

# From Communicative to Educative Rationality: Dewey's Enlightenment Project<sup>1</sup>

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In the following paper I attempt to show that John Dewey's philosophy could offer an important insight into the way we think about theories of consent and mutual understanding. I situate some of the assumptions in Dewey's work within the debate on Kant's Enlightenment project, with direct reference to the views of Jürgen Habermas and Robert Brandom. I begin with a brief sketch of Kant's Enlightenment project and the role his critical philosophy plays in this context (1). I then turn to Habermas' communicative rationality as a continuation of the Enlightenment project and I argue that his consent theory ignores the educational aspect of Kant's initial project (2). I then move on to discuss the conversational dynamics of mutual understanding with the help of Robert Brandom's philosophy of communication. My aim is to show the difference between the principle of 'making it explicit' and, what I call, the principle of 'making it learnable' (3). Finally, I turn to Dewey and argue that his considerations on the ways in which communication is experienced in the public sphere highlight the importance of attempts to make arguments in the public as learnable as possible to all discursive participants and, hence, that the educational aspect of communication is central to mutual understanding (4).

## 1. Kant and the Enlightenment Project

For Immanuel Kant the Enlightenment is the stage of the development of humanity, which is characterized by the ability of all people to make use of their own reason, without subjecting it to an authority. Kant claims that the purpose of the Enlightenment is to find a *way out* of humanity's *self-imposed immaturity*. Immaturity here is to be understood as the inability to use one's own reason in an autonomous manner. This implies that people should not conform to someone else's authoritative opinion on a subject matter, but should instead aim to reach a self-sufficient understanding on their own.

An important part of this project are the Kantian Critiques, which aim to describe the legitimate conditions under which reason should be used, if it is to give us answers to the questions of what humans may hope for, what humans must do and what can be known. The incorrect use of reason in answering these questions will lead to dogmas or ignorance. "[The critique's] role is that of defining the conditions under which the use of reason is legitimate. [...] The critique is, in a sense,

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the handbook of reason that has grown up in Enlightenment; and, conversely, the Enlightenment is the age of the critique" (Foucault 1984:37).

To sum it up, the Enlightened age is a hypothetical point in human history, during which people will be intellectually free to participate in conversations within the limits of reason and without the dependency on authoritative sources as a form of compensatory understanding. In terms of education, we can compare this aim to the notion that learners should develop an ability for self-directed and critical learning. But Kant's project is not far from an educational project. In a letter to Christian Wolke, he writes "the only necessary thing is not theoretical learning (Schulwissenschaft), but the education (Bildung) of human beings, both in regard to their talents and their character." (Kant 1902a:221) And in this anthropology lectures he adds that "if teachers and priests were educated, if the concepts of pure morality would prevail among them, then [...] the whole could afterwards be educated" (Kant 1902b:691).

Not only does Kant imply that the Enlightenment and pedagogical efforts go hand in hand, but pedagogy is a part of his critical philosophy. In his words "it is incumbent on every generation to work on the plan of a more purposive education", which is "the greatest and most difficult problem that can be assigned to human kind" (Kant 2012). In the background of these comments it becomes clear why Kant's critiques can be understood as being pedagogically significant for educators (Munzel 2003): they lay out the limits of reason, which have to be applied in the course of the Enlightenment and, in turn, an Enlightenment project implies the *duty* to a particular kind of *Bildung*.

"This duty can therefore consist only in *cultivating one's faculties* (or natural predispositions), the highest of which is *understanding*, the faculty of concepts and so too of those concepts that have to do with duty [...]. A human being has a duty to raise himself from the crude state of his nature, from his animality (*quoad actum*), more and more toward humanity, by which he alone is capable of setting himself ends; he has a duty to diminish his ignorance by instruction and to correct his errors [...] morally practical reason *commands* it absolutely and makes this end his duty, so that he may be worthy of the humanity that dwells within him" (Kant 2013:387).

But this duty is not merely the individual's responsibility, by addressing this duty to "humanity" or "human beings" Kant defines this duty in collective terms and this is not surprising, given the fact that the cultivation of the human faculties is, in the end, an educational enterprise. In this sense, Kant's project has a pedagogical aspect and the Critique can be seen as providing the framework for moral instruction and understanding. The result of an Enlightenment project conceived this way is the individual's realization of his or her own intellectual freedom, by means of which one escapes immaturity, be it self-imposed or imposed by others.

A notable requirement of Kant's Enlightenment is that the public use of reason should be free. According to Kant, Enlightenment cannot be achieved individually, but is a part of a social process

and in this sense the free use of (correct) reason in public is seen as fundamental for this process. This is where I will turn to Jürgen Habermas, who worked on the criteria for free and legitimate communication in the public sphere in his critical philosophy. It has been suggested that Habermas continued Kant's project by trying to understand the use of reason within communication. Habermas provided criteria for the limits of reason based on the intention to reach a mutual agreement or consent. However, as I mentioned above, Kant understood the Enlightenment as a duty of humanity to enlarge its capacity for knowing and learning. Whether this duty to educate oneself and others persists in Habermas' continuation of the Enlightenment project, will be the topic of discussion in the next section.

## **2. Habermas and Communicative Rationality**

Unlike many others, Habermas stayed true to the Enlightenment project. He thought that this project had an emancipatory potential, which had not yet been realized. As I already mentioned, Kant understood the public sphere as... understanding of the role of the public sphere for the Enlightenment ideal. Habermas' philosophy is based on an attempt to *repair* the public sphere, so that it provides a social structure for the legitimate use of reason. According to Habermas the legitimate public use of reason is possible within certain modes of communication.

For Habermas (1979:196) "reaching understanding seems to be intrinsic to human language as its telos". He claims that mutual understanding is achievable by means of certain universal validity claims and suggests four: comprehensibility, truth, truthfulness, and rightness. We can evaluate arguments based on these four validity claims, which should be implied in the speech of every speaker who intends to achieve a consent. This basically means that the speaker is responsible for keeping his or her arguments in line with these criteria, if a legitimate consent is to be reached.

In his words: "These linguistic validity claims, central to achieving communication, are not based on a socially achieved consensus but, rather, provide a formal basis upon which consensus can be asserted, called into question, mutually interpreted, and utilized in subsequent communicative utterances. In essence, the capacity to call validity claims to be redeemed, provides a universal basis for both the achievement of a consensual understanding and the questioning, or "shaking," of that consensus" (Habermas 1979: 3). Habermas is more concerned with the form of communication itself, than with the potential participants. This is, perhaps, due to his attempt to understand reason as the result of certain type of intersubjective communicative practices and not as a purely subjective phenomenon, or as entirely unrelated to the subjects.

The question is how to make sense of intersubjective communicative practices, which are in accordance with the four universal validity claims, but are not in accordance with every participant's intellectual ability to follow these communicative practices with sufficient understanding. If we are to understand Habermas's theory of communicative rationality as contributive to a project of Enlightenment, then where does the educational function of

communication reside in his theory? In the first section I tried to show that Kant was very conscious of the role of education and learning and teaching practices for humanity's intellectual emancipation. In my understanding, intersubjectivity in communication is achieved not only by means of communicational criteria (such as those developed by Habermas). It is the educative efforts within conversations, which aim to include more speakers in public debates who have with a better understanding of the subject matter.

Habermas has attempted to find a solution for this problem in his criteria for comprehensibility. As Phillips (2001) notes: "before one can play the game of the public use of reason one must, at a minimum, understand the basic terms: public and reason. Without such an initial understanding, the structure cannot, logically, facilitate the use of public reason. Comprehensibility, thus, is a crucial element." In adds further that: "We must, therefore, begin with a world in which the processes and stakes of communication are at the least comprehensible to all, even though these may be comprehended differently by some participants. For Habermas, the ability of these communicative social structures to be self-transforming lies precisely in their ability to bring diverse views together and create a mutually agreed upon set of assumptions via the process of communicative rationality" (Phillips 2001).

But communicating in a publicly comprehensive way does not necessarily imply communicating in a way that assists others in their understanding. As Habermas puts it "the rationality of those who participate in this communicative practice is determined by whether, if necessary, they could, under suitable circumstances, provide reasons for their expressions" (Habermas 1984:17). However, such a mode of communication does not seem to aim at overcoming the dependence on external guidance of one's conversational partners. To achieve consent with an *ill-educated* or an *ill-informed* conversational partner could mean mere acceptance, or denial, in the case of dissent, on their part.

Advancing conversational partners' intellectual ability, which is required for their best possible understanding of the subject matter, is an implicit requirement for consensual communication. In this sense it could be argued that consensual communication cannot be limited to argumentative strategies, but has to be understood as dependent on teaching strategies. Teaching as in the most basic sense of helping others develop the understanding required for an authentic agreement or, in Kant's terms, helping them overcome their immaturity, which is "the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another".

This is essentially one of the basic problems of teaching: How can a teacher make sure that a learner is understanding something, without the teacher's or someone else's guidance? Transferred to the public sphere, this question can be reformulated as: How can a speaker make sure that their opponents are understanding a discussion of a social problem, without guidance from another? What kind of criteria for intersubjective understanding can we apply, in order to make sense of consent in the terms of the Enlightenment?

To sum it up, Habermas understands consensus as the result of communicative situations, which should be free of any external compulsion, but my concern is how can we make sense of

negligence in communicative situations? What criteria for communication will prove useful when we analyse conversations according to the intellectual respect and care they offer to all participants? If, in Kant's words, the Enlightenment presupposes a particular duty to advance the other's capacity for knowing and learning, how could Habermas' theory live up to this commitment? One of the ways of understanding the consensual purpose of communication is by analyzing discourses for their learnability- i.e. how learnable have assertions been made in the course of communication? In the next section, I will attempt to show how Robert Brandom's theory of communication could be used to understand what it means to make an argument more learnable.

### 3. Brandom and Mutual Understanding

Habermas and Brandom have discussed their theories with each other (Habermas 2000, Brandom 2000) and, by others, these their theories are often seen as complementary (Giovannioli 2001, Sharp 2003). Both develop theories for reaching an understanding between participants in discourse and both consider factors of shared communicative practices, common beliefs and argumentation important for the use of language in general. The main difference is that Brandom tries to infer the conditions under which speakers reach understanding in the very dynamic of the game of "giving and asking for reasons" (Brandom 2001:189), whereas it could be said that Habermas tries to define the *political* rules of the game.

For Brandom, the first step of communication is to make an assertion that something is the case (and believing it to really be so). After a speaker makes a claim, they make a commitment towards that claim, which means that they are responsible for justifying this claim (Brandom 2001: 43). The listener, in turn, might infer that when making a certain claim, the speaker is committing themselves to further, not explicitly stated beliefs. In this case, the conversational partner *entitles* the speaker with a commitment, which (potentially) has to be justified in the game of "giving and asking for reasons". Thus, rational speakers should be able to understand what kind of commitments or entitlements they hold and to be aware of the *implicit* claims follow inferentially from one another. In Brandom's words:

"In [Making it Explicit] I employ a social notion of normativity. It is the product of two ideas. First is the Enlightenment idea that normative *statuses*, such as being committed, are only intelligible in a context that includes normative *attitudes* such as acknowledging or attributing commitments. Second is the idea that determinately contentful normative statuses are only intelligible in a context that includes the normative attitudes of *others*, who *attribute* a commitment, *hold* one responsible for it" (Brandom 2001).

In this reading, within discourses communication requires an awareness of one's claims in their relation to another speaker's inferential competence or the ability to locate what has been claimed (made explicit) within a wider system of tacit implicit claims. This is because "speaker and the audience typically have *different* sets of collateral commitments – if they did not, communication would be superfluous" (Brandom 1994:475). Two seemingly identical

commitments might have been inferred in two different ways and in this sense can be based on different reasons or may have different significance for some speakers.

Brandom calls *inferential interpretation* the process by which speakers can overcome such differences. Speakers are able to modify each other's sets of commitments and make explicit new links in the inferential network of reasons. The importance of all of this for consent theories is that speakers who differ in the width and depth of knowledge understand each other by extending their common ground in the course of the game of "giving and asking for reasons", until a correct and rational understanding (for the time being) has been reached. "In other words, the practice of inferring is considered to be the most fundamental activity through which rationality is revealed, and as such, it is the crucial language game to be played among rational agents." But the practice of inferring only reveals the speakers' network of beliefs, it shows how different concepts and reasons are related to each other from the point of view of each speaker who have made the basis of their argument *explicit*. This practice may give us some clues regarding whether or not speakers are dependent on the guidance of authority in their reasoning, but it tells us little about how reaching mutual understanding is related to the duty to "diminish ignorance and correct errors" - as Kant has put it.

To sum up, speakers are capable of reaching mutual understanding if the claims made by speakers become available to their conversational partners, which means that the claims have found their place in the inferential network of the conversational partners- the claims have become intelligible and conversational partners are able to use these claims correctly within inferential practice. Understanding someone's claim would mean to realize the consequences of accepting such a claim as true or correct and being able to use this claim from the background of one's own inferential network from now on. This resembles one of the intuitive principles of education, namely that a learner has *really* learned something when they are capable of teaching it to someone else. In the same sense, interlocutors mutually understand each other as far as they are able to endorse and entertain claims in a common inferential set (Brandom 1994:478). In this sense, inferential rationality is based on the game of "giving and asking for reasons" and the public sphere is the political playground of reasons (where mutual understanding is not necessarily everyone's strategy).

Public discourses usually give people new insights, challenge their current points of view and may even endanger their sense of identity. Public discourses also provide space for learning and opportunities to convince others and in this sense have a lot in common with general educational principles. The quality of agreement between interlocutors depends on their ways of understanding a particular subject and on their background knowledge. However, it also depends on the quality of their individual inferential ability. Reaching an authentic consent presupposes, in some cases, more than having good arguments. This is apparent in virtually every educational situation in which a teacher (presumably) introduces the best arguments, but does not expect their students, as Habermas would expect of speakers, to merely answer with "a "yes" or "no" position on a validity claim that is in principle criticizable" (Habermas 1984:287). Teachers play the game of "giving and asking for reasons" with learner, until teachers are able to confirm that

learners understand their own commitments and entitlements to what has been learned (or claimed) and then analyze the rationality of the learner's inferences in that process.

To put it simply, if, following Habermas, human rationality is to be considered the result of a special type of communication based on communicative rules and if communication is always happening in the background of some educational reality or inferential ability, then considerations related to teaching and learning-from-others should also be taken into account. I attempt to do this by applying a criterion of learnability to communication. I ask the question "What makes *the better argument* more learnable or learnable by a larger proportion of individuals"? In the lifeworld of individuals this question is identical to the question of how to make a concept easier to learn for someone or how to assist someone to learn in a qualitatively different way by developing certain learning skills or habits.

Brandom's inferentialism is useful for analyzing speech acts for their learnability, because in the end "making it learnable" means adapting one's claims as much as possible to the inferential network of another's explicit or implicit claims. This type of conversational dynamics becomes problematic on the level of the public sphere, because public discourses are fragmented in time and space and the media cannot engage everyone, at least not in the form of inferential interpretation, which could replicate the Brandomian speech situation.

My concern with making sense of the continuation of the Enlightenment project in the context of consent theories, takes us back to the type of educatio-communicative interactions which aim to make the learner or speaker autonomous - i.e. how to make sure that within communicative practices an individual reaches the intellectual potential "to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another"? To facilitate the discussion of this question, turn to John Dewey's understanding of politics and the public sphere as naturally related to educational matters.

#### **4. Dewey and The Experience of Communication**

Dewey understands communication not only in linguistic terms, but also in the social sense in which communication has the function to hold a community together. According to him, a community is a social structure which shares communication habits and experiences which lead to forms of mutual understanding. According to Dewey, the best model of social structure is democracy (Dewey 2004). Here it must be noted that democracy for Dewey was a principle more than a way of government (Dewey 2004). He sought to apply this principle in science, art and education and defined democracy as "primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (Dewey 2004:99). It is important to note that the notion of *communicated experience* is central to Dewey, as it is to most pragmatists. The reason I think Dewey has some interesting insights for consent theories and the Enlightenment project, is that he tries to understand communication in terms of how people experience communication.

In his writings on the public sphere, Dewey gives a rather central role to art (Mattern 1999:54), which can be used to illustrate his way of thinking about *communicated experience* and *the*

*experience of communication*. According to Dewey, art resembles the freest form of communication (Dewey 2004), because it does not merely convey a message to its audience, but it locates communication in the very experience of the message. The *commonality* of art is based on a planned sequence of experiences, in which the public has to take part in order to understand certain claims by experiencing more than the mere *argument* or a description of the expressed (Mattern 1999:57). The experiential qualities of art are what make it a worthwhile form of communication. “Art contributes to people’s capacity for critical judgment, and it does this through an ‘expansion of experience’” (Mattern 1999:65) or in terms of Brandom, it plays a role in the inferential interpretation in the public sphere and may challenge speakers to reorganize or revise their claims, just as any other type of communication might.

And this is exactly the point at which I intended to arrive: What is it in the very experience of communication that makes consent or mutual understanding possible in its authentic form? For Dewey the public sphere has the function of making discourses intelligible to the public or to engage the public in a special type of communication, which provides the experiential interactions needed for meaningful participation in a given discourse (Dewey 2012). On this reading, Habermas’ theory could be rightfully called elitist, but not because his criteria are too high or because they exclude non-competent speakers, but because it does not emphasize the function of the public sphere to actively include more participants and develop their ability to play the game of “giving and asking for reasons” without subjecting themselves to authority.

Such a communication model might produce better *arguments*, but it would not necessarily produce better *arguers*, which was a central concern of Kant’s Enlightenment project. An intriguing question in this sense would be if we should think of consensual models of communication in two different ways: as either prioritizing the quality of argument and consequently neglecting incompetent participants or as prioritizing the development of the participants’ intellectual abilities and dealing educationally with the consequences of poor argumentation in the public sphere.

The point of this paper was to highlight one aspect of the achievement of mutual understanding, which is directly related to the educational concept of learnability, and to situate this aspect of communication in the project of Enlightenment. My aim was to show that Dewey’s philosophy is capable of making explicit the *miseducative* experiences of the public sphere. “Any experience is miseducative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience. An experience may be such as to engender callousness; it may increase a person’s automatic skill in a particular direction and yet tend to land him in a groove or rut; the effect again is to narrow the field of further experience” (Dewey 1963:10).

My claim is that there are certain modes of communication which can be *miseducative* regardless of any other qualities they might have. For instance, Habermas’ four universal validity claims of comprehensibility, truth, truthfulness, and rightness don’t account for the learnability of expressed claims or even forms of communication, but they nonetheless present an appropriate framework for thinking about matters of learnability within communication. The question that



has yet to be resolved is how much importance we ascribe to the principle of learnability in public discourses and whether it is possible to base the project of Enlightenment on a concept of an educative public sphere - such that interlocutors take active part in the development of every discursive participant's ability to authentically acknowledge the better argument without the guidance of authority.

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