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*Mimesis in Communicative Action: Habermas and the Affective Bond of Understanding*

Can any particular political body in an age of pluralism have confidence that its moral values are born of more than historical inertia but less than pure will to power? What secular sensibility can govern the legitimate exercise of power in the modern age? Under the broad rubric of modernity, postmodernity, and the democratic imaginary in a post-socialist age, this dissertation takes up these questions in providing an assessment and reconstruction of a particular theory of communication found in the writings of Jürgen Habermas.

The standard reading of Habermas supposes him an ardent rationalist and a defender of a neo-Kantian concept of autonomy. Under this reading, a respect for persons by democratic procedure secures legitimacy for the use of power. Contrary to this standard interpretation, I argue that the theory of communicative action does not merely entail democratic procedure, but also offers a theory of the production of meaning and solidarity, and that the latter destabilizes the status of the former.

I show how Habermas backfills his procedural theory with a *substantive* accommodation among participants by reintroducing into the concept of rationality its ancient Greek complicity with mimetic power. Habermas' innovative rendering of a specifically *communicative* rationality poses mimesis as productive of an articulate, affective binding effect in communication. Properly understood, Habermas' theory must be viewed not as rationalist, but as an attempt to close the gap within the classical debate between philosophy and poetry, articulating a new field of post-metaphysical thinking and action. Simply put, communicative action is a sublation of mimesis and reason; our affectual bonds take articulate form in and as shared experience.

The operation of communicative mimesis, therefore, undercuts Habermas' claims for discourse ethics, because the testing procedures of validation prove external, not internal, to the experience of understanding. Legitimacy in the modern age, therefore, does not find justification by working out Habermas' theory of communicative action, though his theory of communication does account for the bonding effect borne of agreement.

My text introduces (chapter 1) generally the themes of reason and mimesis in political philosophy and critical theory. I then develop my reconstruction of communicative rationality over three main chapters concerning Habermas' appropriation of Platonic mimesis (chapter 2), George Herbert Mead's account of mimetic identity-formation (chapter 3), and Walter Benjamin's account of the mimetic experience of language (chapter 4) .

My project contributes to contemporary debates in normative political philosophy at the intersection of democratic theory, moral theory and aesthetic theory.