CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Karl-Otto Apel: an obituary
Authors	Strydom, Piet
Publication date	2017-08-11
Original Citation	Strydom, P. (2017) 'Karl-Otto Apel: an obituary', European Journal of Social Theory, 20(4), pp. 569-575. doi:10.1177/1368431017724160
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1368431017724160 - 10.1177/1368431017724160
Rights	© 2017, the Author. Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications.
Download date	2026-10-15 01:27:37
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/7535

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Strydom, 'Karl-Otto Apel', *European Journal of Social Theory* 20(4), November 2017, pp. 569-75.
DOI: 10.1177/1268431017724160.

Karl-Otto Apel: An Obituary

On 15 March 2017, Karl-Otto Apel celebrated his 95th birthday, a milestone that was betokened by the publication of an important collection of essays dating from 1996 to 2014. Exactly two months later, the prominent German philosopher passed away at his home in Niedernhausen, Taunus, some distance from Frankfurt where he had taught and from where he emitted his tremendous intellectual influence both nationally and internationally from 1972 until his retirement in 1990. As emeritus professor, he subsequently continued contributing as writer, editor, conference speaker and visiting professor, while a series of volumes consolidating different strands of his work followed. Included, most importantly, are *Auseinandersetzungen in Erprobung des transzendental-pragmatischen Ansatzes* (1998), an 866 page collection of essays in defence of his signature transcendental pragmatics; *Paradigmen der Ersten Philosophie* (2011), essays reconstructing the history of philosophy culminating in his version of a third post-metaphysical transcendental-semiotic first philosophy; and finally *Transzendentale Reflexion und Geschichte* (2017), essays identifying both the historical anchor points and the practical significance and potential of the discourse ethics he had initiated and developed in collaboration with Jürgen Habermas.

Apel's stature as one of Germany's most outstanding academics who had exerted a decisive shaping impact on post-war German philosophy and further afield is beyond doubt. This has been confirmed by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier's extension of condolences to Apel's widow. In a communiqué, he *inter alia* perceptively and appreciatively noted:

'With Karl-Otto Apel's death our country has lost one of its most outstanding and highly profiled thinkers. He always understood the National Socialist terror as the necessary background of his philosophical endeavour. By way of discourse ethics, he arrived at the most effective and convincing grounding of democracy based on equality, freedom and respect. His thought traced the presuppositions we assume when we engage in argumentation, discussion and seeking to convince. Today, we must once again demand and strengthen reason and respect in public discourse. On this basis alone is free and peaceful exchange possible in a society comprised of a variety of different identities. Karl-Otto Apel's work therefore possesses acute actuality. His formulation of the rules and grounds of an argumentation and communication society inhabited by members with equal rights has contributed to the establishment of a humane and civil society in the wake of the Second World War. Far beyond the borders of Germany, Karl-Otto Apel rightly enjoys high recognition and well-deserved philosophical fame.'

As regards fame, going by degree of resonance and reception, Apel was both nationally and internationally overshadowed by Habermas. But as one ex-student and commentator notes, this was entirely 'unjustly' the case, considering that 'without Apel there would have been no Habermas – at least, not this potent philosophical force' (Edmund Arens). That Habermas himself is perfectly aware of this, of course, is borne out by his numerous generous admissions of the enormous debt he owes his seven years older fellow student, colleague, collaborator and lifelong friend. Their relationship had been forged originally in Bonn where Apel studied since 1945 and where Habermas joined him in the early 1950s and observed the older man, fortified by war experience, assume a leadership role among the students.

In 1950, Apel obtained his doctorate on the strength of a thesis, *Dasein und Erkennen: Eine erkenntnistheoretische Interpretation der Philosophie Martin Heideggers*, in which he approached Heidegger's philosophy from an epistemological perspective but simultaneously also showed how Heidegger's proposal of a temporalized ontology implies a transformation of Kant's philosophy. While Heideggerian thought had a marked impact on Apel's own thinking, it by no means did so in an unqualified sense. Habermas reported that on the occasion of Heidegger's publication in 1953 of

his 1935 lectures on metaphysics, Apel was offended by the fact that he, despite a thorough reworking of the lectures, nevertheless retained an unqualified reference to his notorious *Rektoratsrede* of 1933 that celebrated 'the inner truth and greatness' of National Socialism as the essential revitalising force of the European spirit in the wake of the enfeeblement and paralysis it had suffered due to being caught between the equally debased and spiritless Russia and America. Apel also found absolutely unacceptable the disburdening of responsibility entailed by the celebration of the human condition as a state of being delivered out to the happening of language or of being fatefully directed by the history of being. For him, the personal experience of the historical catastrophe of the National Socialist violence which Heidegger metaphysically justified demanded moral learning motivated by an insight-based insistence that it may never ever occur again. It is for this very same reason that Apel though not entirely consciously 'rebelled with moral earnest', as Habermas said, against his morally and politically oblivious historicist academic milieu in Bonn. Beginning with this quiet resistance, although not carrying politics on his sleeve, there are signposts throughout Apel's career of making politically motivated choices for a social democratic position – for example, against old conservatism *à la* neo-Thomism, historicist hermeneuticism, orthodox Marxism, positivist-based elite control, privatistic phenomenology and existentialism, the dogmatic left, neoconservatism, neo-Aristotelianism, contextualism and postmodernism.

Harbouring also scholarly ambitions besides his philosophical interests, Apel prepared a *Habilitationsschrift*, accepted in 1962 by the University of Mainz and published the following year, on the topic of *Die Idee der Sprache in der Tradition des Humanismus von Dante bis Vico* for the purposes of which he studied certain relevant documents in their original Latin and Italian. This work was conceived as part of a much larger project reconstructing the historical humanist, nominalist, *mathesis universalis* and logos-mystical traditions of language that lie behind the twentieth-century conception of language which, in turn, shaped the understanding of both the natural and human sciences. In the prescient introduction to this work, which deals specifically with the relation between humanism and twentieth-century language philosophy, all the characteristic motifs of Apel's mature work are contained in a nutshell. Among these are the convergence between Anglo-American and Continental philosophy, the comparison of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, the critique of behaviourism and logical positivism, an adequate grasp of the human and social sciences, language and communication as medium, the introduction of the pragmatic dimension, modes of signification and sign-pragmatics or semiotics, the shift toward pragmatism, the transformation of Kant and, above all, the 'always presupposed "transcendental" *apriori* of world-understanding provided by ordinary everyday language'. It also pointed toward his replacement of his original transcendental-hermeneutic position by his mature transcendental-pragmatics.

In the following period between 1962 and 1972 during which he taught first in Kiel and then in Saarbrüchen, Apel assiduously laboured on the consolidation and realization of his core project of the transformation of philosophy which was published in 1973 as his first major work, *Transformation der Philosophie*. It is this achievement that enabled him to followed Habermas to Frankfurt, the seat of Critical Theory, in 1972 when the latter vacated his chair there. A selection of seven chapters from the nineteen contained in this two-volume book of 826 pages was eventually published as *Towards a Transformation of Philosophy* in 1983.

That the mature meta-theoretical framework or architectonic of dialectically mediated meaning constitution and validity reflection or the real and ideal communication community articulated in his first major work presupposed Apel's appropriation of Peirce is obvious, yet his discovery of it was enabled in the first instance by his return in the early 1960s to the young Marx. What he sought to recapture was the proper sense of dialectics – that is, the relation of dialectical mediation within a particular historical situation between the highest possible level of reflection and embodied praxis in which language plays a decisive role. This, what he called an 'epistemic- or cognitive-anthropological

[*erkenntnisanthropologische*] conception of dialectics', cleared the way for his theory of 'cognitive interests' and the 'cognitive-anthropological' theory of science which was presented in 1966 in terms of the 'methodological trichotomy' of scientistics, hermeneutics and critique of ideology. Through Habermas, this cognitive interest-based tripartite model of empirical-analytical, interpretative and critical social sciences came to play a central role in the Positive Dispute in German sociology and abroad in the late 1960s and 1970. That Apel actually contributed more than any other critical theorist to the ongoing project of a comprehensive critical theory of science was sealed by his book of 1979 reconstructing the long-drawn controversy about explanation and understanding, *Die Erklären/Verstehen-Kontroverse in transzendentalpragmatischer Sicht*, which was published in English in 1984.

In more than one way, Apel contributed completely new ways of seeing things to philosophical and social-scientific debates. His inaugural address of 1962 on 'Wittgenstein and Heidegger' proved exemplary in this respect, particularly setting the tone at a general level. Not only did he here reveal against the conventional view of the canon that these two thinkers laid down the parameters of twentieth-century philosophy. Simultaneously, he also inaugurated the momentous shift in understanding that the Anglo-American and Continental traditions of language philosophy, far from being opposed, actually converge insofar as both pulled the rug from under the objectivism of the unified science programme. Without this feat, there would have been no possibility of the conception of the tripartite model of the social sciences and, hence, of admitting critical social science as a legitimate topic in mainstream philosophy and methodology of social science. A stunning spin off of his mediation of the different traditions which concerns critical social science in particular was his demonstration that Marx and Peirce are both representatives of the Left-Hegelian strand of thought without which Critical Theory is unthinkable.

While Apel's early confrontation of epistemology and Heideggerian philosophy alerted him to the possibility and necessity of a transformation of Kant, it is his comprehensive survey of the different traditions of thought on language that revealed the proper basis from which such a transformation could and should be undertaken. Charles Morris led him to pragmatism and to Charles S. Peirce, but it took his first four years at Kiel to unearth and truly appreciate the significance of the neglected founder of pragmatism. His two-volume edition of a selection of Peirce's writings which came out in 1967 and 1970 not only made 'the American Kant' known in Germany, but the lengthy introduction tracing Peirce's trajectory from pragmatism to pragmaticism, which was eventually independently published in both German and English, also inaugurated and contributed to the international debates that were later called 'the pragmatic turn' and 'the renaissance of pragmatism'. Having been sketched in volume one of his Peirce edition, by 1970 he was able to present the core component of his transformation of philosophy which was published in German in 1972 and 1973 and in English in 1983 titled 'From Kant to Peirce: The Semiotic Transformation of Transcendental Logic'.

Already well before the publication of *Transformation der Philosophie* in 1973, the encounter with Peirce and the resultant transformation of Kant led Apel to replace his conception of transcendental hermeneutics with his characteristic transcendental pragmatics. The latter is a mode of philosophical reflection that seeks to identify the conditions *qua* presuppositions underpinning communication, argumentation and knowledge production. Drawing on Peirce's three-prong conception of the sign, these presuppositions are located at the distinct moments of embodied engagement in meaning constitution, the situational forging of relations and finally validity reflection – all interrelated in the medium of language. In the early 1970, he presented this new reflexive philosophical approach in a variety of different forums. As Habermas made clear, his universal or formal pragmatics published in 1976 was developed in reaction to Apel's proposal. Apel himself pursued transcendental pragmatics in a number of more specific directions. In the philosophy of science, the methodological trichotomy

of distinct types of social science was the result. In moral theory, discourse ethics owes its formulation to this type of philosophical reflection. And in the history of philosophy, the link with Peirce's conception of sign-mediation or semiotics led to the proposal of a new type of first philosophy – neither ancient-Medieval ontology nor modern mentalism, but rather a transcendental-semiotic one turning on communicative mediation.

The prime instance of introducing a novel perspective that decisively shaped late twentieth-century philosophy and, moreover, had significant implications for social theory, raised already in Apel's first main work, is the ethics of communication or ethics of argumentation that, through collaboration with Habermas, came to be called 'discourse ethics' which itself equates to an ethics of democracy. The seed of this idea was Apel's discovery in the early 1960s of an implication of Peirce's conception of an infinite community of investigators which he more broadly understood as 'the ideal communication community' – the implication being an intersubjectively binding minimal ethics that is unavoidably assumed and thus at least implicitly recognized by any participant in argumentation. Extrapolated by transcendental pragmatic reflection from the dialectical *apriori* of the counterfactual anticipation of the concretization of the ideal *apriori* in the *facticity apriori*, discourse ethics refers to the activation and realization of the ideal communication community's norms of interaction in the real communication community. But Apel did not stop there. Considering the problem of dealing constructively with the many conflicts of our time, whether social, political, economic, international or ecological on a planetary scale, he recognized that discourse ethics cannot be directly applied to concrete situations, as though normative conflicts could simply be resolved by practical discourses. Such an attempt would in many cases simply be irresponsible. Consequently, he devoted a further major work, *Diskurs und Verantwortung* published in 1988, to what he called 'Part B' of ethics – that is, discourse ethics as an 'ethics of responsibility', also in the form of a 'planetary macroethics', which is aimed at taking 'co-responsibility' for the creation over time of the conditions necessary for the successful application and realization of ideal norms of interaction through practical discourses.

By far the most vexed issue in Apeliana is *Letztbegründung*, final or ultimate grounding, according to which transcendental pragmatic philosophical reflection pins down the most basic unavoidable and hence necessary presuppositions of communication. In a discussion we had in 1998, Apel ruefully remarked that he was unable to convince more than a very few others of this idea. The problem, to begin with, is that it was an unfortunate choice of title, one he took over from an opponent, Hans Albert, in a debate between them. Secondly, it gave the wrong impression of an incurable foundationalist predilection in an age of anti-foundationalism, historicism, contextualism and relativism, whereas Apel actually meant by it reflection on normative rationality generating moral insight that could remedy entrenched Western prejudices. Among these are the assumptions that grounding is equivalent to deduction from a foundation, or that ethical rationality can be reduced to means-ends rationality or, finally, that not rationality at all but rather an act of faith is required. His own more precise expression is therefore 'the grounding rationality of ethics'. It is to this end that he developed a theory of different types of rationality in the late 1970s. Habermas criticized Apel for his 'stubborn retention' of the ultimate grounding claim, yet he himself persistently insists on the necessity of rational moral insight. If there is something unresolved in Apel, as also in Habermas, it might be the unanalysed problem of limit concepts which has ramifications at levels other than just the presentation of *Letztbegründung*.

Personally, I am deeply touched by Karl-Otto Apel's passing. As a student and young academic in the late 1960s and early 1970s in a South Africa that had internationally become a pariah due to its UN sanctioned legalized racism and oppression, he shaped my consciousness as a sociologist with an interest in morality and ethics and in the philosophy and methodology of the social sciences. And throughout my whole career, he – accompanied by Habermas – was my guiding light. The English

edition of 'Analytic Philosophy of Language and the *Geisteswissenschaften*' published in 1967 was the first work by him I read and from 1973 I practically lived for some years with *Transformation der Philosophie*. It is this book as well as Habermas's *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften* which appeared as a special issue of *Philosophische Rundschau* that forced me to seriously upgrade my German reading competence. I met Apel a few times in the 1970s after I had fled to Europe from the Apartheid regime and the Bureau of State Security infested and defiled University of South Africa. And in 1983, I had numerous discussions with him as a visiting scholar at the University of Frankfurt and subsequently on occasion as well. Besides his persona as a philosopher and intellectual, I saw him as a person with whom I shared comparable life experience, having grown up under an unjustifiable immoral authoritarian regime in respect of which there was no option other than to decisively break with and seek to compensate for once one's moral self-consciousness had been disturbed and reconstituted. As a man, I will remember him as incredibly generous, and not just with his immense learning, fine scholarship and innovative ideas. On my last visit to him in Niederenhausen on a lovely summer's day in late June, we had a relaxed wide-ranging discussion while sitting outside on the patio, he showered me with a pile of books on departing and eventually walked with me to the station where I had to catch the train back to Frankfurt. The impressive image of this exceptional human being bidding farewell to me on a sunny afternoon will always live in my memory.