

Ex-Communication

by Geoffrey Bennington

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Last night I had a dream about Jürgen Habermas. In the dream I was sitting reading Kafka and waiting for a phone-call when he came in with a friendly smile, hand outstretched for a greeting. Somewhere in the background, Peter Dews and William Outhwaite were smiling too. The handshake was firm and warm, but modest and not overbearing, polite but not over-polite, reserved but perhaps promising something more open, an invitation to dialogue. The handshake was saying something: we can talk, let's talk, it's good to talk. 'Habermas!' he said exclaimatively, following a formal code of German *politesse*. 'Bennington!' I shouted back, wondering how polite it really was to ape the other's manners like this, and what would have happened if I'd shouted 'Habermas!!' back at him even more exclaimatively, or said 'That's not how we do it in England.' Peter and William smiled more broadly, encouragingly. It's good to talk. I was keen to talk. I like talking. It is good to talk. I love it. But maybe I like talking too much? Like the sound of my own voice? Don't listen enough to the other? It's good to talk, but it's especially good to *listen*. Guilt hung around the room, already tainting the friendly atmosphere Jürgen and Peter and William were creating, or working to create, or trying to create. Or were they just pretending to create it? Guilt and suspicion. What did they want from me? What were they after? Why bother talking to me? They must know I know next to nothing about his work. Who had set this up? Their warmth and openness suddenly seemed unwarranted to me, a bit phoney, a show, maybe a front. What more or less ritual humiliation was being prepared here? What had been planned between them?

Habermas spoke first. His voice sounded clear enough, there was no doubt that he had spoken, but somehow in the dream I didn't quite catch what he said, nor even in what language he had said it. I hadn't needed to know what language he was speaking when he had said 'Habermas,' of course. I was nervous they might assume I could manage in German. Peter and William were nodding in the background. 'Yes,' I said uncertainly but encouragingly, trying to suspend the sense of my reply between affirmation and interrogation. Habermas was beaming now, more friendly than ever.

'What's so funny?' I asked, too quickly, hearing my voice sounding strained and brittle. 'Funny?' he said, clearly enough in English now, his smile fading a little, 'Why do you think it's funny?' 'I don't,' I said, 'I thought you did.' 'You thought I did what?' he asked. 'I thought you thought something was funny,' I said unhappily. 'What made you think that?' he asked. 'I don't know,' I said, 'just the way you were smiling. I'm sorry. I didn't mean' 'That's no problem,' said Habermas quickly, 'forget it. I was just trying' 'No, no,' I said, 'I really am sorry. I really didn't want to cause trouble.' 'OK, OK,' he said, 'let's just pretend it didn't happen.' 'What?' I said. 'Let's just pretend it didn't happen,' he said. 'Pretend that what didn't happen?' I said. 'What just happened,' he said. 'What did happen?' I said, 'I don't really know what happened.' 'There was a misunderstanding,' he said. 'Oh,' I said. There was an uncomfortable pause. I thought I could hear William whistling softly in the background. The faint, cosh-like thudding I could hear was the sound of my own heart beating. I was wishing I was somewhere else.

'Maybe we could ... talk sometime,' I said cautiously. 'Sure,' he said. 'Sure.' There was a slight pause. 'Right now if you like. We can talk now. Why not?' My mouth was dry with doubt and anxiety. 'Now?' I said, 'Right now?' 'OK,' I croaked, 'why not? That's what we're for, after all, isn't it?' 'What is?' he said. 'Talking,' I said, 'That's what we're for — talking. Let's talk.' 'Great,' he said. 'Seems a really *ideal* situation,' I said meaningfully, trying not to smirk. I didn't want to start impolitely by blurting out obvious things like, 'Why do you base your discussion of Derrida almost exclusively on secondary sources? Or, more importantly, how come you manage to put up a reading of Bataille without even mentioning the fact that he has an explicit theory of communication rather different from yours?' Be polite. Maybe we could get into that later.

There was a pause. 'You shoot first,' I said. 'Shoot?' he said. 'Yes, you shoot first,' I said. 'You really mean that?' he asked, looking at me searchingly. 'Well, only metaphorically speaking, of course,' I laughed a bit too loudly, suddenly aware of what looked like a bulge under the armpit of Peter's jacket. 'But I thought you lot didn't believe in the distinction between literal and metaphorical meaning,' he said. 'We don't,' I said, 'Or only sort of, unlike you: you think it's dead simple to distinguish between a literal and a merely figurative sense of rationality, for example, don't you?' 'So what do you mean, 'shoot first'?' he said, ignoring my reference to his *magnum opus*.¹ I was a little hurt. 'We don't really believe in meaning either,' I said, sulkily. 'I know,' he said. 'I expect you're going to say something about performative contradiction,' I said. 'Uh-huh,' he said. I found it hard to tell whether the intonation had risen to mean 'yes,' or fallen, to mean 'no.' 'I've heard it before,' I said. 'Well?' he asked. 'Oh, I'm all for it. The more performative contradiction the merrier,' I said, trying to sound cheerful. 'You

can't mean that,' he said. 'I don't,' I said, 'Only joking ... I think.' 'Oh,' he said. 'Ha ha ha,' I said. 'Ha ha ha,' he said. 'Not very funny, is it?' I said. 'No, not really,' he said. 'Sorry,' I said. 'That's OK,' he said. 'But what do you *really* think about it?' 'I really think,' I heard myself say, 'I really and sincerely — no, I do, I really do, this is the truth, I swear it— I really and sincerely think that there's an originary and irreducible quasi-transcendental dehiscence constitutive of anything like meaning such that any speech-act at all is caught up in something that looks like performative contradiction when seen from a metaphysical vantage-point such as yours.'²

I'd gone and said it now.

'Let's examine the validity-claims in what you've just said, shall we?' he said briskly. Businesslike chap, I thought.

'Must we?' I asked ungraciously. 'It's not that we *must*,' he said, 'but you can't deny that there are various validity-claims implicit in what you've just said, and that part of the sense of your saying what you said is that those claims can be taken up and discussed.' 'Of course,' I said. 'But let's not.' 'Why not?' he said, 'You must be committed to examining the claims of what you've said — it's implied in your saying it.' 'Before we do that, then,' I pleaded. 'What?' he said, I thought a touch impatiently. 'The claims are only in what I said in the sense that meaning is in a text *to be read*, so any attempt to discuss them or establish their validity presupposes reading. Reading makes the issue of validity-claims possible. But because reading is always more than just decoding, it can never be finally established. So in principle we can never be sure what exactly the claims are, even assuming that what is said in what I say can exhaustively be thought of in terms of validity-claims.'

'But that's exactly why we have to be able to discuss it,' he said. 'We might not ever agree in fact, but you can't deny that the possibility of our reaching non-coercive agreement in principle is built in to your saying anything at all. Reaching agreement without being driven by anything other than the force of the better argument is still the regulative Idea of discussion, however far we may be from achieving it in fact.' 'But there's only communication to the extent that we do not in fact agree,' I said. 'The end of communication as you formulate it would be the end of communication itself. So if we want to communicate, we also have to want not quite to understand each other.' 'But you want me to understand and agree with *that*,' he said. 'Only sort of,' I said. 'What do you mean, only sort of?' he asked. 'Well,' I said, 'I don't think you *can* quite understand and agree with it, any more than I can.' 'But that's *just* irrational,' he said, 'That's my whole point.' 'It's not *just* irrational,' I said, 'though it's not *just* rational either. It's as rational as it's irrational, and its rationality is *the same thing* as its

irrationality.' 'What's that supposed to mean?' he said. 'That the more you approach the regulative Idea or Ideal of communication, the further you get from communication. In total transparency, nothing is visible at all. In total communication, nothing is communicable at all. Consensus is the end of the promise of consensus. If we were in an ideal speech situation, or if we had reached consensus purely by the force of the better argument, we could never be sure of that fact, and even if we *felt* sure of it, we could never communicate that feeling to the other, with a view to agreeing about it, without *ipso facto* proving that the situation was not in fact ideal after all. No one speaks in the ideal speech-situation. Nothing gets said. Silent as the grave. If we must talk of what our speech-acts 'commit' us to, then we'd better recognise that they commit us in a strange way to wanting to disagree. To dissensus, as Lyotard put it, perhaps rather clumsily, at the end of *The Postmodern Condition*. If the end of communication is the end of communication, then the closer you get to the end, the nearer you are to its end. The fact of communication means that communication is not perfect. Perfect communication would always be ex-communication. Reason cannot, rationally, prescribe its own demise in consensus, and so, to the extent that it does prescribe consensus, it is complicit with the coercion that forever prevents that consensus being rational. Your appeals to reason and consensus in fact function coercively by trying to deny the non-rational 'origin' of rationality or the non-consensual ground of consensus. And this is in fact already implied by your letting an Aristotelian notion of rhetoric occupy an important place, alongside dialectic and logic, in your analysis of argumentation. Another consequence of this is that the more perfect, the more performative a system of communication becomes, the more open it is, by the very fact of its increasing perfection, to contamination and breakdown, and the more of its resources have to be devoted to protecting itself from the necessary possibility of infiltration and infection.' ('You've been reading too much William Gibson,' he was muttering.) 'This doesn't mean simply that communication is at its best the *further* you are from realising its end, just that it happens each time singularly in the uneasy negotiation of that tense singularity, each time differently suspended between understanding and bewilderment, agreement and refusal, consensus and coercion — and that this each-time singularity cannot be teleologically organised by an Idea of rational consensus, however important that Idea might still be, singularly, here and there, in negotiating and resisting coercion and injustice. The dispersion of singularities-in-imperfect-communication quite logically and rationally precedes and ungrounds what you call, still teleologically, intersubjectivity,³ consensus, rationality and so on. And don't say that this is just philosophy, and that things are different

in everyday life: this is everyday life, and why it's there every day.⁴

I'd been talking too much. Again. I hadn't been listening. Carried away. Own voice. Suddenly the scene was different and lonely. The dream was fading into daylight. 'Hello?' I woke up saying. 'Hello ... Did you get that? ... Anybody there? ... Hello ... Do you read me? ... Do you read me? ... Over' But here I was awake, the dream fast receding down the plughole to the unconscious, a few drops remaining for last-minute secondary revision and concern for the conditions of presentability. Had I really heard him saying 'I absolutely agree' just then, before the end, just to be annoying? The phone was ringing, and, on the floor beside the bed, the volume of Kafka open at a story called 'The Neighbour.' William on the phone, reminding me of arrangements for this afternoon. Was I really going to go on fabulating like this in serious academic company?

The foregoing is based on a talk given at a roundtable discussion with Peter Dews and William Outhwaite organised by the Social and Political Thought Graduate Programme at the University of Sussex, 4th March 1996.

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Endnotes

¹ 'Behavioural reactions of an externally or internally stimulated organism, and environmentally induced changes of state in a self-regulated system can indeed be understood as *quasi-actions*, that is, as if they were expressions of a subject's capacity for action. But this is to speak of rationality only in a figurative sense, for the susceptibility to criticism and grounding that we require of rational expressions means that the subject to whom they are attributed should, under suitable conditions, *himself* be able to provide reasons or grounds.' J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* Vol. 1, trans. T. McCarthy (Boston Beacon Press, 1984), p. 12. Note

the *prescription* demanding that the subject defend himself.

² [Editor's note] For the use of the term 'dehiscence' in the work of J. Derrida, see *Dissemination*, translated by B. Johnson (London: The Athlone Press, 1981), p. 215.

³ Habermas's intersubjectivity is still a subjectivist concept. E.g., 'An assertion can be called rational only if the speaker satisfies the conditions necessary to achieve the illocutionary goal of reaching an understanding about something in the world with at least one other participant in communication.' *Ibid.* p. 11.

⁴ For the distinction between philosophy and everyday life, cf. the immensely problematic assertion from *Theory*, Vol. 1, p. 19, 'In philosophical ethics, it is by no means agreed that the validity claims connected with norms of action, upon which command or "ought" sentences are based, can, analogously to truth claims, be redeemed discursively. In everyday life, however, no one would enter into moral argumentation if he did not start from the strong presupposition that a grounded consensus could in principle be achieved among those involved.'