TRUTH AND MORAL VALIDITY: ON HABERMAS’ DOMESTICATED PRAGMATISM

1. In this paper I argue against Jürgen Habermas’ claim that there is a categorical distinction between truth and moral rightness and therefore theoretical and practical reason. I argue for my view by demonstrating that Habermas’ new pragmatic theory of truth does not buttress the distinction between truth and moral rightness, as he thinks, but in fact vitiates it. My argument therefore takes the form of an internal critique. In the first part of the paper I briefly lay out Habermas’ new theory of truth; in the second I demonstrate how practical claims are truth-apt within the terms of this theory.

2. In his book Truth and Justification, Habermas characterizes his theoretical project as a type of Kantian Pragmatism. What is distinctive about Kantian Pragmatism vis-à-vis the linguistic pragmatism embedded within Habermas’ theory of communicative action is its attempt to integrate the theory of communication with a pragmatic theory of action and learning. In this new theory, discourse is no longer seen as the autonomous accomplishment of a detranscendentalized linguistic reason but as fundamentally interlaced with the action-contexts of the lifeworld. Habermas takes this pragmatic turn, because—through an engagement with Richard Rorty—he came to see that any view that focuses only on the ‘horizontal’ communicative interrelations between subjects at the expense of their ‘vertical’ relationship to the world established through action cannot avoid a contextualism in which the truth of a proposition is always indexed to a context of justification.

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2 For a discussion of Habermas’ Kantian Pragmatism see McCarthy 1994, Baynes 2004, and Heath 2006. I should point out that these discussions, while deep and insightful, do not take the full measure of Kantian Pragmatism insofar as they are only concerned with Habermas’ linguistic articulation of this view. They do not account for a further pragmatic step that Habermas takes in his book Truth and Justification. This paper and my paper ‘Habermas, Kantian Pragmatism, and Truth’ forthcoming in Philosophy and Social Criticism are meant to outline this shift in perspective in more detail.
Habermas abandoned his older discourse theory of truth because it fell prey to this difficulty.¹ Let us briefly review this theory. The discourse theory of truth, which is itself a type of pragmatic theory, starts from the familiar thesis that after the linguistic turn language and reality are inextricably intertwined. This fact rules out metaphysical versions of the correspondence theory because agents ‘cannot step outside the circle of language’ to examine whether their propositions correspond to a language-independent reality. To settle a contested truth claim we cannot therefore simply point to language-independent facts, we must instead justify or give reasons for that claim. Here, “the two-place relation of the validity of propositions is extended into the three-place relation of a validity that valid propositions have ‘for us’. Their truth must be recognizable to an audience” (Habermas 2003a, 100).

However, just because the truth of a claim can only be settled through justification and reason-giving does not mean that it can be equated with what is justified or warranted now. For we know on pragmatic grounds that our knowledge is fallible and subject to revision. This opens up a distinction between truth and rational acceptability that is internal to our epistemic practices. Some philosophers, like Rorty, think that the gap between truth and rational acceptability can never be overcome. Our epistem goal should not be truth but the achievement of rationally motivated agreements in larger and epistemically more informed audiences.² For Habermas, on the other hand, this gap signaled that the truth of a proposition makes an “unconditional claim that points beyond all the evidence available to us” (Habermas 1998, 355). What is the nature of this unconditional claim?

To answer this question, the discourse theory of truth followed Peirce and idealized the conditions of justification. On this view, a statement is true not when it is justified under current conditions but under ideal conditions. While this move does not detach truth from justificatory and inquiring practices altogether, as metaphysical theories of truth do, it also does not reduce it

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¹ For this theory see chapter five of Habermas 2001.
to what is rationally acceptable in the here and now. Habermas followed Peirce here, but for good reasons detached the notion of ideal justification from Peirce’s thesis that this can only be achieved at an ideal limit, i.e., at the end of inquiry. He instead idealized the mechanisms of discourse: “What is true is what may be accepted as rational under ideal conditions” (Habermas 1998, 365), i.e., conditions which are maximally inclusive and open and in which the force of the better argument wins out. Here the “intuition is expressed that . . . [w]hat we hold to be true has to be defended on the basis of good reasons, not merely in a different context but in all possible contexts, that is, at any time and against anybody” (Habermas 1998, 367).

What is the problem with this theory of truth? Why did Habermas abandon it? Through an engagement with the work of Wellmer, Lafont, Rorty, and Putnam, Habermas became convinced that truth is not an epistemic concept at all. Truth is instead an absolute property that ‘cannot be lost’. Truth transcends or outstrips all contexts of justification, even ideal ones. The concept of truth as what is accepted as rational under ideal conditions cannot account for this intuition insofar as even our best-justified beliefs can turn out to be wrong. A proposition is true not because it is the product of a rational consensus forged under ideal conditions, but rather because it is true. As Habermas puts it, “a proposition is agreed to by all rational subjects because it is true; it is not true because it could be the content of a consensus attained under ideal conditions” (Habermas 2003a, 101). This intuition that truth is not epistemically indexed is not metaphysical, Habermas claims, but is an aspect of the grammar of truth claims. But how can one do justice to this grammatical point and not cut off all connection between practices of justification and truth, as is necessary to avoid metaphysically realist theories of truth? Once the grammatical intuition about the absolute nature of truth is on the table, the discourse-theoretic conception of truth seems to be subject to an unsolvable dilemma:

No matter how the value of the epistemic conditions is enhanced through idealizations either they satisfy the unconditional character of truth claims by means of requirements that cut off all

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5 For some of these reasons, see Habermas 1998, Wellmer 1998 and 2004.
connection with the practices of justification familiar to us, or else they retain the connection to practices familiar to us by paying the price that rational acceptability does not exclude the possibility of error even under these ideal conditions, that is, does not simulate a property “that cannot be lost.” (Habermas 1998, 366)

If we take the former road of completely disconnecting truth from justification we undermine the basis for endorsing the commonsense notion that our inquiries and practices of justification help us get closer to the truth. If we take the latter road, however, and uphold an epistemic conception of truth then we only have the conventionalist position in which the best we can shoot for is not truth but Rorty’s expanding circle of solidarity. But then what of our intuition that truth is an unconditional property that cannot be lost?

To solve this problem Habermas argues that while “we cannot sever the connection of truth and justification, this epistemically unavoidable connection must not be turned into a conceptually inseparable connection in the form of an epistemic concept of truth” (Habermas 2003a, 38). In other words, while discursive justification is the only way to settle contested truth claims and is therefore epistemically connected to truth, this does not mean that truth can be identified with what is justified, even in ideal conditions. But if we don’t make this identification how are we to account for truth?

3. To answer this question Habermas formulates a new pragmatic theory of truth. To articulate this theory Habermas takes recourse to certain insights of the classical pragmatic tradition that many contemporary pragmatists have left behind. Specifically, he calls upon the pragmatic theory of action and inquiry. In all of the classical pragmatic figures—Peirce, James, and Dewey—there is a keen sense that cognition must be seen as a moment in a larger action-cycle that starts when agents confront problematic situations in the world. In confronting such situations, habitual modes of coping break down giving rise to doubt. To repair this breach and replace doubt with belief (rules of behavior) agents must undertake higher-order cognition and inquiry—i.e., communication, theory, and experimentation. Here, agents do not just adjust to the situation, but creatively engage it, thereby bringing something new into the world (such as a
theory, moral practice, invention, etc.). If inquiry is successful, agents acquire new beliefs that reestablish routine action and discourse. For the classical pragmatist this acquisition is the basis of learning and experiential growth because the moves made to solve the original problem are, through a feedback mechanism, integrated into the background understanding of the acting agent.

For the pragmatist, action is therefore always embedded in an objective problem context that is disclosed by a taken for granted background understanding. Even doubt only emerges in a context of belief that is mostly taken for granted as true. So when action breaks down in the face of recalcitrant experience, what specifically comes into doubt does so only against the background of a holistic network of stable expectations, beliefs, and behavioral certainties that guide routine action and communication. As Habermas puts it, “[p]ragmatism makes us aware that everyday practice rules out suspending claims to truth in principle. The network of routine practices relies on more or less implicit beliefs that we take to be true against a broad background of inter-subjectively shared or sufficiently overlapping beliefs” (Habermas 2003c, 252). This background is the origin of our concept of truth as unconditional.

The practices of the lifeworld are supported by a consciousness of certainty that in the course of action leaves no room for doubts about truth. Problem-solving behavior processes frustrations that occur against the background of stable expectations, that is, in the context of a huge body of beliefs that are naively taken to be true. Actors rely on the certainties of action in their practical dealings with an objective world, which they presuppose to be independent and the same for everyone. And these certainties in turn imply that beliefs that guide actions are taken to be true absolutely. We don’t walk onto any bridge whose stability we doubt. To the realism of everyday practice, there corresponds a concept of unconditional truth, of truth that is not epistemically indexed—though of course this concept is but implicit in practice. (Habermas 2003a, 39)

This conception of truth dissolves the dilemma posed above by doing justice to the unconditional character of truth claims while maintaining an epistemically unavoidable connection between truth and justification. While the only way to settle truth claims is through
justification, agents, when entering discourse, already possess an unconditional conception of truth that operates below the level of reasons. This nonepistemic concept of truth is relevant to the realm of reason, however, because it projects into discourse by forming an implicit horizon of expectation for our discursive practices. In so doing, it “provides a justification-transcendent point of reference for discursively thematized truth claims. It is the goal of justifications to discover a truth that exceeds all justifications” (Habermas 2003a, 39-40).

Because the goal of justification is to discover a truth that always exceeds justification, justification can never be final or complete. This is the origin of the sense that our interpretations and justifications in the space of reasons are always fallible. “[T]he fallibilist consciousness that we can err even in the case of well-justified beliefs depends on an orientation toward truth whose roots extend onto the realism of everyday practices” (Habermas 1998, 370). However, this fallibilism, while in principle never ending, in fact comes to an end because just as the ‘Janus-faced concept’ of truth facilitates the movement ‘upward’ of practical certainties into discourse, providing discourse with a justification-transcendent point of reference, it also “allows for a retransformation of rationally acceptable assertions into performative certainties” (Habermas 2003c, 253). In other words, because truth is operative within action-contexts as well as discourse, when argument comes to an end and truth claims are de-problematized, we are licensed to return to an action-framework where justified beliefs are transformed into behavioral certainties. In making this transition we do not leave truth behind, but, as it were, return to its native realm.

In providing a justification-transcendent point of reference for our discursive practices, Habermas thinks he has accomplished the first step to overcoming contextualism, i.e., the view, if we remember, that the truth of a proposition is always indexed to a context of justification. The second step requires connecting our implicit concept of truth to a concept of objectivity that is also implicit in our world-directed action. Contextualism can ultimately be overcome, Habermas thinks, because the certainties that are the origin of our concept of truth are the
certainties that acting agents rely on in their practical dealings with an objective world, a world ‘which they presuppose to be independent and the same for everyone’. In other words, the certainties that are the formal origin of our concept of truth are always about the objective world. But why do acting agents presuppose there to be an independent objective world in the first place? What is the origin of the concept of objectivity?

On Habermas’ pragmatic construal, objectivity is rendered in the first instance not by our linguistically representing the world but through our acting upon it and within it, i.e., through the pragmatic action-cycle mentioned above. Specifically, the concept of objectivity arises ‘through failure’. When action breaks down “we experience in practice that the world revokes its readiness to cooperate, and this refusal gives rise to the concept of objectivity” (Habermas 2003c, 255). This experience of failure, of our individual and cooperative projects undertaken with others, generates an implicit concept of an independent world that feeds back into our system of background beliefs, informing our future action and behavior. From now on, within action we “presuppose the objective world as a system of possible referents—as a totality of objects not of facts” (Habermas 2003a, 27). Like the concept of truth, the concept of objectivity rendered in practice circulates upward into discourse, giving it the assurance that our statements refer to objects that exist independently of our linguistic representations. In this way, objectivity becomes a practical presupposition not only of action but of communication as well.11 “As subjects capable of speech and action, language users must be able to ‘refer’ ‘to something’ in the objective world from within the horizon of their shared lifeworld if they are to reach an understanding ‘about something’ in communicating with one another” (Habermas 2003a, 89). This pulls the rug out from under a contextualism that indexes truth to a particular context, for now truth claims ultimately refer to a single context—i.e., the objective world as a system of

10 The resistance to our inter-subjective cooperative projects gives rise to our assumption that the world we are dealing with is the same for all subjects, an essential aspect of objectivity.
11 For a discussion of Habermas’ discursive theory of objectivity see Lafont 2002.
possible referents—whose independence is ratified not at the level of linguistic representation but in practice.

4. A question that arises at this point is why, after integrating a pragmatic theory of action and truth into his view, Habermas characterizes himself as a type of *Kantian Pragmatist*. As we shall see, the main reason is that for Habermas moral autonomy and validity are made possible solely by reason-giving and concept use in a practical discourse. While truth goes beyond discourse and makes essential reference to a world whose objectivity is ratified in action, practical validity does not. Based upon this difference, Habermas affirms the Kantian thesis that truth and moral validity, theoretical and practical reason, are categorically distinct. In light of this, the difficulty that Habermas faces is this: in order to address the contextualism problem in the theoretical sphere Habermas takes over a pragmatic theory of action to underwrite his pragmatic theory of truth. But this theory of action, at least by the pragmatist’s lights, not only 1) embeds within it a unitary theory of reason or intelligence that contains moments of theoretical and practical reason, it also 2) provides for a notion of objectivity and truth that extends to the practical sphere. How then can Habermas accept this theory of action while also upholding the Kantian distinction between theoretical and practical reason? In an article on Hilary Putnam’s *Kantian Pragmatism*, Habermas rhetorically asks whether Putnam would not be better off remaining a ‘Kantian all the way down’ by discarding his pragmatic moral realism and accepting, as Habermas does, a deontological discourse ethics. In light of his use of a pragmatic theory of action and truth we can ask this question in reverse: would it not be better for Habermas to remain a pragmatist all the way down by accepting a pragmatic moral realism in which the distinction between truth and normative validity, theoretical and practical reason, is a local rather than categorical affair?

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12 For the debate between Habermas and Putnam see Habermas 2003b and Putnam 2002c.
Habermas’ problem is thus similar to Kant’s: he must tailor his theoretical views in such a way as to overcome skepticism (in his case, contextualism), while also making room for the autonomy of practical reason. Habermas meets this problem by domesticating the consequences of his own pragmatism, specifically 1) by attempting to restrict the functioning of the pragmatic action-cycle to epistemic or theoretical contexts, 2) by demonstrating that a proper notion of objectivity and truth can only be credited to theoretical and not ethical or moral beliefs, and 3) by arguing that any position—like that of the pragmatist’s—that assimilates truth and moral validity cannot do justice to the universality characteristic of post-conventional morality. In the next two sections we shall examine the first two ways in which Habermas domesticates his pragmatism and come back to the third at the end of the paper.

5. With respect to the first way in which he domesticates his own pragmatism, Habermas recognizes that the pragmatic action-cycle includes within it a theory of reason that contains moments of both theoretical and practical reason. If we remember, this theory posits a two-level structure in which frustrations in our ‘success-controlled dealings’ with the environment lead to higher-order inquiry and dialog with the community of inquirers. Here, intention and belief, goal-directed action and inter-subjective discourse aimed at truth, have internal relations to one another. Habermas attempts to weaken the force of this point by foreshortening the moment of practical reason. Practical reason, according to Habermas, has three modalities: the moral, ethical, and pragmatic.\(^{13}\) While morality concerns the norms and judgments that merit universal recognition in a rational discourse under approximately ideal conditions, ethics concerns the values, beliefs, attitudes, and self-understandings that inform particular forms of life and conceptions of the good. In contrast, the pragmatic moment of practical reason concerns intentions and actions that are purely teleological, either instrumentally or strategically.

\(^{13}\) See Habermas 1995.
Habermas’ argument is that the pragmatic action-cycle contains only the latter moment of practical reason. Higher-order inquiry and discourse aimed at truth only emerge in the way the pragmatist imagines when our instrumental or purposive dealings with the environment break down. So while theoretical and practical reason are intertwined, they are intertwined only in contexts where agents have a ‘technical interest’ in objectifying and mastering a hostile nature.\footnote{For the origin of this interpretation, see Habermas 1971: 91-139.}

In classical pragmatism, this restriction of the pragmatic action-cycle to theoretical contexts that have strictly epistemic ends does not apply.\footnote{In fact, pragmatism not only posits that there are many other ends served by the pragmatic action-cycle, it also has a notion of non-teleological action in which means and ends, part and whole, are internally integrated. This undercuts the common complaint that pragmatism is simply a type of instrumentalism. See Joas 1996.} The pragmatist argues for this thesis by claiming, in Habermas’ own words, that

> the process of inquiry itself \[is\] an instance of social collaboration. Even if the community of inquirers undertakes its cooperative search for truth under the special conditions of an experimental engagement with nature and a communicative engagement with experts, this complex undertaking embodies none other than the very type of intelligence that determines our ordinary practices and everyday communication. There is an internal connection between the practice of inquiry and the contexts of the lifeworld in which it is rooted. (Habermas 2003b, 222)

In other words, the intelligence that informs theoretical praxis specifically is a higher-order codification of the intelligence that implicitly guides everyday routine action and communication. Such routine practices, however, are not just oriented to theoretically mastering independent natural processes; rather they are involved in the whole spectrum of lifeworld activities insofar as problem-solving behavior copes not only with the objective world, but also the moral, ethical, political, and aesthetic worlds. In all of these domains, routine action can be disrupted giving rise to higher-order inquiry, communication, and deliberation. As we shall see, this fact forms the basis for the argument that a notion of objectivity and truth can be rendered in the practical sphere of the lifeworld. In light of this pragmatic counter-thesis, Habermas needs a more robust argument to justify his claim that the pragmatic action-cycle can only render a notion of objectivity and truth in theoretical contexts. As we shall see in the next section, in *Truth and Justification* Habermas provides just such an argument.
6. To understand Habermas’ second way of domesticating the consequences of his own pragmatism we must first say something about his theory of morality and moral validity. As we mentioned above, Habermas makes a sharp distinction between morality and ethics. With respect to the ethical, Habermas recognizes that “compared to subjective or arbitrarily postulated preferences” evaluative judgments and beliefs “have a certain objectivity” (Habermas 2003b, 229). This is so because within a given culture and upon the basis of a common form of life, agents exchange reasons and thereby modify their evaluations and ethical practices. However, “objectivity in the sense of broad acceptance that is accorded to ethical knowledge from the ‘objective spirit’ of the social environment ought not to be confused with truth-analogous validity in the sense of rational acceptability” (Habermas 2003c, 246). This is because ethical knowledge about what is good or valuable is indexed to particular forms of life and their self-understandings and conceptions of the good. As such, value judgments “do not merit unqualified universal consent, but merely the recognition of those who interpret the underlying standard of value in the same way, either by habit or for good reason” (Habermas 2003b, 231).

While ethical beliefs and values make a claim that applies only to those who already accept an underlying standard of value, moral judgments ideally apply universally to all subjects. Morality, in Habermas’ demanding sense, arises when, in the face of disintegrating communal forms of life and the pluralization of worldviews generated by complex modern societies, agents “become aware of the fact that there can be rational dissensus about fundamental standards of value” (Habermas 2003c, 263). The question is how, in the absence of a fundamental standard, can moral norms be re-established to regulate our interpersonal relations? In Habermas’ view the only way this can be achieved is by turning moral rightness into a procedural concept pertaining to the legitimacy of moral discourses. Moral rightness, or justice, becomes in effect a meta-norm.

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16 It must be pointed out that this represents a change in Habermas’ view. Previously, he characterized ethical values in a subjective and naturalistic fashion. It was this characterization of value that made Habermas a legitimate target of Putnam’s charge that his view of value was not very different from that of the positivists. See Putnam 2002c. In response to Putnam and other Neo-Aristotelians, Habermas has here granted ethical value a slightly more exalted status than previously had.
governing the discourses by which first-order norms and judgments are generated. What is this meta-norm? For a moral norm or judgment to be morally right or valid it must be accepted by all those who are affected by it in an approximately ideal practical discourse, i.e., a discourse structured by certain ideal conditions like openness, inclusiveness, equal right to participation, and protection from external and internal compulsion. As Habermas puts it, “[t]hose moral judgments [and norms] that merit universal recognition are ‘right’, and that means that in a rational discourse under approximately ideal conditions they could be agreed to by anyone concerned” (Habermas 2003b, 229).

Because “we discover the rightness of moral judgments in the same way as the truth of descriptions: through argumentation” (Habermas 2003c, 248), the questions that are discussed and the claims that are made in practical discourses have cognitive and not merely expressive content. Moral speakers take it that there is something to be settled and therefore something to be known by their discursive and justificatory practices. Because there is something to be know or ascertained by their discourse, moral actors, as much as theoretical ones, orient themselves to giving a ‘single right answer’, i.e., are oriented by the notion that it is possible to get what they are talking about right. Although this might make it seem as if moral statements were truth-apt, Habermas claims that moral rightness is only ‘analogous to truth’. What is the difference between these two types of validity?

[M]oral validity claims do not refer to the world in a way that is characteristic of truth claims. “Truth” is a justification-transcendent concept that cannot be made to coincide even with the concept of ideal warranted assertibility. Rather it refers to the truth conditions that must, as it were, be met by reality itself. In contrast, the meaning of “rightness” consists entirely in ideal warranted acceptability. For we ourselves contribute to the fulfillment of the validity conditions of moral judgments and norms. (Habermas 2003c, 248)

For Habermas, both moral and theoretical judgments, unlike evaluative judgments, raise universal claims to validity, claims that “transcend the context of existing communities” (Habermas 2003b, 229). In the moral case, this universality is generated by the fact that they earn a rationally motivated recognition “not merely in local, but in all contexts” (Habermas 2003c, 259), “not only here ‘for us’ but in the discourse universe of all subjects capable of speech and action”
(Habermas 2003b, 231). In other words, the universality of moral claims pertains to the ‘horizontal inclusiveness’ of a speech community. However, because moral validity still consists in a judgment or norm being accepted or recognized as valid under ideal conditions by a horizontally inclusive speech community it remains ‘justification-immanent’. A truth claim, in contrast, is not true because it is agreed upon by a speech community—even in ideal circumstances—but because it refers to an objective state of affairs. The difference between truth and moral rightness thus comes down to the fact that while truth claims refer to an objective world about which we state facts, moral rightness “does not refer beyond the boundaries of discourse to something that might ‘exist’ independently of having been determined to be worthy of recognition” (Habermas 2003c, 258).

It should now be clear why Habermas thinks that the elaboration of the pragmatic theory of truth is so important: it not only overcomes the threat of contextualism, it also gives him the means to distinguish between truth and moral rightness. Habermas’ older discourse-theoretic conception of truth was insufficient for this task because on that conception both truth and moral rightness were seen as the results of an ideal practical discussion and therefore both as products of the same process of validity construction. But once we have a two-staged pragmatic theory of truth that not only applies at the level of discourse but also at that of action we are in a position to understand the “difficulty of articulating a conception that assimilates moral validity to truth” (Habermas 2003c, 255). For while theoretical claims make essential reference to a world whose objectivity is ratified in action, moral claims are discourse and justification-immanent, and therefore make no such reference. If we stay at the level of discourse and argumentation both types of claims orient themselves to giving a ‘single right answer’. However—and this is the key point—this analogy exists only on the level of argumentation. It cannot be transferred to the prereflective ‘corroboration of beliefs’. For moral beliefs do not falter against the resistance of an objective world that all participants suppose to be one and the same. Rather, they falter against the
irresolvability of normative dissensus among opposing parties in a shared social world. (Habermas 2003c, 256)\textsuperscript{17}

At this level—the level of beliefs implicit in our theoretical and moral practices—only in the theoretical case do we have a notion of objectivity that is \textit{internally connected} to a justification-transcendent concept of truth.

One might argue against Habermas’ conclusion in this way: If, as Habermas admits, moral beliefs implicitly guide rule-governed social interactions in the same way that empirical beliefs guide goal-oriented behavior in the empirical world, then it appears as if moral practices have the same action-theoretical structure as theoretical practices. On this view, both moral and theoretical beliefs are revised—through higher-order moral discourse and theoretical inquiry respectively—when the actions that they guide falter against a recalcitrant reality. But then why could we not say that just as the revision of our empirical beliefs in the face of a recalcitrant reality gives us a sense of objectivity that circulates upward to guide our truth-directed theoretical claims, so too does the revision of our previously settled moral beliefs in the face of a moral dissensus give us a sense of objectivity, one that circulates upward to orient our moral judgments. Here, instead of categorically differentiating truth and moral validity, we would instead show that both forms of validity are essentially connected to a form of objectivity that has its origin in the \textit{constraints} faced by action.

Habermas avoids this conclusion by pointing to the different ways that moral and theoretical beliefs are \textit{corroborated}. In the theoretical case, beliefs are corroborated as objective by allowing agents to “successfully [manipulate] otherwise independently occurring processes.” Moral beliefs, on the other hand, are corroborated by “consensually resolving conflicts of interaction” (Habermas 2003c, 256). So while the corroboration of theoretical beliefs is dependent upon the operations of a world that is presumed to be the same for all agents, the

\textsuperscript{17} Moral \textit{beliefs} are neither the \textit{explicit} moral norms produced by approximately ideal moral discourses, nor the \textit{ethical} beliefs and values that pre-thematically inform our lifeworld self-understandings and conceptions of the good. Rather, moral beliefs are valid moral norms that through habituation and internalization have come to implicitly guide our rule-governed moral practices and interactions.
continued corroboration of moral beliefs is dependent upon the normative and evaluative agreement of agents in a shared social world. It is clear that corroboration in the latter case is much less secure than in the former. This asymmetry in security, however, cannot be explained—as it often is—by saying that corroborated theoretical beliefs are immune to rational disagreement while corroborated moral beliefs are not so immune. For Habermas recognizes that there is a “fallibilist proviso that applies to all knowledge” (Habermas 2003c, 245). His argument is rather that theoretical and moral beliefs—and the discursive claims built on them—are fallible in categorically different ways: Theoretical beliefs and judgments are fallible because of the “cognitive provinciality of our finite mind relative to a better future knowledge,” while moral beliefs and judgments are fallible due to “an existential provinciality, as it were, relative to the historical variability of the contexts of interaction themselves” (Habermas 2003c, 245-6).

Moral beliefs are existentially provincial because their corroboration through resolving conflicts of interaction “can occur only against the background of intersubjectively shared normative beliefs. Corroboration does not occur in a practice that can readily be differentiated from discourse. Rather it takes place from the outset in the linguistic medium of communication” (Habermas 2003c, 256). So while it seems as if moral practices have a two-level structure in which moral discourse and claim-making emerges from the disruption of action, moral practices are in fact discursive through and through insofar as action, and the beliefs implicit in action, are themselves symbolically mediated. But if this is so, then the moral claims and judgments that emerge from working through the disruption of our beliefs cannot, like theoretical claims, call upon a sense of objectivity that is ratified pre-discursively in action. Instead, these claims, like the beliefs that they express, are existentially provincial insofar as they are constrained by, and

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18 The social world, understood in a broad sense, is a symbolically structured lifeworld that includes both culture (the background understandings which communicating agents call upon to interpret symbols and actions) and society (the taken for granted web of normatively regulated institutions, practices, and customs).
remain relative to, a linguistically mediated and historically variable social world. As Habermas puts it:

> Whether the [moral] certainties that guide our action fail is determined not by the uncontrolled contingency of the disconfirming states of affairs, but by the opposition or outcry of social players with dissonant value orientations. The resistance does not come from the objectively ‘given’ that we cannot control, but from the lack of a normative consensus with others. The ‘objectivity’ of an other mind is made of different stuff than the objectivity of an unanticipated reality. (Habermas 2003c, 256)

Here, instead of distinguishing truth and moral rightness by examining the reasons by which we defend expressions containing these claims, as Habermas did when he espoused a linguistic brand of pragmatism, Habermas now distinguishes them by showing that these claims are part of practices that are subject to categorically different constraints, i.e., the constraints provided by the objective and social world respectively. In so doing, Habermas provides himself the means to maintain, within a pragmatic or action-theoretical context, the Kantian distinction between truth and moral rightness, theoretical and practical reason.

7. In light of the views given above, we can now outline Habermas’ full argument for his claim that truth and moral rightness are categorically distinct: 1) truth as a justification-transcendent concept is internally connected to a concept of objectivity that is corroborated in action, 2) moral beliefs and therefore moral claims, in being justification-immanent, do not possess this type of objectivity, therefore 3) moral claims are not true in the proper sense. In this section we shall provide reasons for resisting the second premise of Habermas’ argument, while in the next section we shall contest the first.

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19 This is why moral claims are not only subject to a discourse of justification but also one of application. Moral claims, unlike theoretical claims, require for their application hermeneutic insight into the particular characteristics of the situation, insight that is inexplicably historical. See Habermas 2003c, 245-6.

20 In The Theory of Communicative Action Habermas’ primary way of distinguishing between truth and moral rightness (and subjective truthfulness) was by examining the reasons that were used to defend expressions containing these claims. However, he had another strategy that depended on examining the worlds to which actors relate in using these expressions (i.e., the objective world of existing states of affairs, the social world of normatively regulated interactions, and the subjective world of experiences). While in Truth and Justification Habermas providing a new action-theoretical strategy for distinguishing truth and moral rightness (subjective truthfulness having gone by the wayside)—thereby displacing the older discourse-theoretic strategy of only examining the reasons used to redeem validity claims—the world concepts referred to in his earlier work are still operating in the background. See Habermas 1984, 43-101.
We can resist the second premise by arguing, along with Putnam and other pragmatic moral realists, that objectivity applies to the moral domain not only at the level of discourse and deliberation but also at the level of the implicit beliefs that inform moral and ethical perception and action. As we saw above, Habermas’ main argument against this conclusion is that the norms and values that constitute the symbolically mediated social world “do not fit with the objective world, that is, with the constraints to which we are subject in our problem solving and our coping with a frustrating reality” (Habermas 2003b, 224).

The pragmatic moral realist contests this conclusion in two steps. The first step requires showing that the moral beliefs that inform moral action and perception are “corroborated . . . in a way similar to empirical idioms, namely ‘by reality’” (Habermas 2003b, 226). To make this case we must recall certain facts about the pragmatic theory of action. For this theory, action and the higher-order cognition that emerges from it are both underwritten by a holistic background of belief. But if beliefs are not explicit representations but rather affectively laced dispositions, habits, and rules of behavior, then the background against which the objects of action and cognition manifest themselves as the objects they are involves both factual and normative/evaluative elements. The pragmatist concludes from this that action and cognition face a recalcitrant reality in which facts and values are inextricably intertwined. We do not paint subjectively originating value onto a world of facts, as the projectivist holds, rather facts show up as already impregnated with value. This conclusion even applies to the natural sciences where, as Putnam trenchantly points out, non-moral norms and values like coherence, plausibility, simplicity, reasonableness, etc. are irreducible features of scientific practice. The distinctive objectivity of the natural sciences is not achieved by abstracting from all norms and values, an

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21 My taking up the objectivity issue at this level distinguishes my argument from other arguments against Habermas’ meta-ethical constructivism. Two notable attempts along this score are Davis 1994 and Lafont 1999, chapter 7. Both argue that Habermas’ discourse ethics requires moral realism to make sense of its own claims. My argument is different than these because it is not concerned with what must be presumed to make sense of moral discourse, but with the different types of objectivity that are rendered by our action in the world. This is a consequence of my taking seriously the action-theoretical framework in which Habermas situates his theory of truth and objectivity.

22 See Putnam 2002b, 30-1.
illusory ideal, but by subjecting one’s theoretical practice to certain habits of inquiry—truthfulness, openness to revising one’s views, etc.—and submitting one’s theoretical results to the demanding inter-subjective justificatory conditions operative in a properly structured community of inquirers. But, the pragmatist asks, why can’t these conditions of objectivity apply to other domains of the lifeworld? If theoretical praxis can be both objective and mediated by value then “why,” Habermas himself asks, “should value judgments in other domains count as any less objective?” (Habermas 2003b, 223)

In the moral sphere specifically, Putnam presses this point home forcefully by taking recourse to the now familiar point that in learning a language, and thereby acquiring a background understanding of oneself and the world, subjects learn to use ‘thick descriptions’, descriptions in which the descriptive and evaluative components cannot be disentangled. In using predicates like good, creepy, brave, disgusting, amusing, etc., facts and values are entangled in such a way that subjects directly perceive or discern a state of affairs as normatively charged in certain ways. These discernments (and the judgments built upon them) admit of objectivity and truth simply because the correct application of a moral predicate like ‘cruel’ is not a projection of our subjectivity but a response to pre-existing patterns of ethical life. While in hard cases there can be disagreement and discussion about the application of this predicate, our justifications for the correct application of this predicate are still in general guided by the layout of moral reality. This moral reality is nothing ontologically ‘queer’, as Habermas sometimes suggests, but is simply the habituated patterns of our ‘second nature’. 23

A pragmatic form of moral realism, like that offered by Putnam, can vindicate this notion better than other forms of moral realism because in a second step it points out that the moral discernments that utilize thick-descriptions are not just a matter of free-floating moral perception.

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23 To make this view convincing much more would have to be said. See Putnam 2002b and McDowell 1998.
but part of the larger cycle of *ethical action and inquiry*. Ethical discourse and inquiry emerges when unhindered action and discernments, on the part of a subject or subjects, are disrupted and ethical uncertainty emerges. As Dewey often points out, this uncertainty is not subjective, applying only to the mind of the subject or subjects facing a disrupted situation; rather it is the situation *itself* that is uncertain. In this case, just as in the theoretical case, agents cope with this situation by practicing a kind of dialogical deliberation (with themselves or others) that is similar in logical pattern to inquiry as it is practiced in other problem solving domains. However, the factors that need to be considered in this dialogical deliberation cannot be restricted in advance to those that are, in Habermas’ terms, moral. For it cannot be known ahead of time whether the reestablishment of a unified ethical situation will require working through moral, ethical, prudential, or even factual resistances. Each of these factors can resist unimpeded ethical action and so are objective insofar as they *in fact* constrain one’s ability to act and apply moral concepts. Similarly, when ethical inquiry and deliberation solves a given problem by adjusting old practices, norms, or values to new situations, or by instituting new practices, norms, or values, the solution—like the problem—is objective insofar as something has been brought into the world that allows moral perception and action to again proceed uninterruptedly.

This pluralism concerning the constraints that ethical action might face allows the pragmatist to accept Habermas’ point that the constraint provided by natural processes is different than that provided by normative dissonance. Although we engage both types of constraint by undertaking inquiry and dialogue (even if only with ourselves), we talk to other agents to overcome moral dissensus whereas a physical object seems to be mute. But there are other types of constraints that don’t fit neatly into Habermas’ categorical scheme, for example, the constraint provided by the actions, attitudes, emotions, and value positions of other people and ourselves, institutions like bureaucracy and the market, and phenomena like the

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24 I say ‘ethical inquiry’ rather than ‘moral inquiry’ because for the pragmatist the ethical realm is more extensive than the moral realm. The moral, in Habermas’ specialized sense, emerges from and remains part of ethical life.

environment. These constraints are provoked neither by recalcitrant physical processes nor by discursively articulated normative disagreements alone; rather they have a mixed form, involving both ‘natural’ and ‘social’ factors. Unlike Habermas, who must fit these phenomena into his pre-established categorical scheme, the pragmatist can admit that there is a range of different types of constraint here and therefore a range of different types of objectivity. He can, in Dewey’s terms, recognize a range of local distinctions with respect to objectivity. Nevertheless, because these different forms of objectivity have a common font in the constraints that confront action, the pragmatist can also claim that these local distinctions do not add up to what Dewey calls a dichotomy or dualism—or in our terms, a categorical distinction.²⁶

The effects of resisting Habermas’ restrictive categorical schema can be seen by coming back to the case of ethical value. For Habermas, ethical values do not evince objectivity because their validity is indexed to a community’s particular conception of the good. Moral norms, in being the product of an approximately ideal discussion, are not so indexed and therefore have a universal validity. The pragmatist conceives the matter differently. When discourse and dialogue emerge due to our facing a recalcitrant reality, the beliefs, values, and thick descriptions that implicitly embed our pre-reflective ethical perception and action are put into abeyance and a reflective process of value transformation or discovery commences. When this transformation involves multiple subjects it will often involve intersubjective discourse, a discourse that ideally will be governed by norms very similar to those that Habermas outlines. The pragmatist can therefore accept the usefulness of having a distinction between discussions that concern some person or persons (ethical deliberations) and discussions that potentially concern all persons (moral discourse).²⁷ But we should not let this distinction be transformed into a dichotomy by thinking that moral discourse can fully detach from the value-laden action contexts out of which

²⁶ For more on the difference between distinctions and dichotomies see Putnam 2002a.
²⁷ Hans Joas provides another way of pragmatically distinguishing norms and values: While norms are restrictive, values are attractive. I think there is a distinction to be made here, but question whether norms are merely restrictive. For while many of our most important norms have restrictive consequences they also express a positive commitment to certain values, for example, freedom, dignity, and equality. See Joas 2001.
it emerges. For even the commitment to the supposedly neutral mechanisms of moral discourse is based upon a substantive value commitment to a certain form of life, one that we call (in the pragmatist’s wide sense) democracy.\footnote{For more on this point, see Bernstein 1998.} For the pragmatist, the moral norms and guidelines produced by discourse will be suffused by value, and the value-laden action context from which that discussion arose will always be structured by rules and principles whose normative force goes beyond particular self-understandings.

As we shall see, Habermas takes it that the entangling of norms and values leads to particularist or contextualist conclusions. For him, the only way to maintain moral universality is to rigorously separate the moral from the ethical. The pragmatist’s move, as I interpret it, is to accept the entanglement of norms and values while resisting the conclusion that this leads to moral particularism. The mistake is not the entangling of norms and values, but rather the original emptying of ethical life of objective purport.

8. The second argument against Habermas’ proof (beginning of sec. 7), which attacks its first premise, claims that while truth is internally tied to objectivity it is not tied to Habermas’ narrow concept of theoretical objectivity. Habermas’ own pragmatic concept of truth entails that truth is related to a wider spectrum of objectivity, a spectrum that includes practical objectivity.

In our view, Habermas misconstrues the relationship between truth and objectivity because he does not give proper weight to the fact that on his own account their referents have fundamentally different statuses. As we saw above, the concept of objectivity for Habermas emerges through a breakdown or failure in the action-cycle. As such, the concept is learned through experience and therefore has content. In contrast, the concept of truth that is implicit in our practices is a formal concept that pertains, in Husserl’s terms, to a certain doxie modality of belief, i.e., to our implicitly ‘holding-something-to-be-true-unconditionally’. While the concept of
objectivity refers to a mind-independent world, the concept of truth reflexively refers to the doxic modality of our background, i.e., lifeworld, beliefs.

By Habermas’ lights, this difference in status does not impede the intertwining of truth and objectivity, it simply means that the background beliefs and certainties that are the formal origin of our implicit concept of truth can only apply to independent processes in the objective world. But to say this requires denying the holism of the lifeworld certainties that underlie the pragmatic action-cycle: While the background beliefs that support action and communication about the objective world can have the doxic modality of certainty, other sorts of background beliefs, including most importantly moral ones, cannot. However, it is unclear why the dogmatism of the lifeworld should only pertain to certainties about the objective world and not also to deep-seated assumptions about how to relate to other people, what emotional responses are appropriate, what is good or valuable, etc.

Habermas, in fact, provides no argument for the conclusion that doxic certainty only pertains to theoretical background beliefs. This is the case, I think, because Habermas takes for granted that in a post-conventional context moral beliefs and values have a higher degree of reflexivity than the beliefs that inform theoretical praxis. This assumption stems from his view, discussed above, that interactions in the social world are linguistically mediated all the way down—i.e., at both the level of the implicit beliefs and values that inform ethical perception and action and at the explicit level of discourse. Because both levels are articulated in the same medium, the maelstrom of higher-order moral problematization and conflict can seep down into the ethical lifeworld, de-embedding taken-for-granted ethical certainties.

From the pragmatic point of view, this move is based on a questionable inference from two interrelated insights. First, it is true that in Modernity traditional beliefs and practices have been uprooted to an unparalleled degree. Second, Habermas is right that the level of implicit

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29 This question does not ask about the holism of the lifeworld tout court insofar as it is not concerned with the content of the beliefs that make up the background but only their doxic modality.
moral beliefs and values is not immune to what happens at the level of discourse and argumentation. Our background beliefs are not static, but change in response to new discursive understandings and new ways of dealing with a recalcitrant reality. However, this does not undermine the pragmatic point that while our background system of belief changes, this change is slow and mostly at the margins. New outlooks and self-understandings do emerge, but they, according the pragmatist, are just as situated in mostly implicit and pre-thematic background understandings as any other. This applies even to modern ‘post-conventional’ morality, which must for its intelligibility be underlain by a Modern Sittlichkeit, i.e., a system of implicit beliefs, practices, and habits that articulates our sense of ourselves as modern.30

What we should conclude is that the concept of truth reflexively refers to the doxic modality of our certain background beliefs, whatever their content. Based upon this we can pry apart the concept of truth and the specific concept of objectivity that Habermas credits to theoretical beliefs. In doing so we can still account for the justification-transcendent nature of truth claims insofar as the projection of our ‘unconditionally-holding-something-to-be-true’ into discourse gives us the notion within our discursive practices that there is a difference between something being true because it is true and our finding something to be true because of its rational acceptability. But now our finding something to be true because it is true does not assume that what is true only concerns the facts circumscribed by Habermas’ narrow theoretical construal of objectivity. Moral discourses, just as much as theoretical ones, are objective and aim to reinstate the modality of truth. While the occasion for a breakdown in theoretical practice can be different than the occasion for a breakdown in moral practice (or other types of practices), both theoretical and practical discourses try to recapture the undifferentiated certainty that is implicit in the background beliefs that underlie both of these undertakings.

30 To justify this point requires not so much an argument as a phenomenology of modern moral experience. See Taylor, 1992.
9. Our stress on moral truth should ease Habermas’ worry that the pragmatist’s assimilation of truth and moral validity cannot do justice to the universality characteristic of post-conventional morality. This worry arises because in making practical claims truth-apt, objectivity and truth are extended not only to normative judgments and beliefs, but also to the beliefs and values that inform ethical action-contexts. And this, “in good Aristotelian fashion, makes the rationality of corroborated normative beliefs dependent on the ethical self-understanding of a collective” (Habermas 2003b, 233). In other words, it has the effect of indexing the moral rightness or truth of a claim to the particular beliefs, values and self-understandings circulating in an ethical lifeworld. However, if the pragmatist is armed with Habermas’ pragmatic theory of truth and the concomitant distinction between truth and rational acceptability, this contextualization of moral beliefs within an ethical community does not lead to particularistic consequences. For this distinction operates within particular ethical communities, providing it with the notion that there is a potential difference between what it takes to be true on any given issue and what is in fact true. While our only access to truth is through what we take to be rationally acceptable, a background consciousness of this difference leads to a moral and ethical fallibilism that necessarily opens moral and ethical experience and inquiry to the claims and views of other agents and cultures. We could put this point another way: Without the consciousness that one is searching for a moral truth beyond what ones’ community takes to be true, there would be no motivation to sincerely engage the other in trying to find out the truth—and thereby no motivation to de-center one’s view and expand the ‘horizontal’ inclusiveness of moral discourse (these being the two characteristics of moral universality for Habermas). This openness does not guarantee that truth or even rational agreement will be achieved. From the pragmatic point of view such a guarantee is impossible and places too large a burden on

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31 For more on the role of truth in moral inquiry from a pragmatic point of view see Misak 2000.
morality. Rather, it simply provides an expectation that moral truth can be found and so a motivation to keep the conversation going. And this, the pragmatist thinks, is enough.

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