaning, the interactionist or dialogical approach regards sociality or the outcome of a social situation as depending on the intentions and

actions of participants. It results from the coordination of subjective perspectives and individual actions. The outcome is given shape and form by the coordination of the meanings of the communicative actions of each participant which are hermeneutically interpreted and understood by the other participants. Such coordination is a meaningfully structured process of cooperation among the participants that gathers together the different acts of understanding and agreement so as to culminate in intersubjective understanding and agreement among the participants. This could be summarised by saying that the assumption is made that a speaker communicates a meaning in such a way to an addressee that the latter understands it in a manner identical to the speaker, with the implication that the speaker could be said to control the reception of his or her meaning and its understanding by the addressee.[3]

On close inspection, however, it becomes apparent that the interactionist or dialogical account is not adequate to capture the specificity of discursive practice involving giving and asking for reasons. Habermas demands of Brandom that he takes into consideration throughout the complex interrelations of the first, second and third person perspectives instead of screening out the first person-second person relation. But he himself then continues to reduce this complex threefold relation to the first person-second person relation to the virtual exclusion of the third person perspective. It is remarkable that, in an earlier publication, Habermas (1997: 133--34) himself presented a convincing critique of dialogical philosophy. Proceeding from the assumption of the sign-mediated nature of communication and the full system of personal pronouns, he pointed out that dialogical philosophy operates with a selective reconstruction of the full structure of communication. Replacing the reflection model of the epistemological subject-object relation with the communicative model of reciprocal self-understanding, it focuses exclusively on the I-Thou relation. The result is a narrowing of the structure of understanding to the existential-ethical experience of the participants consequent on felicitous communication. As against this reductive tendency, he insisted that communication involves more than the ego-alter relation. It presupposes the integration of the performative attitude of the participating first and second persons with the third person attitude. Here Habermas obviously went beyond the interactionist or dialogical account he offers in section V(2) of the essay on Brandom. In the earlier publication, the full threefold structure of communication and its sign-mediated nature are manifest in sharp profile --- a complex which makes itself felt in particular when we shift from interaction to discourse where the participants are required to engage in public practices of justification. In the Brandom essay, by contrast, Habermas looses sight of communication in the full sense of the word as well as apparently the Peircean theory of signs which he elsewhere accepts as being presupposed by it (Habermas 1991: 9--33; 1996: 13--4)[4]. But this still leaves the pressing question of the role of the third person.

In his critique of dialogical philosophy, Habermas (1997: 134) regards the third person attitude as one towards something in the objective world. Likewise in his critique

of Brandom, he indeed proposes to correct Brandom's conceptual realism also by replacing it with a pragmatic realism which acknowledges the resistance of an independent objective world (Habermas 2003a: 155--59). Yet in discourse, particularly in the practical type of discourse we are familiar with in social life taking the form of public controversy, debate or dispute characterised by the practice of justification, the third person perspective enters by no means solely in the form of the neutral attitude towards something in the objective world. The latter attitude at best brings into play only 'it', but not yet the personal pronouns 'he', 'she' or 'they'. Habermas gives an unmistakable indication of this more complex situation in a recent outline of what may be called his cognitive-epistemic model of discourse (1998: 46--7, 102--3). According to this model, the structuration of discourse takes place in such a way that it can be said to be an epistemically steered process. Ethical and pragmatic reasons in the sense of individual participants' motives and values are not ignored, but generalised and treated as valid epistemic contributions to discourse that are intersubjectively acceptable. On the one hand, the participants create their own reality by making individual contributions to the process through which this achievement is realised and, on the other, they are all without exception subordinate to the structures of the performatively shared situation which thus become established and collectively accepted --- yet leaving room for the relational structure of otherness and difference which secures the retention of both differences and the particular. What this position implies, in my estimation, is that here not just the participants assuming first and second person roles and a reference to the objective world are of importance, but at the same time also epistemic properties that are discursively constructed and collectively valid since they are acceptable from the third person perspective.

With this circumscription of discourse, Habermas undoubtedly goes well beyond the interactionist or dialogical position he plays out against Brandom, and simultaneously he hints, albeit rather obliquely, at the place of the third person perspective in such a process. In his critique of Brandom, first, he fixes on meanings remaining identical in the transition from the first person to the second person, so that every response is seen as directly connected to a speech act, while the speaker controls the addressee's understanding. In the case of his cognitive-epistemic model of discourse, by contrast, there is a certain openness or contingency of meaning that, precisely because of the epistemic role of the discursive process, allows the participants to maintain different interpretations of the same issue without precluding their potential coordination. In his critique of Brandom, second, he is emphatic about the inclusion only of the first and second person perspectives embodied by the directly involved participants, but in a process of cognitive-epistemic structure formation such as a public controversy, debate or dispute there is present also others who may be only indirectly involved yet are nevertheless indispensable for the epistemic authority of the rules or structures which become established. They constitute the audience or, more properly, the public, the

embodiment of the third person perspective, to whom the participants appeal for their support in dealing with each other and who, in turn, observes the participants and evaluates, judges and comments on their communication and behaviour, thus exerting a significant influence on the definition of reality and the related decision-making emerging from the joint discursive process.[5]

It is indeed remarkable that Habermas should overlook the third person perspective in the guise of the epistemic role and authority of the public since elsewhere he is acutely aware of its significance in public discourse: 'But the political influence that the actors gain through public communication must *ultimately* rest on the resonance and indeed the approval of a lay public whose composition is egalitarian. The public of citizens must be *convinced* by comprehensible and broadly interesting contributions to issues it finds relevant. The public audience possesses final authority, because it is *constitutive* for the internal structure of the public sphere, the *only* place where actors appear. There can be no public sphere without a public' (1996: 364). Later in *Truth and Justification* containing the piece on Brandom, he comparably submits: 'But before it can be considered as a general interest in public discourse, every interest that is to "count" morally in case of doubt must be convincingly interpreted and grounded as well as translated into a relevant claim *from the perspective of those affected*' (2003: 269). Here it should be pointed out in parenthesis that, taken together, the references to the 'public' and 'those affected' contain the important suggestion that, although the public in one respect embodies social validity and authority, it should not summarily be reduced to this and thus robbed of its epistemic authority and guardianship of epistemic validity. Even in his discussion of Brandom's example of a court case involving a prosecutor and a defence lawyer arguing before a judge and jury, in which an understanding of the threefold structure of communication is clearly available, Habermas (2003a: 162--63) dismisses the judge and jury as spectators who are waiting to see what happens. Instead of sensing the potential for highlighting the full structure of communication, he reads into Brandom two distinct levels of communication which need to be kept strictly apart --- the communication of those directly involved and the indirect communication of the speakers with the spectators who are listening to them. It is plain to see that here Habermas completely ignores the discursive practice that is underway. Rather than being kept apart, these two dimensions obviously require to be treated as being intimately related. What happens here, theoretically speaking, is that Habermas remains a captive of the concept of the 'double contingency' (1996: 18, 139)[6] of social interaction appropriated from the classical tradition of social theory, rather than being able, despite his theory of discourse, to make a transition to the more adequate concept of 'triple contingency', as I have called it elsewhere (Strydom 1999a, 1999b, 2001).[7] He fixes his focus on the twofold first person-second person relation and the problem of the contingency of meaning within that restricted framework, instead of including also the third person perspective that would

allow him to come to grips with the full threefold structure of communication and the higher level of contingency relevant to this more complex framework.

Elsewhere in *Truth and Justification* than the chapter on Brandom where he surprisingly confines himself to an interactionist or dialogical position, Habermas on various occasions discusses crucial characteristics of discourse. He indeed sees discourse as a language game, yet beyond limiting contextualist implications it is clearly a special language game for him in that it at one and the same time represents 'the forum of justification' (2003: 102) and a process of 'construction' (2003: 44, 47) which takes off when new issues arise, compelling the development of new norms and their justification in the light of new challenges. As such, discourse exerts a certain 'constraint' that becomes visible through the 'decentering' of the participants' perspectives or a distancing from themselves which the process in the course of its unfolding requires of them (2003: 105, 109, 234, 270). The constraint and decentering on the part of the participants are indications that the process of the joint discursive construction of a common world is in a significant sense a learning process (2003: 105, 161). In the interactionist or dialogical account in the Brandom essay, by contrast, the identity of meaning, the hermeneutic interpretation of the meaning of speech acts, and the control of understanding leave no room for such constraint, decentering and learning.[8] Indeed, there is something else that is still missing even here and should therefore be added to constraint, decentering and learning --- namely, openness of meaning that, in keeping with the full threefold structure of communication and its sign-mediated nature, is best conceived in terms of triple contingency.

Rather than applying his insights into constraint, decentering and learning to Brandom, Habermas instead shrinks back from the consequences of thinking discourse through to the end. There are in fact indications that he is afraid of the concept of a non-linear, dynamic process which breaks through the limits of intentionality, since in his view it inevitably entails fatalistic implications. The model of such a process guiding him in *Truth and Justification* is the objective, non-human or even anti-human process represented by the currently influential forms of Quinean naturalism and Heideggerian idealism (e.g. 2003: 22--6; 284). Perceiving a similar thrust of an impersonal process in Brandom's tendency towards Hegelian objectivism which celebrates the movement of the concept, he reacts by adopting an interactionist or dialogical rather than a discursive position. This leads him to give a foreshortened account of discursive practice in Brandom as a self-sufficient process made up of the contributions of individuals who mutually observe each other and therefore cannot arrive at intersubjective coordination of their actions. To conceive of discourse as a non-linear, dynamic process of structure formation not fully under the control of any of the participants, yet nevertheless forming part of the larger process of communication, does not imply that it necessarily falls in the category of a strong, objectivistic naturalism or idealism. Habermas indeed emphasizes the centrality of the 'cooperative learning process by way of the constructive

interpretations of a communication community' (2003a: 161), but neither the dynamics nor the serrated profile of the communicative process come through clearly. What he should have appreciated is that it is a temporally and hence sequentially unfolding process that starts from individual contributions and then, through joint construction involving not only cooperation but also competition and even conflict, flowers into a moment of discursive structure formation giving rise to a shared collective outcome which, while differently interpreted by the participants, eventually allows them to coordinate their actions.[9] Despite recognising elsewhere that discourse is an epistemically steered process and despite stressing that it involves a learning process exerting constraint and requiring decentring on the part of the participants, Habermas' critique of Brandom reveals a lack of a sufficiently articulated concept not only of the temporal or sequential phasing but also of the structuration of the process of communication and discursive construction.

If one considers Habermas' distinction between interaction and discourse from a processual perspective, it becomes apparent that it is impossible to operate with the concept of coordination alone. A second concept complementary to coordination is required to capture the different levels of operation of the communicative process as well as the range of achievements gained in its course. Whereas Habermas focuses on interaction and the coordination of individuals that becomes possible through this medium in the course of the process, he leaves the moment of synthesis achieved through joint --- i.e., both competitive and cooperative --- discursive structure formation unnamed and unaccounted for. Previously, I have suggested that there is a certain conceptual blockage in Habermas' understanding of discourse. It can be attributed to the fact that he does not consistently embrace the full structure of communication and the threefold sign relation underpinning it. Behind this inconsistency, in my view, lies the fact that he remains attached to the classical sociological concept of the 'double contingency' of the first and second person perspectives in social interaction and, as a consequence, makes their 'coordination' the central focus of his theory. What he ignores, despite bringing in the public or all those potentially affected, is 'triple contingency' and hence the 'synthesis' of the inputs of the participants in the course of the joint constructive process that, by a discursive detour, provides a basis for the eventual coordination of the participants in the first place. Habermas' narrow double contingency perspective must be extended to the broader triple contingency perspective, and the coordination of the plans and actions of the directly involved participants must be seen in relation to the non-linear dynamics of the discursive synthesis of those contributions of the participants that are judged to be epistemically relevant by the public as well as by the participants themselves from the discursively activated perspective of those potentially affected. Were he to systematise his position along the suggested lines, he would eliminate the ambivalence I have identified by bridging the gap between an interactionist and a discursive concept of

intersubjectivity without having to bow his knee before the objective idealism to which he thinks Brandom is prone.

Conclusion

I have endeavoured to show that there is a clearly identifiable ambivalence in Habermas that is conspicuously present in his analysis and critique of Brandom. I have suggested that it is most immediately fed by an unjustifiable tendency on his part to retreat from discourse into interaction or dialogue due to a not entirely mistaken apprehension regarding objective, impersonal processes --- in Brandom's case, according to Habermas, the objective idealist movement of the concept. Instead of an intersubjective discursive position, Habermas on such occasions of recoil comes to represent an intersubjective dialogical position that cannot be defended. What he does not keep in mind throughout is that not all objective processes are on a par. Even in our type of society where communication has been unleashed to an unprecedented degree, discourse as a concept complementary to interaction does not admit of being assimilated without more ado to cybernetic and informational processes. Like these processes, discourse also has its rightful place. Rather than falling back exclusively on interaction or dialogue, this fact has to be established unequivocally. This means that even if Habermas is correct about Brandom's objectivism, his counter-position should not have been interactionist or dialogicist, but rather one that acknowledges the discursive dimension between these two extremes. Finally, I have also sought to suggest that Habermas' strategy in dealing with Brandom is related to his apparent inclination to stop short of fully utilizing his theory of communication as a process embracing not only interaction but also discursive construction.

It is only when Habermas compensates for this theoretical deficit, which would be more in line with the work of a number of younger authors inspired by him (e.g. Miller 1992, 2002; Eder 1996, 2000; Strydom 1999a, 2000, 2002; Delanty 1999a, 1999b; Trenz and Eder 2004), that he would be able to fend off the concerted and vehement attack that a whole school following Luhmann (e.g. Sutter 1997; Hörning, Ahrens and Gerhard 1997; Sutter and Charlton 1999) is at present waging against him. What both Habermas and these critics of his have in common, ironically, is the debilitating assumption of the traditional concept of double contingency.

Notes

My appreciation is due to the members of the Pragmatic Sociology Working Group at University College Cork, particularly Pat O'Mahony, for their responses to some of the ideas in this article at one of its meetings in early 2004. I wish to acknowledge also that the writing of this article benefited from research done for a project on collective responsibility in the risk society conducted at University College Cork within the framework of the interfaculty programme 'Science of Environmental Risk' under the

auspices of the Irish Higher Education Authority's Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions, Cycle 3, 2002-2005.

1 It is interesting to note that Pierre Bourdieu's (1990: 59, endnote 8) analysis of dance as a model of social integration involving the 'synchronization of the homogeneous and orchestration of the heterogeneous' indirectly supports Brandom's example of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers dancing to illustrate how different things are being done at the same time as the participants are engaged in a shared practice. He outlined this example in a letter to Habermas (2003a: 165, 309) who interprets it as proof of an objectivistic, methodological individualist position. Where Bourdieu and, I think, Brandom see a shared situational structure or, rather, a structuring practice which allows participants nevertheless to execute different yet coordinated actions, Habermas insists that the participants are at best engaged in 'mutual observation' and that this excludes 'the possibility for them to converge in their intersubjective recognition of the same validity claim and [to] share knowledge in the strict sense of the term' (p. 165).

2 Here we witness an insistence on 'convergence' and 'sharing' which leads Habermas, as intimated in the previous note, to a foreshortened analysis of intersubjectivity --- foreshortened in the sense of a lack of attention to both the mode of structuration and the temporal dimension of communication. Below, I return in more detail to this problem.

3 The interactionist or dialogical intersubjectivism extracted from Habermas' critique of Brandom and characterised in this paragraph has been an object of criticism from various sides. Ulrich Oevermann (e.g. 1983), the minimally published yet enormously influential Frankfurt sociological colleague of Habermas who partially under Theodor Adorno's impact founded 'objective hermeneutics', was perhaps the first to highlight the limits of this position. Niklas Luhmann (1987, 1995) was also a dogged critic whose systems theoretical concept of communication deriving from Norbert Wiener's cybernetics became a model for authors inspired by him, such as for example Karl Hörning, Daniela Ahrens and Anette Gerhard (1997), Tilmann Sutter and Michael Charlton (1999) and Loet Leydesdorff (2000). The problem with Luhmann's position is that he conceives of communication as the unity of information, utterance and understanding to the exclusion of the acceptance or rejection of what is understood (1995: 147). The most interesting recent development that is critical of Habermas is represented by a group of authors who adopt Luhmann's concept of communication yet seek to build Oevermann's objective hermeneutics into it, for example, the authors collected in Tilmann Sutter (1997). Also here, however, the concept of system is so strong that it hardly allows discourse. Apart from the outside, however, critique has been developed over many years also by authors inspired by Habermas himself. This immanent critique was first coherently formulated by Max Miller (1986, 1992) who drew on authors such as Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky but was also influenced by Oevermann and Luhmann and, in turn, played some role in the merging of the latter two. In effect, Miller showed that whoever engages in

communicative action necessarily enters into a social relationship possessing structural features that are presupposed by the participants. Against this background, it became apparent that Habermas' abiding attachment to an individualist approach to social reality is accompanied by his neglect of the structural nature of social relations. His latest statement of position is to be found in Miller (2002). Pursuing this suggestion, but also borrowing from Alain Touraine, Bourdieu and even Luhmann, Klaus Eder (1988, 1996) since the mid-1980s sought to identify structural models of practice and to make them amenable to empirical research --- that is, without giving up communicative reason in favour of practical reason. Recently, Eder has restated both his critique of Habermas' tendential psychologism and individualism and his own attempt to theorise the dimension of structuration (1999a, 2000).

4 The theory of signs in question here is Charles Sanders Peirce's threefold semiotic version as distinct from the twofold structuralist (or semiological) version of Ferdinand de Saussure and his followers. On Peirce, see e.g. Karl-Otto Apel (1981), and on the distinction between semiotic and structuralist theories, see e.g. Eugene Rochberg-Halton (1982) and Hans Joas (1992). In addition to intersubjectivity, Luhmann (1995: 146--47) also rejects a theory of signs as irrelevant for understanding communication, but what he has in mind is Jacques Derrida's semiology. In this dispute, interestingly, we witness the symptoms of a slowly emerging battle in the current post-disciplinary situation over the most appropriate trans-discipline of our time: systems theory (or cybernetics), information theory or semiotics.

5 Compare my critique of Habermas in terms of the concept of resonance in Strydom (2003).

6 Not only Habermas is disadvantaged by the retention of this traditional concept, but so too are Luhmann (1992: 378-79; 1995: 103--36) and his followers (e.g. Sutter 1997: 303--36).

7 See also Hans-Jörg Trenz and Eder's (2004) creative analytical use of the concept of triple contingency. Here, however, a cautionary note should be sounded against a purely functionalist theory of democracy.

8 One of the most persistent theorists of collective learning processes, Klaus Eder, has recently again pointed out that Habermas' assumption of the centrality of the cognitively competent individual militates against an adequate understanding of learning which, instead, requires recognition of the fact that the actor is ultimately only the medium for the action-directing cultural models representing society. It is 'less the actor's competence than the script followed by the actor' (2000: 223) that is of importance in collective learning. If this argument covers the discursive moment of structure formation and the structuration of the process of communication, however, then the next step in the temporal sequence, namely the different interpretations of the discursive outcome and their coordination under given situational conditions, is still left open.

9 For comparable elaborations of this complex theoretical premise and corresponding critically oriented empirical analyses in diverse fields, see Eder (1996, 1999b), Delanty (1999a) and Strydom (2000, 2002).

University College Cork, Department of Sociology, Cork, Ireland

References

Apel, Karl-Otto (1981) *Charles S. Peirce: From Pragmatism to Pragmaticism*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1990) *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Brandom, Robert B. (1994) *Making It Explicit*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Delanty, Gerard (1999a) 'Die Transformation nationaler Identität und die kulturelle Ambivalenz europäischer Identität', in R. Viehoff and R. T. Segers (eds) *Kultur, Identität, Europa*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, pp. 267--88.

Delanty, Gerard (1999b) *Social Theory in a Changing World*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Eder, Klaus (1988) *Die Vergesellschaftung der Natur*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

Eder, Klaus (1996) *The Social Construction of Nature*. London: Sage.

Eder, Klaus (1999a) 'Societies Learn and yet the World is Hard to Change', *European Journal of Social Theory* 2(2): 195--215.

Eder, Klaus (1999b) 'Integration durch Kultur? Das Paradox der Suche nach einer europäischen Identität', in R. Viehoff and R. T. Segers (eds) *Kultur, Identität, Europa*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, pp. 147--79.

Eder, Klaus (2000) *Kulturelle Identität zwischen Tradition und Utopie*. Frankfurt and New York: Campus.

Habermas, Jürgen (1974) *Theory and Practice*. London: Heinemann.

Habermas, Jürgen (1979) *Communication and the Evolution of Society*. London: Heinemann.

Habermas, Jürgen (1987) *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol.2. London: Heinemann.

Habermas, Jürgen (1991) 'Charles S. Peirce über Kommunikation', in Habermas, *Texte und Kontexte*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, pp. 9--33.

Habermas, Jürgen (1996) *Between Facts and Norms*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Habermas, Jürgen (1997) 'Kommunikative Freiheit und negative Theologie: Fragen an Michael Theunissen', in Habermas, *Von sinnlichen Eindruck zum symbolischen Ausdruck*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, pp. 112--35.

Habermas, Jürgen (1998) *The Inclusion of the Other*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Habermas, Jürgen (1999a) 'Von Kant zu Hegel: Zu Robert Brandom's Sprachpragmatik', in *Wahrheit und Rechtfertigung*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, pp. 138--85.

Habermas, Jürgen (1999b) *Wahrheit und Rechtfertigung*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
Habermas, Jürgen (2001) 'Robert Brandom: *Making It Explicit*', in J. Habermas, *Zeit der Übergänge*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, pp. 166--70.
Habermas, Jürgen (2003) *Truth and Justification*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
Habermas, Jürgen (2003a) 'From Kant to Hegel: On Robert Brandom's Pragmatic Philosophy of Language', in *Truth and Justification*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, pp. 131--73.
Habermas, Jürgen and Luhmann, Niklas (1971) *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
Hörning, Karl H., Ahrens, Daniela and Gerhard, Anette (1997) *Zeitpraktiken*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
Joas, Hans (1992) *Pragmatismus und Gesellschaftstheorie*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
Leydesdorff, Loet (2000) 'Luhmann, Habermas, and the Theory of Communication', *Systems Research and Behavioural Science* 17: 273--88.
Luhmann, Niklas (1987) Intersubjektivität oder Kommunikation: Unterschiedliche Ausgangspunkte soziologischer Theoriebildung', *Diskus* 1(2): 24--33.
Luhmann, Niklas (1992) 'Stellungnahme', in W. Krawietz und M. Welker (eds) *Kritik der Theorie sozialer Systeme*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, pp. 371--86.
Luhmann, Niklas (1995) *Social Systems*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Miller, M. (1986) *Kollektive Lernprozesse*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
Miller, Max (1992) 'Discourse and Morality: Two Case Studies of Social Conflicts in a Segmentary and a Functionally Differentiated Society', *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 33(1): 3--38.
Miller, M. (2002) 'Some Theoretical Aspects of Systemic Learning', *Sozialer Sinn* 3: 379-412.
Oevermann, Ulrich (1983) 'Zur Sache: Die Bedeutung von Adornos methodologischem Selbsverständnis für die Begründung einer materialen soziologischen Strukturanalyse', in L. von Friedeburg and J. Habermas (eds) *Adorno-Konferenz 1983*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, pp. 234--89.
Rochberg-Halton, Eugene (1982) 'Situation, Structure and the Context of Meaning', *The Sociological Quarterly* 23: 455--76.
Strydom, Piet (1999a) 'Triple Contingency: The Theoretical Problem of the Public in Communication Societies', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 25(2): 1--25.
Strydom, Piet (1999b) 'The Contemporary Habermas: Towards Triple Contingency?', *European Journal of Social Theory* 2(2): 253--63.
Strydom, Piet (2000) *Discourse and Knowledge*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
Strydom, Piet (2001) 'The Problem of Triple Contingency in Habermas', *Sociological Theory* 19(2): 165--86.
Strydom, Piet (2002) *Risk, Environment and Society*. Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Strydom, Piet (2003) 'Resonance: Triggering a Dormant Dimension of the Public Sphere', in V. Kultygin and V. Zhukov (eds) *European Social Theory*. Moscow: European Sociological Association.
Sutter, Tilmann ed. (1997) *Beobachtung verstehen, Verstehen beobachten*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
Sutter, Tilmann and Charlton, Michael (1999) 'Die Bedeutung einer konstruktivistische Theorie sozialen Handelns für die Medienforschung', in G. Rusch and S. J. Schmidt (eds) *Konstruktivismus in der Medien- and Kommunikationswissenschaft*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, pp. 79--113.
Trenz, Hans-Jörg and Eder, Klaus (2004) 'The Democratizing Dynamics of a European Public Sphere: Towards a Theory of Democratic Functionalism', *European Journal of Social Theory* 7(1): 5--25.