

# Transcendental Pragmatics and Hermeneutics.<sup>1</sup>

## *Validity and critique. What is a critical social science?*

### **Abstract:**

In which sense could transcendental pragmatics combined with a hermeneutical approach provide the social sciences with a critical oriented approach? This essay aims at giving an answer to that question by elaborating the critical intent of Apel's approach to transcendental pragmatics and hermeneutics. Hermeneutics itself is considered to have critical potentials by its explicit focus upon the normative presuppositions of the social sciences. Hermeneutics does not, however, provide the sciences with any clear-cut criterions of critique. Nor does hermeneutics escape from a certain relativistic strain, due to the contextual, i.e.; socio-historically relative basis of the normative presuppositions of any hermeneutic approach. The meta-normative conditions of transcendental pragmatics are counterpoising the relativism as well as lack of normative criterions inherent in hermeneutical thinking. The meta-normative conditions of symmetry and reciprocity are meant to be a meta-normative standard for critique as well as functioning as conditions of a valid consensus within a community of scientists. Thereby, Apel is giving a solution to the validation-problem, as well as a compensation for the lack of criterions of criticism within hermeneutics. I will divide the essay into three main topics, and i) start with explicating the transcendental-pragmatic approach of Apel, ii) continue by dealing with his criticism of as well as positive appropriation of hermeneutical thinking, and iii) work out examples of a critical-hermeneutical approach in the last parts of the essay. The main example used will be from contemporary Norwegian sociology, dealing with the possibility of a unitary critical approach to the phenomenon of neo-Nazism. The closing part (iv) will have clarifying purposes.

## **I The transcendental-pragmatic approach.**

### **1.0 The critical intent of Apel:**

Apel's main concern for many years has been to clarify the normative conditions of a critical social science. The discursive conditions of symmetry and reciprocity<sup>2</sup> are given a twofold function within Apel's thinking. On the one hand, they are regarded as the basic preconditions for reaching a valid consensus within the sciences. As such, they function as basic validity-conditions. On the other hand, they are also carriers of an intrinsic normative content that turns the conditions of symmetry and reciprocity into meta-norms of understanding- and consensus-oriented communication (Apel (1988): 99). "The ideal community of communication" is the key

---

<sup>1</sup> This is an extended and improved version of a paper published in *Parabel* in 2004: cf. Hedberg, Petra (2004): "Transcendental Pragmatics and Hermeneutics.", Trondheim, Norway: Tapir Forlag, *Parabel*, Vol. VII, 1/2004, pp. 35-61. The subtitle has been changed in this version, although the main title remains unaltered.

<sup>2</sup> Here, I am making use of the Habermasian formula of "symmetry and reciprocity", cf. (Habermas (1990): 88). Apel is not adhering to these abstractive terms himself, but speaks about the "equal right to take part" and the "co-responsibility of the members of a discourse.", cf. (Apel (1999): 48).

term in this respect. By clarifying the conditions of reaching a valid understanding and consensus, Apel is explicating the counter-factual conditions that must be vindicated within any real community of communication, if a valid consensus is to come through.

At the ideal level, these conditions can be formulated in a unitary way. Like Habermas, Apel maintains that reciprocity and symmetry, like the four validity-claims of the discourse, refer to the argumentative traits of language use. The four validity-claims presuppose that any understanding oriented communication, i.e.; communication oriented towards mutual understanding, implies the truth- and rightness-orientedness as well as the sincerity of each participant. Symmetry and reciprocity imply the equal opportunity of each participant to take part in the discourse. Symmetry and reciprocity also represent conditions conceived in purely argumentative terms. By taking the arguments of one another into consideration on an equal basis, the participants fulfil the requirements of symmetry and reciprocity.

These twofold argumentative conditions are of special importance in practical discourses, since practical discourses also must include the interests of the participants, in addition to securing the mutuality and inclusiveness of argumentation. In practical discourses, the principle of universalisation ("U") is needed, in order to take care of this additional condition of "each person's particular interests".<sup>3</sup> As formulated by Habermas (and Apel): *(U) For a norm to be valid, the consequences and side effects of its general observance for the satisfaction of each person's particular interests must be acceptable to all.* (cf. (Habermas (1990): 197)<sup>4</sup> as well as (Apel (1999): 49)).

Owed to the many obstacles that might be at hand in "real discourses", the issue of symmetry and reciprocity is less clear-cut at the real than the ideal level. In real discourses, the positions of the participants themselves, as well as the possible economic and administrative interests linked to these positions, may serve as obstacles to a communication on equal basis. The interests linked to the positions may be hidden from the other participants, thereby letting an allegedly understanding-oriented communication conceal the success-orientedness inherent in strategic forms of communication. The positions of some of the participants might be authoritative in the eyes of other participants, thereby linking the strength of the better argument to the strength of the higher position. The main aim of critique will be, therefore, to point at

---

<sup>3</sup> The original version of this essay, cf. (Hedberg (2004)), did not take this difference between practical and theoretical discourses into consideration. These remarks are therefore added to this extended version.

<sup>4</sup> This paper was added to the English translation of *Moralbewußtsein und kommunikatives Handeln*. (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1983). The paper itself was, however, not published until 1986, in: Kuhlmann, Wolfgang (ed.): *Moralität und Sittlichkeit. Das Problem Hegels und die Diskursethik*. (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986).

possible obstacles inherent in real communities of communication: obstacles to the realization of the ideal argumentative conditions of symmetry and reciprocity.

Apel maintains that there is a sharp difference between the ideal level and the real level of communication, i.e., between the “ideal community of communication” and the (manifold) “real community (communities) of communication”. In one of his programmatic formulations, he claims that one could never expect a full-scale conformity with the ideal conditions at the real level. The real communities of communication will only approximately, and to different degrees, be able to conform to the conditions of the ideal community of communication. He, therefore, points out that “the ideal community of communication” must be conceived as a regulative idea (Apel (1988): 100-101).

This principal difference is due to another principal difference: the difference between justification and application. Justification, i.e.; the ultimate kind of justification,<sup>5</sup> is conducted on a purely reflexive basis. Reflexively, the conditions are to be demonstrated as unavoidable within any understanding-oriented argumentation, by showing that the violation of any of the conditions and claims will lead to a defective (non-valid) agreement. An agreement based on coercion would be the clearest example of a non-valid agreement between persons. Coercive speech acts are, however, not always easy to identify within the real communities of communication. Strategic speech acts of the covert kind may, in fact, be difficult to identify. Any participant might feel compelled to agree with a more authoritative person, given that the more authoritative person may use his/her authority in order to pursue sanctions towards the less authoritative one. This agreement might as well be due to a one-sided respect, whereby the less authoritative person feels compelled to agree on a, reasonable enough, basis, given that the more authoritative person represents a person with more knowledge or skill. This kind of agreement may easily be concealed as an agreement based upon a symmetrical and reciprocal understanding of the subject matter discussed. The lacking validity of this non-coercive variety of agreement will be due to the fact that, here, strategic communication is concealed as understanding-oriented communication, based upon an asymmetric relationship between the participants.

The discursive conditions are clear-cut enough at the ideal level: symmetry is conceived as the equal opportunity to take part in a discourse, implying equal weight given to the arguments of the different participants. At the real level, real asymmetries and non-reciprocities may serve as obstacles to the ideal conditions of a symmetry and reciprocity of argumentation. These

---

<sup>5</sup> Here, I see the need to distinguish between justification in the weaker sense and justification in the strongest sense of the word, i.e.; ultimate justification. Specific normative as well as factual claims may always be justified in a weaker sense, by not expecting the reasons given to be finally certified. The original version of this essay did not take this difference into consideration, so these remarks are added to this extended version.

asymmetries may be identified, but not verified in any final sense. The justificatory certainty at the ideal level is counterpoised with a fallibilism at the real level. A community of researchers may be conceived as a community approximating the ideal conditions in the highest available degree, but this community is also a real community of communication, not an ideal one. A valid consensus may, therefore, be distorted by strategic communication within this community as well. The community might, or might not, fulfil the conditions to the highest possible degree, but the fulfilment can never be stated for sure, simply because of the self-referential status of the conditions within the real community. The community would, after all, have to (discursively to) agree on the point that the (discursive) conditions were fulfilled at a given time of the discourse. This agreement would, also, depend on the conditions of a valid consensus. A fallibilism is therefore also due to the fact that the conditions may not have been fulfilled in the first place.

Additionally, fallibilism is due to the fact that even within alleged symmetrical and reciprocal relationships, disagreements might arise. Reasonable disagreements might be due to the subject matter itself. Especially when normative questions are treated, rival answers could be given. At the real level, “symmetry” might be conceived in socio-economic terms, in order to identify the possible obstacles to the realization of the ideal conditions. Interpreted socio-economically, symmetry and reciprocity could be interpreted in terms of economic equality. Disagreements would probably arise, if different members of a community of researchers try to define the term equality. At least two different rival versions could be at hand: equality defined in terms of “equal rights” opposed to “distributive principles of justice”.

A short summary:

Fallibilism at the real level of communication is due to the:

- Self-referential status of the discursive conditions.
- The possibility of concealing strategic actions and communication by, allegedly, understanding-oriented means.
- The subject matter itself, i.e.; the normative and factual claims that can not be justified in any final sense.

The principal difference between the ideal and real level does, therefore, also concern the difference between justification and application. At a justificatory level, the ideal conditions are to be formulated in a unitary way. At the real level, the application of the conditions will be apt to tentative and fallible interpretations. The real level is entangled with a principal problem of validation and the pluralism of interpretations that might arise out of this fallibilism. The

challenging questions will therefore be: 1) to which extent may hermeneutics serve as a useful device for clarifying the normative content of different perspectives? 2) In which sense could transcendental pragmatics serve as a critical device, clarifying the symmetry and-reciprocity-potentials in given normative perspectives? 3) In which sense do the ideal conditions of the transcendental-pragmatic approach serve as validation-ground as well as meta-normative ground for a critically transformed hermeneutics?

I will start by giving a short historical background-account of the relationship between hermeneutics and transcendental pragmatics. Hermeneutics was, after all, criticized for not being “critical enough”, because of the hermeneutical ignorance of the empirical part of the social sciences. The empirical part of the social sciences is taken care of in Apel’s transcendental-pragmatic transformation of hermeneutics, by linking the practical discourse to the theoretical discourse. Before turning to the transcendental-pragmatic transformation of hermeneutics, I will deal with the critique of the lack of criterions of criticism within hermeneutical thinking.

## **II The hermeneutical approach**

### ***2.1 Hermeneutics and critique***

One of the main critiques of Gadamer’s hermeneutics was carried out by Habermas in the 60-ies. In his review of Gadamer’s *Wahrheit und Methode* (Habermas (1988): chap. 8), Habermas focused at the strengths as well as weaknesses of the hermeneutic position. On the one hand, hermeneutics was supposed to serve as a useful corrective to the explanatory and nomological scientific methodology. Social science does rely on theoretical accounts of the historical changes from tradition to modernity. These are theoretical perspectives which, as such, can not become subject to empirical testing. The hermeneutic method of understanding would therefore be of relevance for the theoretical level of science, as a complementary to empirical and explanatory methodology. Habermas’s main concern was Gadamer’s failure to take the explanatory part of science into consideration. By not taking the explanatory part into consideration, Gadamer abolished the critical intent of social science. According to Habermas, a hermeneutic concept of tradition would be enclosed within the self-understanding of tradition, and not be able to confront the tradition with critical questions. Traditional world-views were considered to serve as a defence of a given social order, and did therefore not carry any critical potential. The explanatory part of science could, therefore, serve as corrective to given world-views, by pointing to relations of economy and power not revealed, but rather defended, by the tradition.

Given the subsequent development of Habermas’s formal-pragmatic perspective as well as Apel’s transcendental pragmatics, one may retrospectively ask whether an explanatory science

itself may serve as a source of criteria of critique. One may even confront this conception of science with a fundamental, Gadamerian question: would not the critical potential of social science depend on the questions asked, rather than the material presented? *De facto* inequalities presented in social statistics would not present themselves as inequalities if not being defined as inequalities by the scientists in the first place. Certain normative laden questions would have to be asked in advance, if the material itself were to reveal inequalities made notice of, such as: “Are these inequalities acceptable? Do they point to differences that make a difference? May, for instance, low-income levels restrict the capacity to take part in the democratic processes of the society? Or do existing differences rather point to acceptable differences, in terms of “to each according to his merits”?”<sup>6</sup>

Habermas did not only criticize hermeneutics because of its lacking acknowledgement of the empirical source of social scientific knowledge. He also criticized hermeneutics because of its devaluation of reflection<sup>7</sup>, implying that critical thinking could not be conducted within the framework of tradition. Hermeneutics does, therefore, lack the potential for critical thinking not only because of its ignorance of empirical research, but also because of its failure to recognize the critical potential of reflection:

It requires a system of reflection that transcends the context of tradition as such. Only then can tradition be criticized as well. But how is such system of reference to be legitimated in turn except through the appropriation of tradition?  
(Habermas (1988): 170).

Using Gadamer against Habermas, one may claim that the “priority of the question” (Gadamer (1996): 362-391) within hermeneutical thinking could serve as a source of criticism, provided that the tradition contains “critical” prejudices as well. Criticism does not arise from the “brute data” themselves, but rather from the critical interpretation of data<sup>8</sup>. Within the later position of Habermas, the relationship between “facts” and “norms” is dealt with in a more thorough fashion.

---

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, the different principles of distributive justice discussed by Habermas in: “Morality, Society and Ethics: An Interview with Torben Hviid Nielsen.”, in (Habermas (1995): 152). This interview was originally published in: *Acta Sociologica* 33 (1990). (Habermas (1995)) is, in fact, a partial translation of *Erläuterungen zur Diskursethik*. (1991), containing the last three chapters of the German work.

<sup>7</sup> In the *Merciers Lectures* of 1999, Apel presents a similar criticism of the hermeneutical thinking of Gadamer: the contextual presuppositions of hermeneutics make it impossible to establish a reflective distance to the given historical and social surroundings. Hermeneutics, therefore, relapses into historicism and relativism. The criticism of hermeneutics of the late 60-ies and the 70-ies has, hence, not lost its relevance; cf. esp. (Apel (1999): 65-77).

<sup>8</sup> One of the few remarks Gadamer made about statistics, is to be found in: “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem”, in (David E. Linge (ed.) (1976): 11).

The discourse theory explicates the common, argumentative ground of empirical as well as normative questions.

One of the differences between the Habermasian and Apelian positions consists in their different approaches to the relationship between the practical and theoretical discourse. Habermas makes a sharp distinction between the two types of discourses, by emphasizing the principal differences between fact and norms. Norms are uncoupled from the cultural background when treated by practical discourses. Their main validation ground is based on the agreement between participants affected by the norms; meaning agreement between participants of a practical discourse. Problematic normative questions form the main focus of the practical discourse. The theoretical discourse, on the other hand, is the exclusively scientific discourse treating empirical questions at a descriptive and explanatory level. This form of discourse depends on a material “given” in quite another sense than the practical. Questions of truth depend on a correspondence-based criterion of truth in addition to the consensus-based. In *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, Habermas makes a sharp distinction between the inductive bridging-principle of theoretical discourses, and the consensual bridging-principle of the practical ones (Habermas (1990): 63-4).<sup>9</sup>

The ambiguity rising out of this distinction consists in the fact that the scientific discourses of the social sciences must treat normative questions as well as descriptive. A distinction between facts and norms seems reasonable at the analytic level, but in scientific discourses within the human and social sciences, the distinction between fact and norms is not clear-cut when put into practice. The reconstructive historical level of the social sciences will work as a useful example in this respect. Historical reconstructions will aim at a descriptive approach by describing a certain development of norms and values over time, without taking into the consideration that the norms “described” may be a part of an evaluative interpretation conducted by the researchers themselves. The Durkheimian concept of *anomie* serves as an exemplary case in this respect. After all, *anomie* could not be used in pure descriptive terms: it contains negative connotations and works as a key-term in an evaluation of a given historical development. Contrasted with a more optimistic account of the modernisation process (for instance Habermas’s own account), Durkheim certainly gave a pessimistic account of the modernisation as such. Given that *anomie* is considered to be the central term in a sociological interpretation of Durkheim’s thinking, then the evaluative content of this interpretation could be

---

<sup>9</sup> For a more recent approach to the question of facts versus norms, see: “Richtigkeit versus Wahrheit. Zum Sinn der Sollgeltung moralischer Urteile und Normen.”, in (Habermas (1999): 271-319).



revealed by a hermeneutical explication of the normative presuppositions embedded in the interpretation.

Still, I regard the analytic distinctions of Habermas as both useful and important. To some extent, one could certainly distinguish between a descriptive and a normative approach to norms. The descriptive approach would be conducted with a minimum of evaluative terms, for example by describing differences in income between different professions without evaluating the differences in terms of “better” and “worse”. Still, a purely non-evaluative description would probably be difficult to maintain even in such cases. Descriptive practises will rather be a matter of approximation to an "ideal of description". Further on: when dealing with extreme cases, like the description of the norms and actions of neo-Nazi-groups, a “purely” descriptive approach will probably give rise to ethical implications that can not be ignored by the scientific community. The theoretical discourse will, therefore, not be sharply distinguishable from the practical discourse at the real level.

## **2.2 Hermeneutics and claims of validity:**

Hermeneutics itself does not, however, explicate any given norms that ought to be given priority in a hermeneutic interpretation of a text or a social context. It does not provide scientists with any explicit criterions of criticism. Hermeneutics will, however, still serve as a valuable interpretative tool:

Hermeneutics may explicate the norms given in a neo-Nazi-group, and may also explicate the counter-norms in use by a group of researchers making a problematic judgement of the norms at work in the neo-Nazi-group. As such, hermeneutics can be a useful tool in explicating the normative prejudices of any (con)text, but does not itself specify the normative conditions that should a priori be presupposed by a critical interpretation. By turning to Apel’s appropriation of hermeneutics within his transcendental-pragmatic position, we are turning to the questions of validity as well as criticism.

In a more recent paper, *Die Hermeneutische Dimension von Sozialwissenschaft und ihre normative Grundlage* (Apel (1994)), Apel turns to the question of the connection between hermeneutics and transcendental pragmatics. His point of departure is the *Erklären-Verstehen-Kontroverse* of the early human sciences of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, bringing forward the parallel controversies of the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Social sciences, he points out, rely on explanatory as well as understanding-oriented approaches. Apel turns the focus to the historical and normative traits of the social sciences, and points out the relevance of the hermeneutic approach. Hermeneutics takes the normative content of scientific perspectives into consideration.



By explicating the normative presuppositions inherent in different interpretations, hermeneutics will serve the function of being a clarificatory device within the social sciences. In a certain way, it seems like hermeneutics is even given a higher-order priority than explanatory approaches within Apel's account. Interesting enough, this might be due to the higher-order priority given to the consensual criteria of truth claims within the discourse theory.

The model Apel works out, is a subject-subject-object-model of scientific investigation. The subject - co-subject - relationship (*Subjekt-Kosubjekt*) and the subject-object-relationship work as complementary relations within this model. The subject - co-subject - relationship seems to be given a certain priority within Apelian thinking, given his focus on the criterion of consensus. Claims to truth, as well as claims to rightness, can only be vindicated within the subject-co-subject-model of scientific knowledge, and thereby "truth" can never be conceived from the solitary individual's point of view (cf. Apel's remarks on "methodischer Solipsismus" in (Apel (1979): 16, 96) and (Apel (1973): 209)). "Truth", in the scientific sense of the word, depends utterly upon the condition of intersubjective agreement about what should count as truth.

His choice of words does in fact indicate his concern with the intersubjective realm of knowledge. First, along with Habermas, he points out that the four validity-claims are operative within any argumentative discourse. Then, he stresses the connection between the different claims:

- 1) The first claim, intelligibility, refers to intersubjectively valid meaning. This basic, linguistic form of understanding implies a common understanding of the linguistic terms used, and works as the precondition for the other three claims:
- 2) The claim to truth, that works as a claim for universal consensus about truth claims.
- 3) The claim to sincerity and truthfulness, that each speech act must contain when forwarding truth- (and rightness-) claims.

And, interesting enough:

- 4) The claim to normative rightness, which must be implicitly at work in any speech act, also when we are aspiring towards an agreement about truth claims.

The fourth claim may indicate a difficulty with keeping questions of truth and rightness apart. This may give rise to a certain ambiguity in Apel's position, as if even assertoric statements within strictly nomological and explanatory sciences, like physics, were to be understood as intermixed with implicit claims to normative rightness. Yet, at another, higher-order level, the normativity Apel is pointing to in this respect is the normative presuppositions of the discourse itself. The claims to sincerity/truthfulness, intelligibility, etc., work as "norms" at a meta-

normative level. At this meta-normative level, the claims to intelligibility, truth, sincerity and rightness must be supported by yet two other unavoidable conditions, the conditions of symmetry and reciprocity (cf., also, Apel (1997): 87). These meta-normative conditions work as universal and necessary conditions in any discourse, included the theoretical one. As “meta-norms” they also work as certain normative conditions within any discourse. A theoretical discourse may get disrupted if a member claims that his/her arguments are not dealt with as thoroughly as the arguments of other participants. This would either turn the theoretical discourse into a dialogue on unequal terms, or possibly turn the theoretical discourse into a practical one while dealing with questions of appropriateness (rightness).

In yet another way, normativity implies specific claims to rightness that can be “externally” linked to questions of fact. Pure facts of economical transactions may involve negative consequences within the sphere of ecology, pure facts of chemistry could be used for beneficiary means within the industry of pharmaceuticals, and so on. Theoretical discourses are not “theoretical” by excluding the connection to the “outer” social and objective world<sup>10</sup>. Theoretical discourses work as discourse-practices by conducting speech acts leading to given co-ordinations of actions in the “outer world”, thereby implying that possible normative questions could be linked to the actions.<sup>11</sup> In discourse practices, i.e.; “real communities of communication”, theoretical approaches will include certain practices, either of the instrumental kind linked to the technical inventions in the objective world, or the communicative/strategic kind linked to the realm of intersubjective relations and co-ordination of actions.<sup>12</sup>

The social sciences do, however, present themselves as a special case in this respect. A pure theory is highly unlikely to be produced within disciplines like sociology and political science. Even “economic” models of “rational choice” or “game theory” will involve certain

---

<sup>10</sup> Here, I am making use of Habermas’s terminology and distinctions between the “subjective”, “objective” and “social” world-orientations (Habermas (1997): 52-53, 88-95).

<sup>11</sup> In order to avoid any misunderstandings: the term “discourse theory” refers to the general theory of discourses, whether theoretical, practical or explicative, while “discourse practices” refers to the “real” realm of discourses, meaning “real communities of communication”, in Apel’s terms. The terms “theoretical discourse” and “practical discourse”, on the other hand, refer to the analytic distinction between discourses treating factual and normative claims, respectively.

<sup>12</sup> The linkage between causal explanation and intentional action could be exemplified by looking at the connection between nuclear research and the innovation of nuclear weapons, showing that theoretical research as such can be value neutral, but will lose its value-neutrality when becoming subject to political decisions and actions. A pragmatic dimension is linked to causal explanations, given the intended application/usage (Ger. *Anwendung*) of given theoretical results. If the usage works as the incentive for conducting theoretical studies, exemplified by the close connection between private economic interests and public research within the chemical industry, then the explanatory part of the theoretical sciences will serve as a foundational, but not dominant part of the research process. For Apel’s analysis of the connection between the explanatory and innovative parts of the research process, see (Apel (1979): esp. the notes at pp. 278-279 and 252). For the relevance of the *Erklären:Verstehen-kontroverse* within the social sciences, cf., esp., (Apel (1979): part III: 2).

normative presuppositions, like the presupposition of rational actors in terms of an ego-centric means-end oriented rationality. The intermixture of theoretical and practical discourses will probably be the dominant feature of the social sciences. Statistics seems to form an exception, in terms of presenting facts in numerical terms, but will nevertheless be a part of the interpretative practices of the sciences. A rise in suicide rates does not, simply, present itself as a bundle of numerical statements about facts, but presents a social problem which needs to be interpreted in terms of social change. The interpretation could rely on macro-theoretical perspectives of social and historical change, involving certain normative presuppositions, like the aforementioned concept of *anomie*. The point is, therefore: even if it is possible to maintain a sharp distinction between theoretical and practical discourses at the analytic, let us say theoretical level, scientific practices will not offer us the advantage of upholding a sharp distinction at the practical level.

Nevertheless, the difference between facts and norms is important to keep in mind. Facts are not inherently normative, but are linked to norms whenever linked to normative questions. In spite of this basic difference between theoretical and practical discourses, their common ground is given by the ideal conditions of the discourse. Consensus works as the ultimate validation-ground of any discourse *proper*, whether descriptive or normative.

Additionally, it will be important to keep the difference between the “ideal community of communication” and the various “real communities of communication” in mind. The justification of the argumentative conditions at the ideal level is not to be confused with a possible vindication of these conditions within a “real community of communication”. “The ideal community of communication” states the conditions and presuppositions which must be vindicated if a discourse is going to accomplish a valid consensus on given truth- and rightness claims. Whether these preconditions are vindicated or not within real communities of communication, will be an open question and a matter of fallible interpretation. Hermeneutical approaches dealing with “real communities of communication” can not escape from this fallibilism. By turning to the topic of meta-norms as a validational and critical device within the social sciences, the question raised will, hence, be: how is a (valid) critical hermeneutics possible?

### **2.3 A hermeneutics with a critical intent.**

The (four) validity claims and (2) validity conditions employ a double function within transcendental pragmatics. As validation ground, the “ideal community of communication” represents the ideal conditions that real communities have to fulfil, if a valid consensus is to be established. As a standard for critique, it works as a regulative ideal for the critical evaluation of obstacles within real communities. The difference between the real and ideal level is fundamental

to Apel's approach. The ideal level serves as the foundational ground of justification. Justification is made on a reflexive basis. The meta-norms themselves are justified *via negativa*, by showing that any violation of any of them would create a defective consensus, a *de facto*, non-valid agreement. The fundamental difference between the ideal and real level also creates a fundamental difference between justification and application. The meta-norms themselves can be ultimately justified and conceptually clarified at the ideal level, but only approximately fulfilled at the real level. This approximation is due to a principal validation problem at the real level. One could never verify the fulfilment of the conditions at the real level. And, even an (alleged) approximate fulfilment of the ideal conditions within a research community may result in a reasonable disagreement about the subject discussed.

The relevance of hermeneutics might actually be strengthened by this principal validation-problem. Given no "final agreement" at the real level, and given the acceptance of "reasonable disagreements", a plurality of interpretations might be the result within a research community. While the "ideal community of communication" is based on universalism, meaning an ultimate justification of the universal conditions of reaching understanding, the real level seems to be entangled with pluralism and relativism.

Here, the key term "approximation" of Apel must be kept in mind. The purpose of critique will be to enhance the potentials of mutual recognition in any real community of communication, in order to make it approximate the conditions of the ideal. A hermeneutics guided by an ideal standard for critique will, therefore, be conducted as a "hermeneutics of suspicion", pointing negatively at the obstacles in any real community in order to make the ideal conditions come through. This form of critical hermeneutics will not escape the fallibilism of interpretative approaches. It will, however, be guided by a universalistic standard, restricting the possible amount of critical interpretations to those critical interpretations which do not contradict the conditions of the ideal level. Let me elucidate this last point:

A critique not based on the principle of individual autonomy embedded in transcendental pragmatics, will not be a "critique proper". "Symmetry and reciprocity" are not conditions realizable between collective actors, but only realizable between individual actors. A collective actor may, after all, contradict the conditions of symmetry and reciprocity by inhabiting non-reciprocal and asymmetric relationships between its various members. This point is embedded in any (theoretical or practical) discourse. Related to practical discourses, it applies to the extended principle of "U" as well. The principle of universalisation would be violated, if the participant concerned by a norm turned out to be a "collective participant" consisting of non-mutual and asymmetric relationships. A non-mutable principle of individual autonomy can, hence, be

extracted from the meta-normative conditions of the ideal community of communication. Symmetry and reciprocity can not work without the individual autonomy of each participant in a discourse. This works as a minimal formulation of the basic conditions of “the ideal community of communication”.

### **III Meta-norms as critical devices: application on concrete cases.**

#### **3.1 An example: A participatory model of democracy.**

Before I make a further elaboration on the relationship between transcendental pragmatics and hermeneutics, I will make use of an example in order to clarify the critical usage of the transcendental-pragmatic meta-norms. The example chosen is based on a transcendental-pragmatic approach to theories of democracy within political science. We will exclusively be dealing with normative political theory, although I will point out the linkage between normative and “factual” questions in the final sections.

Adela Cortina’s main question in *Diskursethik und partizipatorische Demokratie* is whether the ideal conditions of “the ideal community of communication” could work as ideal conditions in a model of democracy. The title of the paper suggests a close linkage between democracy and discourse. However, certain problems arise when one tries to match “discourse” with “democracy”. Transcendental pragmatics does, after all, make strong claims for individual participation in the discourse. The principle of “U” does, explicitly, presuppose that the individual is indispensable and non-representational, and that anyone concerned by a norm ought to have the possibility of taking part in a discourse. “In principle” can not be read as “an equal right to take part, but not equal opportunity to take part, due to various socio-economic constraints”. At the ideal level, non-representationality is formulated as indispensable. Transcendental pragmatics, therefore, seems to work in favour of a participatory model of democracy.

Participatory models, however, seem to be more realistic and realizable at small-group levels within societies, than at the general level of national government. Representative democracies are, evidently enough, representative and not participatory. The individuals are given the equal rights to take part, but only through representation. The Athenian ideal of participation seems to be a utopian, and therefore useless, ideal. In which sense, then, could the meta-norms function as a critical device applied to the political realm?

Cortina emphasizes the principal difference between the ideal and real level(s), and also points out, along with Apel, that application will be a matter of approximation. Participation is, and ought to be, an ideal in western democracies. The democracies should therefore, as far as

possible, try to expand the participatory potentials. She, nevertheless, views the participatory model as less applicable to the political sphere of parliament and government than to the sphere of public debate. Citizens may always be able to partake to a higher degree in public debates, and within this realm, direct participation is possible (Cortina (1993): 255).

Cortina's viewpoint is based upon the gradualist premise within the applied level of discourse ethics: the participatory levels of "real communities of communication" may always be enhanced, even if one will never be able to reach a full-scale realization. This gradualism may, I think, be applied to the political sphere of parliamentary representation as well<sup>13</sup>. Examples could be easily given: minorities should (through their own representatives) be given the right to take part in democratic decisions concerning themselves. Local elections have, likewise, been considered as a device to bring political matters closer to the voters, thereby enhancing their influence upon political decisions. Hence, small-scale-wise, one could extend the participatory potential of the political society. Along with Cortina, the participatory ideal will never be realizable in the fullest sense. The participatory ideal could, nevertheless, work as critical corrective to given practices. As I would like to point out: this critical corrective can be given on Apel's terms by taking into the consideration the obstacles given in any context. By taking the approximation-principle within Apel's position into consideration, the regulative function of the participatory ideal may be more appropriately formulated in the following way: critique will be conducted by identifying the obstacles to the optimum approximation to the ideal of participation.

I will expand this example in a hermeneutic direction, since a reasonable as well as unreasonable disagreement may result from any debate on the ideal of participation and the optimum level of approximation to this ideal. Even if a discourse could reach a mutual agreement about the importance of a maximum participation, the "optimum approximation" will probably be an issue of disagreement. Different degrees of participation could be acceptable, given the normative laden standpoints of different discourse-members. Hence, even if a debate on the optimum degrees of participation in a representative democracy would result in reasonable agreement, the obstacles given to the realization of the optimum participation may still be subject to a reasonable disagreement. Differences in educational and income levels may serve as obstacles to participation in representative democracies, even when "participation" is defined at a low-approximation-level as "taking part as a voter in general elections" and "taking part in organisational and lobbyist activities". Reasonable disagreement might arise about the definition of participation. "Equal opportunities to take part" might be opposed to "distributional justice"-

---

<sup>13</sup> By a mistake, I applied this viewpoint to Cortina in my original paper. She is, in fact, sceptical to the possibility of applying the participatory model to representationist practices.



versions of justice, since versions of “distributional justice” might be considered to take care of the material conditions of the ability to take part. Evidently, this kind of disagreement could be linked to political-ideological differences between the participants of the discourse along the right-wing and left-wing scale of politics. In addition: since matters-of-fact, like social statistics, might be part of the discussion, this “practical discourse” would also be a “theoretical discourse”. Questions of truth and rightness will be combined by taking into consideration the importance of relying on results from empirical research in order to identify possible obstacles to a given definition of “the optimum level of participation”.

The key-concepts of gradualism and meliorism can easily be applied to this example, since the concept of approximation implies a gradual improvement of the conditions of “symmetry and reciprocity” within the real communities of communication, cf. (Skirbekk, G. (1992): 157-158)<sup>14</sup>. This is based upon the further presupposition that it will always be possible to improve the conditions at the real level, although not to the ultimate extent.

### **3.2 Intermediate reflections. Hermeneutics as “double hermeneutics”. “Double hermeneutics” as “double critical hermeneutics”.**<sup>15</sup>

Hermeneutics would serve as a valuable device in a scientific discourse like the one exemplified above, since this kind of scientific argument would be in need of conceptual clarification as well as a “normative clarification”. A normative clarification would imply the explication of the normative presuppositions (“prejudices”) made by each participant in the discourse. This kind of normative clarification/explication could be conducted at different levels within social sciences.

A critical hermeneutics would depend on criterions of critique. These criterions could not be relativized within the scientific discourse, without losing their status as “universal criterions of critique”. This is the intention of connecting hermeneutics to transcendental pragmatics. A critical explication of given normative presuppositions could thereby be performed. Given that the “ideal community of communication” could function as a set of critical meta-norms for evaluating whether given “real communities” did conform to the ideal conditions, a critical application of justified meta-norms could be accomplished.

Another example could serve the purpose of clarification. The example given above is focusing on a “real community of communication” at a macro-level of society. Clearly enough, the given conditions of symmetry and reciprocity will be easier applicable on, and realizable

<sup>14</sup> See Gunnar Skirbekk’s article “Ethical Gradualism?”, as well, also in (Skirbekk, Gunnar (1992)).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. (Habermas (1997): 110), for Habermas’s remarks on Anthony Giddens’s “double hermeneutics”, as well as Giddens’s in (Giddens (1977): 79-80, 162). For Habermas’s remarks to Gadamer in this volume, cf. (Habermas



within, the micro-levels of society, such as small-scale democracies at schools, universities or working-places. I will make use of a small-scale group in my next example, in order to clarify the relationship between meta-norms as validity-conditions and meta-norms as critical standard within “the real community” of scientists, and clarify the application of meta-normative criterions on another real community, such as a neo-Nazi-group.

### **3.3 An example from contemporary Norwegian sociology.**

Katrine Fangen’s Ph.D. thesis was based on a field-study of a neo-Nazi group in Norway<sup>16</sup>. Due to her usage of the method of participatory observation, this empirical study can serve as a model example of the validity concerns as well as the critical concerns of a hermeneutics guided by transcendental-pragmatic criterions. The field-study gives rise to truth-oriented as well as rightness-oriented problems. Fangen herself got concerned about the dilemmas that could result from the close contact with the neo-Nazis: evidently so, because neo-Nazi groups do not always act according to the legal rules of the society. A certain clash may be expected to take place, between the norms of the group itself on the one hand, and the norms of the society at large and the community of scientists on the other. As Fangen notes, tolerance is not the key value of neo-Nazis. On the contrary, neo-Nazi attitudes of intolerance towards other cultures and races may be conceived as a threat to ethnic minorities, as well as to the society at large, by giving rise to violent actions. The field-study, hence, serves as an exemplary case of a conflict between the norms of the scientific community and the community under investigation. The scientific norms of tolerance and peaceful conflict solution through reasonable argumentation are easily contrasted with the norms of intolerance and violent conflict solution.

The remarks so far do not do justice to the complex structure of this example. Given that the example should be able to illustrate the validity-conditions as well as the meta-normative criterions of Apel’s transcendental-pragmatic approach, and also be able to illustrate the relevance of a hermeneutical approach in a critical sociology, we must take the following topics into consideration.

#### 1) Dealing with the problem of validity:

In an alleged symmetrical and reciprocal relationship, the researchers will naively presuppose the intelligibility of the utterances of one another, and will, likewise, naively presuppose the

---

(1997): 133-136). Habermas did not, however, expand the theme on “double hermeneutics” in a double-critical direction.

<sup>16</sup> See Fangen, Katrine: *Pride and power: a sociological study of the Norwegian radical nationalist underground movement*. (Department of Sociology, University of Oslo, 2000).

sincerity of one another. Further on, each person must presuppose that the claims to truth and rightness will be explorable by argumentative means, meaning that the arguments could be complied to, or rejected to, on a rational basis.

Questions of validity are, however, not totally separable from questions of critique. Let me put it in this way: they are neatly separable analytically, but not pragmatically. Transcendental pragmatics could serve as a continuous critical device within a community of researchers, by presupposing that each researcher himself/herself would be willing to conduct a self-critical reflection in order to make the norm of impartiality operative. This self-critical reflection could be expanded from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 2<sup>nd</sup> person's perspective, by reflecting on possible obstacles to impartiality and equal opportunities within the scientific community, caused by professional inequalities and/or personal conflicts.

In order to simplify the matter in this case, let us assume that the different members of the scientific community are in symmetrical and reciprocal relationships to each other.

2) Dealing with the first level of critique:

Given that the validity-conditions are vindicated within the community of scientists, we could ask ourselves: in which sense do the norms of the scientific community conform to the meta-norms of discourse? The norms of "tolerance" and "peaceful problem-solving" serve as the specific norms that the scientist confronts the neo-Nazi norms with. Apparently, being non-contradictory to the meta-norms of discourse, these scientific norms could serve as specific criterions in a critical-normative approach to neo-Nazi conduct. The abstract formula of "symmetry and reciprocity" at the meta-normative level could serve as a clarifying tool when explicating the specific and lower-order normative content of given norms in a given scientific community. Presuming that another scientific society would adhere to a more positive attitude to Nazi conduct than this one, the need for an explication of the norms of the scientific community would be more acute.

3) Dealing with the second level of critique:

Do the norms of the given (neo-Nazi) community conform to the meta-norms of discourse? The answer is apparently: no. In order to explicate the double structure of norms at stake, one could first ask: do the norms of the scientific community conform to the meta-norms? Given that the answer is "yes", one would ask further: in which sense could these norms serve as a critical device when analysing the norms of the group under investigation? If these questions were related to the example of the field-study, the answers might be self-evident, given the premises delivered so far: the norms of the neo-Nazi group are apparently not conforming to the norms of the scientists, and evidently not to the meta-norms of the discourse.

### **3.4 The neo-Nazi case: a closer examination.**

I will examine the case further by taking Fangen's remarks about her own study into consideration. In a recent paper, “”Radical nationalism”. What are the key contemporary conceptual and theoretical issues?”, Fangen presents two different perspectives on racism from contemporary sociology. The British sociologist Martin Barker (Fangen (2000): 157) makes a distinction between two forms of racism, the “new racism” and the “classical” one. The classical form is defined as “discriminating”, while the new form is “differentiating”. This model claims that neo-Nazi<sup>17</sup> groups will cling to the new form. The “old racism” had discriminatory attitudes against other cultures/races by considering them to be inferior to their own (white, European) one. The “new racism”, on the other hand, is distinguishing between different cultures on an egalitarian basis: different cultures are even considered to be at the same cultural level. These “new racists” do, hence, not discriminate according to race, but differentiate according to culture. According to this model, neo-Nazi aggression will result from the claim that every cultural group should “stick to their own land” (Fangen (2000): 158), on an egalitarian basis.

The field-study of Fangen does, interesting enough, contradict the claims of this model. The neo-Nazis do, on the one hand, consider their own attitudes to be “differentiating”, not “discriminating”. They do not label themselves “racist”, since they claim to be dealing with cultural, and not racial, differences. However, by confronting them with current examples, like the example of South Africa, they start to contradict themselves. They do not support the liberation of the black population, and they do not accept the loss of white superiority (Fangen (2000): 158). A certain “classic” form of racial discrimination seems to be part of their world-view, and in this case, even by reducing culture to race. In the course of communication, the attitude of “egalitarian differentiation” is replaced with an attitude of “non-egalitarian discrimination”.

A certain “reasonable disagreement” seems to exist within the “community of scientists” (Fangen and Barker). The model of Barker does not only claim to represent two different racist attitudes at a purely idealized (Weberian ideal-type) level, but does also claim that these attitudes correspond to a real level: to the attitudes of the “old” Nazis of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War and the attitudes of the post-war, “new” Nazis.

By making use of the distinction between 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person’s perspectives, the example gives rise to interesting questions. A field-study based on participatory as well as

---

<sup>17</sup> Fangen prefers the term “radical nationalism” to “neo-Nazism”. I will simplify the matter by, consequently, making use of the term “neo-Nazism”, since the groups discussed, in fact, do support Nazi world-views.

observational methods does in fact make use of a complex combination of these three perspectives. At the analytic, conceptual level, one could distinguish between communicative approaches of participation and non-communicative approaches of observation. The participatory approach amounts to a 2<sup>nd</sup> person's communicative access to the viewpoints of the 1<sup>st</sup> person. The observational approach amounts to the detached spectator's (3<sup>rd</sup> person's) point of view<sup>18</sup>. At the factual level, these approaches will probably be strongly intermixed. The sociologist will not only depend on the utterances of the participants, but also depend on an observational approach to their actions. Given discrepancies might arise between different utterances from the neo-Nazis, and between speech and action, thereby requiring further questioning from the sociologist. A neo-Nazi claiming to have a respectful attitude towards other cultures would certainly contradict himself/herself if approving of violent actions carried out by white South Africans against black South Africans. In that case, the sociologist could, still, accept the neo-Nazi as a communication partner on equal terms. The sociologist may, however, be criticizing the group because of the lacking coherency of speech, and may even comment upon the deficiencies of the neo-Nazi normative standards.

The observational part of the field study does also play a vital part in this case, and should not be neglected. The aim of the sociologist is not to reach an agreement with the neo-Nazis about racial issues. The primary aim is to produce a scientific study, reaching an agreement with other scientists about the status of neo-Nazi attitudes. The co-subject of communication must therefore also be conceived as an object of observation. A certain asymmetry does exist between the scientist and the neo-Nazi, even if the communication is mutual and oriented towards understanding. This communication inhabits an element of strategy, as well, since the mutuality of understanding serves as a device to gain more knowledge about the attitudes and norms of the group, and to produce scientific results. The means-end form of rationality of strategic action is, hence, linked to the purposes of the research. The strategy is, however, open, as long as the purposes of the research are not concealed from the group.

In which sense could the meta-norms of discourse be operative within a field-study? By dealing with the validity claims as well as conditions of symmetry and reciprocity, this question divides into two distinct topics. A minimal understanding ought to be accomplished in the dialogue between the field-worker and the group under study. This minimal understanding presupposes the four presuppositions (validity-claims) of understanding-oriented communication, but does not have to be directed towards consensus<sup>19</sup>. By understanding the semantic content of

---

<sup>18</sup> On 1<sup>st</sup>-, 2<sup>nd</sup> - and 3<sup>rd</sup> - person perspectives, see (Apel (1979): 215-216, 278-282).

<sup>19</sup> On understanding versus consensus, cf. (Habermas (1999): 116).

the utterances of the neo-Nazi, and by presupposing the truthfulness and orientedness towards truth and rightness, the sociologist does not have to agree with the neo-Nazi. She must presuppose that the neo-Nazi is truthful about his/her own ideas about truth and rightness, but she does not have to convert to their ideas, as they do not have to convert to her (and the community of scientists') norms and ideas. An attitude of indifferent impartiality is even expected as part of the scientific approach. A purely descriptive approach would, however, be difficult to carry through. Not because it is impossible to carry through a descriptive approach within the social sciences, but because a purely descriptive approach is likely to result in ethical dilemmas in a case like this. Obviously, the neo-Nazi group represents an extreme case. Most social groups will probably not produce any serious amount of ethical dilemmas within the scientific community. Let me conduct a short thought-experiment to clarify my point:

The norms of the neo-Nazis could be treated as "facts" in describable terms. Different racist attitudes could be analysed and classified, without involving any evaluative concerns from the scientist's point of view. Different actions could be observed and described, without making any judgement in terms of better or worse, right or wrong. Norms may be treated as "facts", in a classificatory manner. Discriminatory ideas could be referred to, without judging them in terms of "better" or "worse". So, even in this case, a purely objectifying attitude may be conducted, by not taking the ethical implications of the "given" norms, attitudes and actions into consideration. Anyway: a professionalised attitude of indifference towards the norms and values of the group would represent an objectifying attitude that would contradict the idea of a critical approach. The objectifying, descriptive approach would have to be supplemented with a normative-critical judgement in order to conform to the ideal of a critical, social science.

Turning to the question of critique: the critical, hermeneutical approach is not necessarily opposed to the idea that norms could be treated as facts. It maintains, however, that norms carry a normative content that should be evaluated, given that the intent of the science is a critical intent. An objectifying approach could be conducted in order to classify the norms of the group, in terms of the classificatory scheme of traditional versus new racist ideas. The critical approach would nevertheless take the normative content into consideration, treating norms as criticizable validity (truth- and rightness) claims, using meta-norms as critical standard. The old form of racism is evidently not in terms of the ideal conditions of symmetry and reciprocity. Not even the new form of racism could be conforming to the ideal of reciprocity and symmetry, since it works as a principle of exclusion along national borders, and since "new racists" may promote violent actions against foreigners and ideological adversaries. The neo-Nazis are not likely to enter into a

discourse with members from other cultures (or anti-racist groups) in order to discuss the different world-views on equal terms.

Symmetry and reciprocity will work as standard for an evaluation of the internal relations within the group, as well. The basic premises of the neo-Nazi world-view are probably not laid open for discussion within the group, either. The alleged symmetric relationships between different neo-Nazis<sup>20</sup> will probably be contradicted by argumentative practises. A principal openness towards the viewpoints of other members of the group is not likely to be expected among neo-Nazis. A neo-Nazi would probably not be allowed to convert to a non-Nazi world-view. He/she would, most likely, be threatened by sanctions. Neither the basic condition of reciprocity, nor the condition of symmetry, is to be fulfilled.

This “meta-study-study” may easily be extended. Let me carry the thought-experiments a bit further. The sociologist herself/himself may conduct an interpretation of the power-structures given internally in the group. This might be done by “observing” informal leadership structures, comparing them to the “formal” leadership or egalitarian structures of the group. The neo-Nazi-group may very well present itself as an egalitarian and democratic group, but the factual speech acts might reveal structures of command and obedience. The sociologist might confront the neo-Nazis with the lack of consistency between speech and action, or prefer to leave the observations to the scientific debate. Here, the close connection between observation and communication/participation is made apparent.

These last remarks also point to the difference between the two “real communities of communication”. Consensus is the primary aim of the scientific discourse. Understanding, not consensus, is the primary aim of the sociologist taking part in the neo-Nazi group. The members of the neo-Nazi group might, or might not, be oriented towards understanding and agreement. A “traditional racist group” might favour coercion, not consensus, thereby only accepting the kind of agreement resulting from the excessive use of threats of sanctions, and thereby not accepting the basic argumentative conditions in the first place.

### **3.5 Hermeneutics and transcendental pragmatics: some clarifying remarks.**

By adhering to the hermeneutical language of Gadamer, the meta-norms of transcendental pragmatics could be labelled as “critical prejudices”. These critical prejudices could be given the function of normative conditions, used as an evaluative standard when exploring the symmetry

---

<sup>20</sup> The neo-Nazi groups labelling themselves “Skinheads” claim to have no leadership, according to Fangen (Fangen (2001): 153). However, *de facto* communicative practices might reveal informal leadership-functions also among Skinheads. It is easy to imagine different examples that might contradict this claim. Newcomers are probably not to be in charge, nor allowed to give commands to others.



and reciprocity potentials of the given norms of a social group. Within Gadamer's traditional hermeneutics, these prejudices are not to be given a higher-order status compared to the norms of other groups. The justification of the critical prejudices would be conducted by other prejudices, and these other prejudices would simply be part of a tradition. The ultimate justification of Apel is not compatible with the Gadamerian priority of tradition. Different traditions might be opposed to each other, based upon their diverging and traditionally justified norms, but none of these traditions could be given priority. Within a purely hermeneutical perspective, the norms (prejudices) of the scientific group would not be able to conquer the norms of the neo-Nazis. The meta-norms may just be considered to be an idealized version of the norms of the scientific community. This is the strongest relativistic version of Gadamer: a hermeneutics entangled by "radical relativism". Critique can not be given any strong foundation within this version.<sup>21</sup>

The arguments in favour of an ultimate justification of the meta-norms point to their inevitability in any argumentation directed towards an agreement about specific truth- and rightness claims. Consensus proper is the criterion of truth as well as rightness, and the meta-norms could not be violated without producing defective forms of agreement, whereby self-referential inconsistencies as well as performative contradictions produced by the participants themselves prove the agreement to be defective and non-valid (cf. (Hedberg (2005))).

An example could easily be given, by conducting a thought-experiment related to the case-study of the neo-Nazi group. The neo-Nazis themselves might consider their world-views to be egalitarian and differentiating, not discriminatory, towards other cultures. The sociologist might accept these world-views without further questioning, or choose to examine the normative presuppositions ("prejudices") of the neo-Nazis by asking further questions, as she in fact did. The example of South Africa proved their world-views to be far more discriminating and "traditionally racist" than previously assumed. If the neo-Nazis do consider other ethnic groups to be inferior, and still maintain to have an egalitarian and non-discriminatory world-view, this would certainly reveal inconsistencies between their different statements. If they claim to be egalitarian and non-discriminatory, but engage in violent actions against non-white citizens, they would demonstrate inconsistency between speech and action.

If they, on the other hand, did express "traditional racist" world-views and promoted "traditional racist" actions, they would be self-referentially consistent as well as performatively non-contradictory. The formal features of their speech and action would be in accordance with the aforementioned four validity-claims. The neo-Nazis may even fulfil the conditions of the discourse by being in an (alleged) symmetric and reciprocal relationship to each other. The

---

<sup>21</sup> For the relativism of Gadamer's position, cf., esp., (Apel (1997)), as well as Gadamer's reply in (Gadamer (1997)).



content of their speech (i.e.; their given norms and attitudes) would, nevertheless, be in conflict with the "general content" of the meta-norms. "Symmetry" and "reciprocity" would not be applicable to the relations between the neo-Nazis and their "enemies" (foreigners). Neo-Nazi attitudes and norms would simply preclude a mutual (and symmetric) relationship. A critical application of the discursive meta-norms does, therefore, point to the formal as well as the material features of speech and action. As validity-conditions, they point to the formal features of discourse, given by the dual conditions and the four validity-claims. As critical device, they also point to the content of speech and action, by explicating whether this content is conforming to the meta-norms or not.<sup>22</sup>

An argument from absurdity might prove the point: if the sociologist herself were to reach an agreement with the neo-Nazis, leading to an acceptance of the neo-Nazi world-views, she would have to dispense with the meta-norms of symmetry and reciprocity. She would have to accept asymmetric and non-reciprocal relationships between different cultural groups. She would also have to accept the dogmas of the neo-Nazi world-view, and dispense with the idea of a discursive vindication of world-views. She would have to dispense with the formal as well as material implications of the transcendental-pragmatic conditions.

## ***IV Hermeneutics: an explicatory device within the social sciences.***

### ***4.1 The relevance of hermeneutics at different levels.***

Dealing explicitly with the question of critique in this essay, the closing sections will focus more explicitly on the relevance of hermeneutics within the social sciences. The problem with hermeneutics is, I think, the lack of specificity linked to the hermeneutical approach. Hermeneutics seems to give a loose guidance to the understanding of meaning, without supporting the sciences with definitive criterions, devices or even "methods" for a "proper" hermeneutical approach. Nevertheless, I believe that Gadamer's concepts of tradition and prejudice will be valuable and useful keys in a meaning-oriented science, and that the specific application of these concepts at different levels within the social sciences will compensate for the abstractive character of these concepts.

---

<sup>22</sup> Contrary to Habermas, Apel maintains that the meta-normative conditions can not be regarded as morally neutral. Symmetry and reciprocity imply the equal rights and co-responsibility for the equal rights of one another. Meta-norms do not only have implications for the internal relations within a community of scientists, but also for the relationship between the group of scientists and the external society. Completely neutral conditions of reaching consensus can not be formulated, cf. (Apel (1999): 89-90, 42-51).

The concept of tradition is far-stretched within Gadamer's thinking. The world history as such could be included in one, grand "tradition", including modernity as well as post-modernity. Modernity and post-modernity could be conceived as two (not sharply distinguishable) "traditions" within the larger tradition. Within the sciences, the concept of tradition could be applied to different sciences as well as the differing traditions within one science. In this sense, it would work as a loose version of the concept of paradigm. Durkheimian approaches could work as one tradition within sociology contrasted with other (such as Weberian or Parsonian) approaches. At this macro-theoretical level, the concept of tradition could serve as a valuable device, presupposing that each one of these macro-theoretical approaches does intend to present a unitary and coherent interpretation of historical and social change, without being provable as such. Macro-levels of theory do, in fact, rely more heavily upon interpretation than upon observed phenomena. They rely on the initial interpretations of social and historical change made by the author himself/herself, as well as the interpretations made by the sociologists reading the author's work.

Micro-levels of theory, like the model of Barker, are more easily related to empirical studies, like the material of the field-study. A hermeneutical approach in terms of explication of meaning is necessary even at this level, given the communicative approach of the scientist. Given that the observational level will give minimal information about the world-views of the neo-Nazis, the scientist will rely more heavily upon the meaning-oriented approach. Another insight from Gadamer might be of high relevance to the social sciences. "The priority of the question"<sup>23</sup> involved in the hermeneutical approach can be contrasted to the ideal of an observational science looking for inductively derived facts. The method of questioning was Fangen's primary key to the world-views of the neo-Nazis. The questions asked were also, in a certain sense, prejudicial to the answers. An acceptance of the model of "new racism" might, "a priorically", have led to the acceptance of the neo-Nazis as not discriminatory against other cultures. Further questioning was required in order to reveal certain discrepancies within the neo-Nazi world-view. An acceptance of the self-presentation of the neo-Nazis could, in that case, have been guided by "prejudices" inherent in the model of "traditional" versus "new racism", the presupposition that "new Nazis" conform to "new racism". This example also illustrates the complex relationship between macro- and micro-levels within the social sciences. The concepts of "traditional" and "new racism" do, after all, depend on macro-level interpretations of historical and social change. The empirical study of Fangen did, in a certain way, correct the idealized model of the two forms of racism. The

---

<sup>23</sup> Cf. "The hermeneutic priority of the question." in (Gadamer (1996): 362-381). Among other things, he wrote: "Discourse that is intended to reveal something requires that the thing be broken open by the question." (p. 363).

results of her study seem to depend more on an abductive level of questioning, than the inductive level of observation.

So far, the hermeneutics guided by critical meta-norms has been connected to two different levels within the social sciences. At the level of theory I was explicitly dealing with normative, political theory exemplified by the model of participatory democracy. The empirical level was exemplified by the field-study of Fangen, which relied on the "qualitative" methodology of participatory observation. A critical hermeneutics may, as well, be extended to the material given by the quantitative methods of the social sciences. The abductive level within the quantitative realm of social statistics may be given priority by a focus upon the "priority of the question", in order to examine the given prejudices of a given questionnaire scheme. Such an examination may reveal alternative interpretations, as well as alternative questions to be raised in a questionnaire scheme. The empirical level of social statistics may, thus, be an area of hermeneutical explication as well. Within the empirical field, social statistics may even form a paradigmatic example of empirical data in need for interpretation. The hermeneutical explication of meaning does, hence, neither have to be restricted to the theoretical level of social sciences, nor to the qualitative methods.

Given the limited space of any essay, I will not include the topic of statistics here, which may turn into a topic of vast range. In the next part, I will briefly turn to the question of functional explanations in sociological approaches. Functional explanations do, on the one hand, intend to explain phenomena in mainly descriptive terms. On the other hand, they serve as devices in the evaluation of social phenomena, by judging some phenomena to be "dysfunctional" to the society at large, while others are judged as "functional". The dual concepts of "function" and "dysfunction" may be entirely neutral at a purely conceptual level, but may also carry normative presuppositions whenever applied to concrete cases. The example of neo-Nazism will be useful in this respect, since the phenomenon of racism may be judged as functional as well as dysfunctional. Yet another example from contemporary, Norwegian sociology will be included in this part. Here, functional analysis is conducted at a theoretical and historically oriented level, related to the phenomenon of racism as part of the process of modernisation.

#### ***4.2 The case of functional analysis.***

Returning to the initial remarks about Durkheim, it will be interesting to take a closer look at the views of a professor of sociology at the University of Oslo: Sigurd Skirbekk. He has adopted a negative stand towards the growing individualism of the modern/post-modern

societies. He maintains that the growing individualism implies a progressing disintegration of the European societies. Using the functionalist terminology, he claims that certain other features of this development, like declining birth rates, are dysfunctional to the societies of northern Europe, and symptomatic signs of disintegration and civilisational decline. He, further, claims that the populations of these areas will be endangered by immigration, threatening the already disintegrative cultures of Europe.<sup>24</sup> And, further on, he claims that integration depends on different integrative forces, and that discrimination will be one of them (Skirbekk, S. (1997): 72-3). He even asserts that racist attitudes may have this function.<sup>25</sup>

From this viewpoint one could certainly ask: what is the status of the concepts of "function" and "dysfunction"? Certainly, they seem to work as explanatory concepts relating to observable phenomena<sup>26</sup>. Hermeneutically seen, however, they also seem to become carriers of a specific normative content when applied to specific cases. Returning to the field-study of Fangen, one could certainly ask whether the phenomenon of neo-Nazism could be characterized as functional or dysfunctional to the post-modern society.

A closer look at the basic concepts of functional explanations should serve the purpose of clarifying this question. The dual concepts of manifest and latent functions are vital in this respect. In the case of the neo-Nazis, 'integration' may be viewed as the manifest function of neo-Nazi behaviour and attitudes towards other groups, such as foreigners. The attitudes expressed by the neo-Nazis may be taken to be the latent function at work. Within the realm of functional analysis, then, the latent function will be identified with the intentional and intended part of group behaviour: the part recognized by the group itself. The manifest function (here: "integration") will, however, only be detectable from the observer's standpoint, i.e., the standpoint of the social scientist(s). The normativity inherent in functional explanations will, apparently, be linked to the (scientific) evaluation of the manifest functions, which are to be judged in terms of 'positive' or 'negative', i.e.; functional or dysfunctional.

One of the crucial questions that have been raised in regard to the dual concepts of manifest and latent function has been: recognizable or non-recognizable by whom? (Giddens

---

<sup>24</sup> "If most societies within a civilization adjust to dysfunctional reproduction - as for the time being seems to be the case in Europe - other people from other civilizations can most certainly be expected to take over the land and the lead in a foreseeable future. It is the job of sociologist to say such things, even if this contradict basic assumptions in popular ideologies.", quotation from: Sigurd N. Skirbekk: "Limits of predictive power in an individually based political ideology. - Reflections upon some aspects of Swedish family policy", Presentation at the *National Conference in Sociology*, Røros, Norway 1993, also available at: <http://www.uio.no/~sigurds/>

<sup>25</sup> "Racism, at least when presented in certain ways, could contribute to a strengthened national confidence of a given people.", Sigurd Skirbekk writes in (Skirbekk, S. (1998): 247). Cf. the English translation: <http://www.uio.no/~sigurds/>: "Nationalism – Subject of Study and Term of Abuse". This version is available under the main link: "Modern Nationalism".

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Elster's discussion of the explanatory function of "manifest functions" in (Elster (1990): 130).

(1996): 89; Elster (1990): 131). Here, I would like to link the question of normativity to this question, since the question of “recognizable by whom” also seems to involve the question of “negative or positive by whom?” On both questions, one could easily imagine disagreements between the group of scientists and the group under investigation, as well as between scientific colleagues. The first question seems to be easier to resolve, since the scientific (observer’s) judgment will gain priority over the layman’s point of view. The latent function of the group will therefore not be in conflict with the manifest one, since the latter one will be given higher-order priority. Nevertheless, since group behaviour hardly is to be subject to unitary observations, but rather interpretations, reasonable disagreements may arise between different scientists. Additionally, the demarcation line between manifest and latent functions is not easily discernible in the real course of communication and action. Since scientific viewpoints are available to the public, the group itself may very well gain access to the manifest functions of their own group behaviour, and thereby integrate the “manifest goals/unintended consequences” into their own intentional action<sup>27</sup>.

The question “recognizable by whom?” is therefore of a more complex kind than assumed. In the case of the neo-Nazis, the group members may even make use of the “manifest function” of “integration” in order to defend their own group behaviour. In this case, the manifest function will turn into a recognized norm and value, at work in their intended group attitudes and behaviour. The “normativity” embedded in the concept of function should be apparent in this case. Further on, it is no reason to believe that the scientific analysis of the case (from the scientist’s point of view) will be completely neutral, either. A purely “observational” usage of the functionalist terminology will be difficult to accomplish:

If the phenomenon of neo-Nazism is to be labelled as “functional” to the western cultures, the following arguments may be used: do the neo-Nazis not represent integrative forces, by being discriminatory against other cultures? Do they not praise the features of the traditional, national culture? On the contrary, it will not be hard to label their attitudes and actions as “dysfunctional”. Their actions will hardly be functional from the viewpoint of the protagonists of democracy and human rights, and certainly not from the viewpoint of the different minorities affected by the actions of the neo-Nazis. Their values, norms and actions are "dysfunctional" in the eyes of anyone who favours democratic and human rights. Democratic institutions and human rights do, after all, depend on a minimum equal rights, as well as mutual respect between individuals, in order to be operative. The neo-Nazi values will therefore be functional to protagonists of

---

<sup>27</sup> Such a response would amount to a “self-fulfilling prophecy”, cf. (Apel (1979): 264, 285 and 297), on “self-fulfilling” versus “self-destroying prophecies”.

collective, traditional and authoritarian world-views, favouring collectively given values rather than individual rights.

### ***V Finishing Remarks.***

The case of neo-Nazism has proven to be a very useful example in this context. As a small-scale and “extreme case” example, the neo-Nazi group works as an exemplary device in clarifying the normative presuppositions made by the group itself, as well as the normative presuppositions made by the scientific community. The case-study has, hence, been serving the purpose of exemplifying the usage of hermeneutical and transcendental-pragmatic approaches within the field of social science.

As pointed out in the previous parts of this paper, the scope of hermeneutics is not limited to small-scale cases. Even higher-order theoretical perspectives with a descriptive intent might be hermeneutically examined in order to find their normative content, a content that might or might not be conforming to the meta-normative criterions of a transcendental-pragmatically transformed critical hermeneutics. Sigurd Skirbekk reads Durkheim in an exclusively anti-individualist manner, by pointing at the integrative, supra-individual and authoritative forces of culture (S. Skirbekk (2000))<sup>28</sup>. Habermas's approach to Durkheim is, contrary to S. Skirbekk's, compatible with the meta-normative conditions of symmetry, reciprocity and individual autonomy. As expected along with his discourse-ethical concerns, Habermas criticizes the one-sidedness of Durkheim's collectivistic account of the “life-world”. On the one hand, Habermas considers the life-world to be a reproductive source of collective norms and values. On the other, he also regards it as the source of individual communicative competences. Habermas, hence, emphasizes the communicative potential of culture, regarding it as vital to the development of the communicative skills and autonomy of individuals (Habermas (1997): 139-41). His interpretation and criticism of Durkheim is therefore highly compatible with a “critical oriented hermeneutics”. Sigurd Skirbekk's account is certainly not, and would therefore be in need of a critical examination. The conservative reading of Durkheim seems to work well with the conservative concerns of the sociologist. These conservative concerns are made transparent in his diagnosis of the contemporary social world.

The choice of examples in this paper has been advantageous, by including a higher-level theoretical approach to the phenomenon of racism (S. Skirbekk), as well as a lower-level theoretical model (Barker), and an empirical-oriented study (Fangen). Empirical studies are, after

all, not devoid of theoretical presuppositions. They may, more or less, depend on the viewpoints expressed by various “classic” works and/or lower-level models. A more comprehensive hermeneutical approach would take this linkage into consideration, by explicating the Weberian, Durkheimian, Parsonian or even Marxist “prejudices” inherent in an empirical study, as well as the prejudices made by the dominant models at use. This kind of hermeneutical explication can be conducted by the scientist herself/himself, by exploring the presuppositions made by her/his own study. “Meta-studies” may as well be carried out, in order to explicate the presuppositions made by others. Such an explication of normative presuppositions may very well be conducted in an impartial fashion, since hermeneutics does not inhabit any conditions for a critical approach. A switch to the transcendental-pragmatic presuppositions will therefore be needed, if a critical clarification is to be carried out.

Transcendental pragmatics and hermeneutics will be compatible parts of a critical social science. Hermeneutics will serve as a device in explicating the normative preconditions embedded in theoretical and empirical perspectives. Transcendental pragmatics will employ the double function of working as conditions of validity as well as conditions of critique. Here, the meta-norms will be at work. Important to keep in mind in this respect, is the difference between meta-norms, norms and facts. Meta-norms are not confused with norms within transcendental pragmatics, nor are norms confused with facts. Transcendental pragmatics does, on the one hand, point to the differences between facts and norms. On the other hand, the interconnectedness between facts and norms is stressed.

Descriptive approaches are, therefore, not impossible to carry out within the social sciences. Descriptive approaches may, however, hide given normative presuppositions made by the scientists. Given that the social science aims at being critical, the various normative presuppositions must be taken into consideration. A strictly counterfactual premise will be at work here: if the social sciences aim at being critical, criteria of validity and critique will be needed. The social sciences may, after all, not inhabit such an aim at the real level.

---

<sup>28</sup> See S. Skirbekk’s usage of Durkheim, as well as his discussion of liberal values and human rights in: “Culture at a Crossroad: Diversity in Culture - Unity in Rights?”, at <http://www.uio.no/~sigurds>



## BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Apel, Karl-Otto(1973): *Transformation der Philosophie. Band 2: Das A priori der Kommunikationsgemeinschaft*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.
- Apel, K.-O. (1979): *Die Erklären: Verstehen-Kontroverse in transzendentalpragmatischer Sicht*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.
- Apel, K.-O.(1988): "Kant, Hegel und das aktuelle Problem der normativen Grundlagen von Moral und Recht.", in: Apel: *Diskurs und Verantwortung. Das Problem des Übergangs zur postkonventionellen Moral*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, pp. 69-102.
- Apel, K.-O. (1989): "Normative Begründung der "Kritischen Theorie" durch Rekurs auf lebensweltliche Sittlichkeit? Ein transzendentalpragmatisch orientierter Versuch, mit Habermas gegen Habermas zu denken" i Honneth/McCarthy/Offe/Wellmer (Hrsg.)(1989):*Zwischenbetrachtungen Im Prozeß der Aufklärung*. Suhrkamp: pp. 15-65.
- Apel, K.-O. (1997) [1992]: "Regulative Ideas or Truth-happening? An Attempt to answer the Question of the Conditions of the Possibility of Valid Understanding.", in: Hahn, Lewis Edwin (ed.) (1997): *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*. The Library of Living Philosophers, Vol. XXIV, Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishers, pp. 67-94.
- Apel, K.-O./Kettner, Matthias (Hrsg.) (1992): *Zur Anwendung der Diskursethik in Politik, Recht und Wissenschaft*. Frankfurt a.M : Suhrkamp.
- Apel, K.-O. (1994): "Die Hermeneutische Dimension von Sozialwissenschaft und ihre normative Grundlage.", in: Apel, K.-O./Kettner, Matthias (Hrsg.) (1994): *Mythos Wertfreiheit? Neue Beiträge zur Objektivität in den Human- und Kulturwissenschaften*. Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, pp. 17-49.
- Apel, K.-O. (1999): *The Response of Discourse Ethics to the Moral Challenge of the Human Situation as Such and Especially Today* (Mercier Lectures, Louvain-la-Neuve, March 1999), Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2001.
- Cortina, Adela (1993): "Diskursethik und partizipatorische Demokratie.", in: Dorschel, Andreas. Kettner, Matthias. Kuhlmann, Wolfgang. Niquet, Marcel (Hrsg.)(1993): *Transzendentalpragmatik. Ein Symposium für Karl-Otto Apel*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, pp. 238-257.
- Dorschel, Andreas/Kettner, Matthias/Kuhlmann, Wolfgang/Niquet, Marcel (Hrsg.)(1993): *Transzendentalpragmatik. Ein Symposium für Karl-Otto Apel*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.
- Elster, Jon (1990): "Merton's Functionalism and the Unintended Consequences of Action.", in: Jon Clark, Celia Modgil and Sohan Modgil (eds.)(1990): *Robert Merton: Consensus and Controversy*. London/New York: Falmer Press, pp. 129-135.
- Fangen, Katrine (2000): "'Radical nationalism'. What are the key contemporary conceptual and theoretical issues?" Oslo, Norway: *Yearbook of Sociology*, 2000.1, University of Oslo, pp. 149-167
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg (1996) [1960]: *Truth and Method*. London: Sheed & Ward, 1996.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (1997): "Reply to Karl-Otto Apel.", in: Hahn, Lewis Edwin (ed.) (1997): *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*. The Library of Living Philosophers, Vol. XXIV, Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishers, pp. 95-97.
- Giddens, Anthony (1977): *New Rules of Sociological Method*. London: Hutchinson & Co Ltd.
- Giddens, A. (1996): "Functionalism: *Après la lutte*.", in: Giddens, A. (1996): *In Defence of*

- Sociology. Essays, Interpretations and Rejoinders.*, Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 78-112.
- Habermas, J. (1988) [1967]: *On the Logic of Social Sciences*.  
Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Habermas, J. (1997)[1981]: *The Theory of Communicative Action*.  
Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997.
- Habermas, J. (1990): *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*.  
Cambridge/Massachusetts: Polity Press.
- Habermas, J. (1995): *Justification and Application*.  
Cambridge/Massachusetts: Polity Press.
- Habermas, J. (1999): *Wahrheit und Rechtfertigung*.  
Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Hedberg, Petra (2004): "Transcendental Pragmatics and Hermeneutics.", Trondheim, Norway:  
Tapir Forlag, *Parabel*, Vol. VII, 1/2004, pp. 35-61.
- Hedberg, Petra (2005): "What are performative self-contradictions?", *Sats - Nordic Journal of  
Philosophy* 2005; 6.1: pp. 66-92
- Linge, David E. (1976) (ed.): *Philosophical Hermeneutics*.  
Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press.
- Skirbekk, Gunnar (1992): *Manuscripts on Rationality*.  
Bergen, Norway: Ariadne Forlag.
- Skirbekk, Sigurd N. (1993): "Limits of predictive power in an individually based political  
ideology. – Reflections upon some aspects of Swedish family policy", Presentation at the  
*National Conference in Sociology*, Røros, Norway 1993, also available at:  
<http://www.uio.no/~sigurds>
- Skirbekk, Sigurd N. (1997): "Time for Rethinking the Basis for the Universal Declaration  
of Human Rights.", in: Oslo, Norway: *Yearbook of Sociology*, 1997.1, University of  
Oslo, pp. 57-79.
- Skirbekk, Sigurd N. (1998): "Nasjonalismen – Studieobjekt og skjellsord." ("Nationalism –  
Subject of Study and Term of Abuse"), Oslo, Norway: *Nytt norsk tidsskrift* 3/1998, pp.  
244-257. An English version available at: <http://www.uio.no/~sigurds>
- Skirbekk, Sigurd N. (2000): "Culture at a Crossroad: Diversity in Culture - Unity in Rights?",  
(Manus written for International Seminar - *Culture at a Crossroad*, Bergen, Norway: May  
2000), available at: <http://www.uio.no/~sigurds>