

# From ‘Consensus Theory of Truth’ to ‘Janus-Faced’ Truth — A Research on Jurgen Habermas’s Theory of Truth

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## Abstract

It is one of the critical tasks for Jurgen Habermas to figure out the essence of truth. During 1970s, Habermas has established his philosophy framework of ‘universal pragmatics’. Under this framework, Habermas developed his ‘consensus theory of truth’, which explain truth as validity claim that achieve by discourse. But in 1990s, Habermas discarded this comprehend of truth and put forward a theory of ‘Janus-faced’ truth. In his masterpieces during this period, he was committed to hold both the truth of discourse on utterance level and the truth of reality on lifeworld practice level. This is a peculiar viewpoint that differ from both realist like Putnam and pragmatist like Rorty. In other words, it’s an approach between them.

**Keywords:** theory of truth, Habermas, discourse, pragmatism, realism

## 1. Introduction

The study of epistemology is one of the crucial fields in philosophy. Likewise, it is also crucial in Habermas’s philosophy theory. In his early writings, Habermas explored a theory of interest as an epistemology theory. Afterwards, he paid his attention to the question of truth, that is, “what is truth?” Arguably, the answer of this question is a precondition of philosophical and scientific questions. And in fact, the theory of truth has been an important composition of Habermas’s philosophy theory. Especially in 1990s, in his discussion of truth in *Truth and Justification*, Habermas released a concept of objective world as a necessary supplement for his theory of communicative action. (J. Habermas, 2003, p. xvii)

This article is devoted to reveal Habermas’s transfer in the research of truth from 1970s to 1990s, namely, from the ‘Consensus Theory of Truth’ to ‘Janus-faced’ Truth. This article is divided in 4 parts. The first part is an overview of the history of Habermas’s exploration on theory of truth. The second part pays attention to describe Habermas’s early theory of truth, namely, the ‘Consensus Theory of Truth’, and reveal its difficulties. The third part intend to clarify the transfer from early theory of truth to the late one. And in the last part, I will give a briefly conclusion.

## 2. The History of Habermas Exploring of the Theory of Truth

The history of Habermas Exploring of the Theory of Truth can be divided in three period as follows.

First of all, the pre-communicative-action period: before 1970s, Habermas had not established his communicative action theory. In this period, his main efforts were making critics on various philosophy schools and seeking for an introduction of a ‘Critical Theory of Society’. The later, as we all known, was his theory of communicative action. In this period, Habermas had not yet paid his attention to the concept of truth. And in this period, his epistemology was known by the masterpiece *Knowledge and Human Interests*. (J. Habermas, 1968) Well, this work did not make a clear picture for the concept of truth, as Habermas lately pointed out in *Theory and Practice*: the interests did not influence the question that what is a validity claim. (J. Habermas, 1973, pp.

19-21)

Second, the communicative-action period: around the 1970s to 1980s, in this period, Habermas released the main writings of his famous theory — the theory of communicative action. In this period, Habermas made his significant transition to pragmatics and searched for a construction of a universal pragmatics. The ‘Universal Pragmatics’, as well as the theory of truth, were the necessary preparations for his theory of communicative action. His main writings in this period were collected in *Vorstudien und Ergänzungen Zur Theorie des Kommunikativen Handelns*, which has not entirely translated into English yet.

Last but not least, the post-communicative-action period: after the 1990s, in this period, Habermas made a lot of revises for his main propositions. The most important writing on our topic in this period is *Truth and Justification*, which abandoned the former perspective of ‘consensus theory of truth’, turning to a view of weak realism. Under this point of view, Habermas proposed a theory of ‘Janus-faced’ truth, to explain two different aspects — the aspect of daily real life and the aspect of utterance discourse — of truth.

Now this article is going to articulate the second and the third period in sequence.

### 3. The ‘Consensus Theory of Truth’ and Its Difficulties

Since linguistic turn in 20th century, many philosophical questions have been considered under the linguistic framework, as Habermas pointed out that: “Nowadays, linguistic questions take the place of traditional questions of consciousness, the critic of linguistics a priori take the place of the critic of consciousness.” (J. Habermas, 1970, p. 220) The questions referred to truth were also included in linguistics. But for Habermas, the dominant view about questions of truth in linguistics were semantics. What has been ignored in Habermas point of view was pragmatics. Habermas disagrees with the dominant view in semantics that pragmatics questions are nothing but empirical questions, which suggest that there is no general feature in our using of language. Therefore, Habermas tried to establish a formal pragmatics, or so called ‘Universal Pragmatics’. In his point of view, questions of truth are not subject to semantics but pragmatics: “Truth is not a feature of a claim. By the contrast, I raise a validity claim of ‘true’ or ‘false’ by a representing action.” (J. Habermas, 1989, p. 105) On the questions of truth, we need to know the main standpoint of Habermas’s universal pragmatics, that is, the pragmatics refers to the patterns of communications and relations between us and the outside world. In these patterns, there are general features corresponding to our language proficiency. Hence, we can establish a universal pragmatics to explore the general pragmatics rules. (T. McCarthy, 1985, p. 276) Obviously, these pragmatics rules include the rules of truth.

The correspondence theory of truth is always the most popular opinion, which believe that truth is the correspondence between concept and outside reality. It is Habermas’s start point to refute such an idea in his *Wahrheitstheorien* (1972). In Habermas’s insight, the correspondence theory of truth faces insurmountable difficulties. First of all, for all of our words, propositions and concepts belong to a linguistic world, how can they correspondent with things belonging to an outside world? On this account, Habermas accept Strawson’s distinction between facts and things. Things are those existing out of linguistic world, namely, reality. While facts are existing within the linguistic world. Things are objects of experience, while facts are objects of statement. In Habermas’s view, we cannot extract things from language: “The relations between statements and realities are determined by statements.” In other words, truth can only be researched in linguistic field.

In this stand point, Habermas points out that, truth is a kind of validity claim connected to our assertive statements. An assertion is a confirmatory speech action, by which we request our validity claim of our statements to be true. (J. Habermas, 1989, pp. 132-133) This is the first proposition in *Wahrheitstheorien*, which define truth as the validity claim. The next proposition is that, only when our validity claims in naïve daily actions incur suspicion, a truth claim can be put forth. In this proposition, Habermas suggests that we have already presupposed validity claims unspokenly in daily life. Only when these unspokenly validity claims incur suspicion, we need to discuss on the true value of propositions, then truth shall be put forth via discursive argumentation. From this point of view, Habermas makes his refutation to the redundancy theory of truth. The latter insists that truth is a redundant concept, because the proposition “p is true” means nothing but p itself. Obviously, from the standpoint of semantics, we can hard to say what the word ‘true’ can tell us. But if we consider the question under the view of pragmatics, we shall see that truth requires something referred to our action. For example, we must believe in the content of a proposition, then we follow it.

The third proposition is a truth claim can only be fulfilled in discourse. While empirical materials support a claim, such a claim is not warranted. (J. Habermas, 1989, pp. 135-136) There is an important question here, that is, the private property of experiences. Empirical materials can only be experienced by oneself personally. Conversely, a truth is agreed generally in public. This question can be divided into two parts — generality and publicity. On the first part, it is a commonplace that experiences cannot support a general proposition, for empirical method of induction cannot reach the cases that we haven’t experienced. On the second part, we shall

see that an experience can only be experienced personally, while language can only be grasped in public, which has been shown in Wittgenstein's famous argument against private language. Following Wittgenstein, Habermas points out that, even a single statement includes universal expression, thus words and sentences have more generality than any concrete reality. (J. Habermas, 1989, pp. 155-156) From this point of view, Habermas distinguishes certainties in experience and truth validities in language expression: "a validity claim is something that can be examined, while a certainty is something subjective. I put forward a validity claim, and I have a certainty." (J. Habermas, 1989, p. 156)

All in all, Habermas's three propositions in *Wahrheitstheorien* are trying to exhibit that a truth is a validity claim which is discussed in discourses. In an asserting statement, we propose a validity claim; in discourses, we reach a consensus and fulfill it. But now we are still facing a big question, that is, a certain discourse remains respective but not general. In a certain discourse, we are constrained by the conditions from reality or history. Thus, we can only reach relative truth but not general truth. In other words, the general truth can not be reached in a certain contextual discourse. To handle this question, Habermas proposes the formal feature of discourse. This formal feature does not mean formal logic but means a form of universal pragmatics. In detail, this formal feature contains two dimensions, first is the coherence of propositions, and second is keeping discourses from outside forces. In a discourse, participants only accept the force from language itself. With this consideration, Habermas proposes the concept of 'idea speaking context', which is a context of discourses that gets rid of outside forces like power, violence and so on, allowing participators express their propositions and suspicions equally. From Habermas, in this idea speaking context, we can always reach a consensus. (J. Habermas, 1989, p. 160)

However, such theory of truth in Habermas's *Wahrheitstheorien* still facing some troubles, so that he has to revise it later. The first question is that experiences cannot be ignored in a truth, and sometimes plays a decisive role. For example, we can't reach a truth about the number of white bears on earth by an idealized discourse. In such a case, the only way to examine a truth is to investigate on the spot. Thus, as a formal condition, the idea speaking context is not sufficient condition to reach a truth. The next question is that there is an inner contradiction in the 'idea speaking context'. Because we are living in a real world, or in other words, we are living in some concrete contexts, we cannot really reach a completely idea speaking context. Considering about this, Habermas points out that the idea speaking context can only serve as an assumption, or so called 'transcendental presupposition'. It is a constitutive condition for rational speech, but we cannot examine it in a transcendental way. (J. Habermas, 1989, pp. 180-182) In other words, it is a conducting rule for our speech which aims at truth that keep our speaking context as idealize as possible. At last, another question is, does the consensus theory of truth explains truth sufficiently? There is still a big gap between a truth and a consensus. In some cases, I am aware of a truth, without joining a discourse. Of course, Habermas may respond that, truth is a linguistic concept, and a linguistic concept already contains a consensus. It is still an indispensable requirement for reach a truth. Whatever, all these questions render Habermas to revise his theory of truth.

#### 4. The 'Janus-Faced' Truth

If we find that Habermas underlines the importance of the communicating function of language in *Wahrheitstheorien*, we shall see that he turns to the importance of reality in his later writings. In his book *Truth and Justification*, Habermas makes critics on both correspondence theory of truth and coherence theory of truth. The representative of later is Rorty's extreme pragmatism, which suggests that the concept of truth is redundant, and a truth means a justification is accepted. Habermas makes critics on this point of view. Habermas now insists that, both the semantics pole and the pragmatics pole of our knowledge are important. He says: "we associate truth with a claim that transcends all potentially available evidence. This relict thorn prevents us from falling into a linguistic idealism that reduces 'truth' to 'warranted assertibility'." (J. Habermas, 2003, p. 250) In other words, we are always facing an independent reality.

Under the scope of consensus theory of truth in early period, Habermas has proposed the concept of 'ideal warranted assertibility' to define the truth. Such concept of truth is now abandoned. To make remedy for early theory of truth, Habermas explores a kind of weakly transcendental or 'quasi transcendental' objective world of reality. First, Habermas go back to Kant's standpoint, insisting that a presumed objective world, which cannot be received as a cosmos centered on the god but the origin of our language world, cannot be canceled. Furthermore, Habermas points out that every language communication must presume an independent objective world which is same for everyone. This objective world should be given to everyone in the same way. A difference between Habermas and Kant is the concept of 'transcendental' of Kant was pretty strong, while for Habermas, the concept of 'transcendental' can be changed by extended experiences, so that it be called as 'weakly transcendental'. On the one hand, such a presume of objective world is the normative form for empirical discovery. In this sense it's transcendental for our cognition. On the other hand, it can be changed by further empirical discovery, which means our cognition cannot be defined by purely language form. (J. Habermas, 2003,

pp. 26-27) Language can represent the objective world, but such representation is not a simple model of correspondence, but a dynamic procedure combined by experiences, action and discourse. Habermas's weak naturalism insists that: on the one hand, the history of outside reality and our social spirit culture are continuous; on the other hand, Habermas refuse any kind of reductionism, which reduces the spirit world to purely nature process, for example, reduces social norms to observable natural phenomenon. Obviously, the strong naturalism of reductionism is lack of the scope of self-understanding both on individual and integrated community.

Back to the questions of truth, Habermas used to propose 3 kinds of validity claim in *Wahrheitstheorien*: true (validity about outside reality), right (validity about social norms), truthfulness (validity about our inner world). Now he realizes the particularity of the concept of 'true' and 'truth'. He points out the truth cannot be reached by purely discourse like social norms. Truth cannot be defined as 'believe to be true' either, because our belief will change by science discovery, but the concept of truth requires an unconditional validity. As a result, in his writings after the 1990s, Habermas does not try to define the concept of truth anymore. He now sees truth as an unconditional realism presume in our daily life practices, as he says: "we don't walk onto any bridge whose stability we doubt." (J. Habermas, 2003, p. 39) Truth will be questioned and discussed only in discourses.

However, Habermas do not give up the level of discourse of truth, nor 'ideal warranted assertibility'. For Habermas, the concept of discourse is not wrong but insufficient. Insisting both the level of reality and the level of discourse, Habermas proposes his theory of 'Janus-faced truth'. On the first level, agents in daily life are realists, subjecting their actions to naïve beliefs in daily life, which are presumed to be true and based on a presumed transcendental real world. On the second level, only when our practices in daily life encounter failure, and thus our realism beliefs in daily life confront with query, discursive truth will be needed as a remedy for daily life. (J. Habermas, 2000, pp. 44-48) On the second level, Habermas still insists on an independent concept of truth predicate, that is, 'ideal warranted assertibility'. According to Habermas, in a discourse, participants must give up their realism beliefs and search for consensus. Consensus are still sufficient grounds for truth predicate in discourse. (J. Habermas, 2000, p. 47) However, we shall distinguish 'truth' and 'truth predicate' here. As a truth predicate, 'ideal warranted assertibility' cannot provide criteria of judgements which tell us whether a statement is right or wrong. The function of truth predicate is to show that a statement which is procedural idea and supported by credible evidence is true. And that is the function of 'ideal warranted assertibility'.

As we can see, in Habermas's theory of 'Janus-faced truth', there're different concepts of truth between the level of daily life and the level of discourse. The former interact with outside reality and the latter just considers the form conditions of procedural rationality of discourse. And the most important point is that these two levels must allow transforms to each other, to avoid both of theory of correspondence and theory of coherence. On this question, Habermas points out that the first level transfers to the second level spontaneously and brings facts into the later, when our daily practice encounters obstacles. By contrast, our validity claims given in discourse still need inspection in daily practices. (J. Habermas, 2003, p. 253) Through this two-sided truth theory, Habermas combines the real world, the life world, and the linguistic world. Such a mode of truth exploration is also in line with the development model of modern scientific theories.

## 5. Conclusion

Above all, since *Wahrheitstheorien*, Habermas has developed his theory of truth under the framework of pragmatics. In this scope, truth is no longer taken as monologue or eternal truth. Instead, truth must be understood in social application of utterance and cultural history. Facing with different standpoints of theory of truth, between theory of corresponding and theory of coherence, reductive naturalism and conceptual realism, as well as extreme realism and extreme pragmatism, Habermas has paid effort to seek a medial route and build a bridge for each other. Meanwhile, Habermas's pioneer exploration of speech acts and linguistic communication has brought discourse into the field of truth justification and made a concept of intersubjective truth possible. His medial route may not be the best but has less doubts than previous.

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