Against a Science of Human Communication: The Role of Hermeneutics in Contributing Arguments from the Frankfurt School.

In examining "the thesis of complementarity for American communication studies," this paper refers to the idea that the dominating social science behaviorism of communication inquiry can be fruitfully complemented or supplemented with the science of interpretation (hermeneutics) as interpretation is regarded by the Frankfurt School of thought. The argument consists of three points: that the thesis of complementarity is recognized in the combination of the philosophy of science with a stated preeminence for the epistemological subject in hermeneutics; that hermeneutic understanding must be conceived of positivistically in order to subsist in this complementary relationship; and that the maintenance of the specific achievement of hermeneutics means the emancipation of inquiry from the cognitive monopoly of science. These three points are derived from the standpoint of Critical Theory as reflected in the Frankfurt point of view. Critical Theory's task has been to show the appearance of the increasing authority of science and thus amounts to an argument against a science of human communication. (Author/RB)
Against a Science of Human Communication:
The Role of Hermeneutics in Contributing
Arguments from the Frankfurt School

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I have been asked to discuss here how that intellectual tradition signified by the term "Frankfurt School" has regarded hermeneutics. And, since the subtitle of this conference session on hermeneutics is "An Understanding of the Process of Interpreting Human Communicative Behavior," I feel compelled to relate my remarks to the study of human communication. I feel even more compelled to do so as I reflect upon the conference program in general, noting that by comparison this session sticks out like a sore thumb. I am brought to wonder how a session on hermeneutics is seen to relate to those behavioral studies being reported elsewhere. Now I could, of course, assume that there is no relationship intended, and thus no mutual contribution assumed. But I should like here to assume some sort of relationship -- not for this conference, necessarily, but for the hermeneutic study of communication and how we are to think of that kind of study fitting in with communication studies in general -- or not. This leads me into, rather appropriately, the Frankfurt School and its regard of hermeneutics in relation to inquiry conducted under a philosophy of science.

I propose as the guiding framework for this paper the examination of what I shall call the thesis of complementarity for American communication studies. What this thesis refers to is the idea that the dominating social science behaviorism of U.S. communication inquiry can fruitfully be complemented
or supplemented with "the science of interpretation," hermeneutics. An appropriate analogy here would be that of color: within the light spectrum, we can speak about complementary colors, having thus assumed the thesis of complementarity; similarly, within the spectrum of inquiry, we can speak about complementary paradigms. To subject this thesis to critique, we must ask the following question: On what ground is the thesis of complementarity possible? To keep our analogy going, how is our spectrum of inquiry to be conceived? I shall argue my interpretation of the Frankfurt position regarding that possibility -- primarily drawn from the work of Jürgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel, who are the most recent and most explicit Critical Theorists dealing with hermeneutics.

My interpretation, and therefore my argument, consists in these three points: (1) That the thesis of complementarity obtains in the combination of (a) the philosophy of science with its dead epistemological subject with (b) a stated preeminence for the epistemological subject in hermeneutics; (2) That hermeneutic understanding, in order to subsist in this complementary relation, must be conceived of positivistically, thereby renouncing its claim to the epistemological subject at the insistence by the philosophy of science that no complement exists -- that philosophy of science constitutes, as it were, the spectrum of inquiry; furthermore, in light of the historical status of philosophy of science, hermeneutics
must abandon the thesis of complementarity; (5) That the maintenance of the specific achievement of hermeneutics -- elucidating the practical cognitive interest of inquility -- as a competing, rather than complementary, interest to the interest of philosophy of science in technical control provides for the possibility of a third interest, which, in terms of the history of inquiry, today means the emancipation of inquiry from the cognitive monopoly of science. This is not to say that the thesis of complementarity should never have been proposed. On the contrary, it is that very thesis which proves both the dominance of philosophy of science (inscalfar as the thesis has not sprung from philosophy of science) and the significance of hermeneutics. In addition, the thesis of complementarity has provided the conditions for inquiry to grasp itself as interested in emancipation. The three points outlined above I consider to be a summary of the argument that would have to occur if we are to embark on a discussion of hermeneutics and the Frankfurt School, and are arrived at from the standpoint of Critical Theory.

Critical Theory is paramountly marked by its distaste for closed philosophical systems -- whether Idealist or positivistic -- and retains a skeptical stance in its primary business: the critique of "other thinkers and philosophical traditions." If there is one role for hermeneutics in Critical Theory, it is a role shared by
other intellectual traditions -- that of a host. As Habermas has written, "Philosophical thinking at the stage of critique [i.e., Critical Theory] -- whether or not the thinkers were aware of being critical -- has fed parasitically on its heritage."\(^5\) Far from being without a content of its own, Critical Theory has participated in an antagonistic symbiosis with those intellectual traditions to which it has turned, and has most recently yielded a "material critique of science."\(^6\) Communication studies, insofar as they claim to be scientific, become part of this critique of science. The indictment leveled by Critical Theorists at the philosophy of science -- which legitimates scientific communication studies -- is that it is not oriented toward people as human co-subjects, but toward the sciences in the interest of technical control. The Frankfurt point of view is relevant to communication inquiry in that the critique amounts to an argument against a science of human communication: As science, human communication inquiry would be limited to the interest of technical control in the behavioral system of instrumental action; consequently ruled out would be a practical cognitive interest at the level of communicative action, where hermeneutics plays its role. The remaining sections of the paper, paralleling the three points above, are intended to expand that argument.
The history of Critical Theory is in part its history of anti-positivism. It is in light of that history that present-day Critical Theorists wage their critique of science. We must understand at the outset that by "positivism" the Frankfurt School throughout its history has included "those philosophic currents which were nominalist, phenomenalist, empirical, and wedded to the so-called scientific method." There is some justification for conceiving positivism so broadly: Nominalism opposes universal to particular -- or "the abstract" to "the real" -- opts for "the real," and appears in particular branches of Logical Positivism; phenomenalism argues the reality of things-in-themselves -- whether mental or physical -- even though we may not fully be able to know that reality; the empirical can be known only a posteriori experience, i.e., after actual facts have been encountered; and scientific method, however conceived, must at some point refer to the empirical. In other words, what justifies regarding these philosophical currents as positivistic is their presumption that there are "real" epistemological handles somewhere about which we can be positive; the problem of knowledge conditions is really no problem. Max Horkheimer, with the Frankfurt School since its infancy and regarded as the school's "most important figure," wrote of these forms of positivism:
Neither the inexpressible nor the unexpressed may play a role in thinking; they may not even be inferred. The way in which the various stages of empiricism conceive the objects of knowledge may indeed be evidence of an increasing shallowness of . . . thought, a growing aversion to seeing the human bottom of nonhuman things.  

What characterizes positivism, as Horkheimer was to constantly hold, is the preempting of the epistemological subject from inquiry. What Critical Theory, in contradistinction, asserts is the centrality of an epistemological subject who "can change reality." It is with that conviction that current Critical Theorists continue the critique of science.

Habermas is concerned to show how the theory of knowledge, epistemology, has been replaced by the philosophy of science. We are brought to this condition largely at the hands of philosophy itself. With positivism entering the history of inquiry, epistemology ends, due in part to the positivistic idea that inquiry into the conditions of possible knowledge is meaningless because of the very fact of modern science. To Habermas, positivism is philosophical "only insofar as is necessary for the immunization of the sciences against philosophy." Positivism's "philosophy" is philosophy of science. Philosophy of science, in order to take on the province of epistemology, had to take up an active programme advancing the cause of scientism. By "scientism" Habermas means "science's belief in itself," and attendant, therefore, with promoting scientism is the
idea of a cognitive monopoly for science.\textsuperscript{12}

To succeed in this promotion, philosophy of science attempted a justification for that cognitive monopoly. Aided by the compelling examples of the natural sciences -- where successful attempts at technical control are difficult to ignore -- positivism has succeeded. Habermas notes, as proof of that success, that scientism could be regarded as a purely academic matter a few decades ago, but no longer; in today's social world, science has become society's ideology,\textsuperscript{13} pervasive to a point where the "dynamics of the total social evolution have largely come to depend upon progress in science and technology."\textsuperscript{14} In terms of science's "philosophical" activity, those schools within analytical philosophy have taken up the "basic intentions of the Vienna Circle, now as before": the legitimization of the sciences.\textsuperscript{15} An important consequence of the success of positivism for the conduct of inquiry is that it has become intellectually fashionable to regard questions of the meaning of knowledge as irrational: "In this way the naive idea that knowledge describes reality becomes prevalent," and is "accompanied by the copy theory of truth."\textsuperscript{16} The significance of this knowledge-claim for the social sciences, including American communication inquiry, is that theory is no longer concerned with "human beings who live together and discuss matters with each other"; instead, theory is now concerned with the "behavior of human beings who manipu-
Just as there is no longer an epistemological subject in philosophy of science, so is there no communication partner in communication inquiry styled as science. It is because of this philosophy of science background that a hermeneutic need is conceived.

(1) (b): Hermeneutics and the Epistemological Subject

Though Critical Theorists are commonly labeled "Neo-Marxists" or "Left-Hegelians," they are not as often recognized as having been influenced by the Lebensphilosophen. Horkheimer, for example, had been influenced by Schopenhauer and Kant before taking an interest in Hegel and Marx; and virtually all members of the Frankfurt School were philosophically educated outside the Marxist tradition. Critical Theory, then, is as eclectic as its skepticism toward closed philosophical systems. Out of its Lebensphilosophie influence, Critical Theory has found its hermeneutic expression in Habermas and Apel.

It is important to note here that Critical Theory is concerned with hermeneutics insofar as hermeneutics establishes a competing interest to the technical cognitive interest of science. Given that concern, we should not be surprised that most of Critical Theory's hermeneutic content is derived through the critique of Wilhelm Dilthey, whose work was designed to distinguish and justify the Geisteswissenschaften from the Naturwissenschaften. We can learn of the Frankfurt
School's understanding of understanding via the criticisms leveled at Dilthey.

Habermas and Apel agree with Dilthey to this extent: that the Naturwissenschaften presuppose a community of co-subjects in inquiry but cannot account for that presupposition within the logic of explanation; that the Naturwissenschaften are only one aspect of the social life-world; that the social life-world is the subject matter of the Geisteswissenschaften; and that experience is organized through the mediation of symbolic structures. But Habermas charges that Dilthey "would like to free hermeneutic understanding from the interest structure in which it is embedded on the transcendental level and shift it to the contemplative dimension according to the ideal of pure description."

This charge follows from Habermas' formulation that any kind of inquiry is embedded in an interest structure; in the case of hermeneutics, meaning is understood by the interpreter "with a view to a possible consensus of interacting individuals," thereby constituting a pre-understanding interest "within the frame of a traditional or culturally patterned self-understanding." This Habermas calls practical cognitive interest as distinct from the technical cognitive interest of science. So, for Habermas, hermeneutics is a priori defined by its practical cognitive interest, just like the framework for the empirical-analytic sciences is defined by its technical cognitive interest. Dilthey
tries to preserve a scientific character for hermeneutics by adopting a goal of the strict sciences: universal validity. Habermas therefore considers Dilthey to have operated in this respect under a technical cognitive interest, revealing himself as a covert positivist.

This interest in technical control goes along with Dilthey's inability to rid himself of a notion of symmetry in his model of experience, expression, and understanding. Dilthey can conceive of a symmetrical relation because he is plagued by his empathy model of understanding and a contemplative concept of truth. Habermas contrasts his own view:

[U]nderstanding itself is bound to a situation in which at least two subjects communicate in a language that allows them to share, that is to make communicable through intersubjectively valid symbols, what is absolutely unsharable and individual... Dilthey cannot avoid reducing the experiential realm of communication to the pattern of uninvolved observation. [Instead], experience is mediated by the interaction of both participants; understanding is communicative experience [emphasis mine].

The situation to which the participants are bound is that determined by practical cognitive interest. The language of that situation is ordinary language.

Ordinary language, as distinct from a "pure" language of philosophy of science, is able to allude to what has not been or cannot be said directly; its ongoing function is interpreting itself. Because it is a complete language
"only when enmeshed with interactions and corporeal forms of expression," ordinary language from the standpoint of formal language "is its own metalanguage." Because it proceeds in large part by indirection, and since it is always interpreting itself, ordinary language is the language of dialogue. And since it is a "polluted" language from the position of "pure" language (in that ordinary language is never only language in the strict, restricted sense), communication partners are therefore required to turn toward each other rather than duologically turn toward the expressions of ordinary language which constitute but fragments of ordinary language. Hermeneutics, the "art of rendering indirect communications understandable," can only be explained by the dialogical "model of participation in communication learned in interaction." Dilthey's empathy model, however, bypasses the need for participation. This is confirmed by his insistence that the results of hermeneutic inquiry be universally valid, an insistence which would orient communication partners toward linguistic expressions in a way not unlike that conceived in the universal language programme of the Vienna Circle Logical Positivists. That amounts to an attempt to elevate the indirect actions and experiential expressions of ordinary language to the level of linguistic expression; empathy is the means by which that movement is possible for Dilthey. But people are "forced to indirectly communicate their immediacy," argues
Habermas; thus "hermeneutic understanding has an oblique relation to symbolic expression precisely because the inner cannot directly emerge [through empathy] outward in expression." Therefore hermeneutic understanding must, in Habermas' view, place the interpreter in the role of a partner in dialogue.

We can see, from this discussion, that Habermas places the epistemological subject -- i.e., the interpreter -- at the center of hermeneutics in his dialogic model. Apel, too, argues in a similar fashion in this example of behavioral science: Try, he says, reducing your partner's utterances to mere verbal behavior; if you succeed in objectifying them in this way you will lose your partner as a communication partner and you will need other partners (not yet objectified ones!) to whom to tell the results of your behavioral science.

The example illustrates for Apel the need for hermeneutic understanding. It illustrates for us the difference in outlook of two competing cognitive interests: the interest in technical control of philosophy of science amounts to the death of the epistemological subject in inquiry; the interest in practical cooperation and mutual understanding in hermeneutics amounts to the inevitability of the epistemological subject. On what ground can hermeneutic inquiry, then, be regarded as complementary to a behavioral science of communication?
Critical Theory, as Habermas has said, is parasitic. There is a value in that: In constantly "looking backward" to the development of any intellectual tradition, the Critical Theorist places that tradition in the context of social history -- among other things, in the hope of having something to say about its social currency among scholars. We have already noted that Habermas and Apel view positivism as enjoying a high rate of exchange. The challenge Dilthey presented to positivism in the nineteenth century, writes Habermas, "only interrupted the victorious march of positivism and did not stop it." Writing of the development of philosophic thought, he observes that "the end has come...for the style of philosophic thinking tied to individual scholarship and personal representation." No longer are we able to find a contemporary philosopher whose name is enough to signify a philosophical posture of such recognized importance that he be reckoned with in philosophizing; instead, philosophy is reduced to "isms," and that reduction is evident in positivism's philosophy of science becoming a synonym for philosophy. This leads Habermas to pose the question, "Why More Philosophy?"

We have already seen how even Dilthey treated hermeneutics positivistically. Apel has written of the reduction by positivists of understanding to the status of a cup of coffee, which he calls the "cup of coffee theory of understanding."
He credits Otto Neurath, a member of the Vienna Circle, with providing to positivists the first statement of that theory. Neurath wrote that "Empathy, understanding and the like may help the researcher, but it enters into the system of statements of science as little as does a good cup of coffee." This view of understanding is, I have no doubt, not uncommon. We can regard it as a function of positivism's interest in technical control. In light of Habermas' analysis of the contemporary intellectual currency of positivism, it becomes reasonable to entertain the talk of the thesis of complementarity as meaning "coffee cup hermeneutics." It is difficult to conceive -- if Habermas is right -- of scientism meeting hermeneutics in a way that would ensure the integrity of a practical cognitive interest. As a political proposal -- political in the sense of agitating for the "cause" of hermeneutics among positivists -- the thesis of complementarity would mean a thesis of intellectual compromise on the grounds of positivism. If the thesis of complementarity is proposed in this political sense by scholars doing hermeneutic inquiry, and if those scholars are aware of the historical success of positivism, they are already positivists.

Theoretically, the thesis of complementarity can be convincingly argued -- up to a point. That point is that the argument does not arise and has not arisen out of the positivist tradition, but instead springs from the practical
cognitive interest of the Geisteswissenschaften. What this means is that the thesis of complementarity makes sense prior to any political action within the ranks of those who propose it. Apel has shown, in agreement with Habermas, that the basis for this thesis is the demonstration that the practice of science presupposes "hermeneutic knowledge by communication with human co-subjects." His demonstration is convincing only to those who believe, as he does, in the transcendental presuppositions of philosophy of science: "I not only believe that I myself need such presuppositions but also that other philosophers of science make use of them, whether they know, grant it, or not." But even for those who are believers, the thesis of complementarity is "hot air" unless philosophy of science shifts from its legitimating of the cognitive monopoly of science and conceives of science as one of many forms of possible knowledge; it is precisely at that point that epistemology is restored.

This act of restoration, however, can come neither from an interest in technical control nor from a practical interest in mutual understanding. Thus the thesis of complementarity is impossible if inquiry is limited to these two competing interests. The classic Naturwissenschaften-Geisteswissenschaften debate, if left to itself, will simply continue as long as the Geisteswissenschaften are not themselves positivistic. The phrase "as long as"
is crucial here, for the "dominant trend is to continue to understand social inquiry in a way that identifies it with the strict sciences."\textsuperscript{42} It would appear, then, that the thesis of complementarity is becoming more and more academic; that technical cognitive interest is a livelier interest than practical cognitive interest. Hermeneutic inquiry, then, enjoys the status of a coffee cup. "This can only be altered," writes Habermas, "by a change in the state of consciousness itself, by the practical effect of a theory which does not improve the manipulation of things and of reifications, but which instead advances the interest...in the autonomy of action and the liberation from dogmatism. This it achieves by...a persistent critique."\textsuperscript{43} Thus Habermas brings us to a third category: emancipatory cognitive interest.
Authority and Emancipation

So far we have seen Critical Theory, as reflected by Habermas and Apel, turn its attention upon the intellectual traditions of the Naturwissenschaften and the Geisteswissenschaften. Before moving to Habermas' category of emancipatory cognitive interest, it is necessary to reformulate the two categories of interest with which we have been working.

The technical cognitive interest of positivism takes its form in the medium of work. This formulation reflects the Marxist tradition in Critical Theory, and allows Critical Theorists to speak of the social function of scientific knowledge as being that of technical control. The working out of this control requires a system of social labor which "extends and rationalizes our power of technical control over the objects or -- which comes to the same thing -- objectified processes of nature and society." In this medium we find those intellectual enterprises concerned with efficiency and economy; these concerns, Habermas argues, "are the definition" of the rationality of science.

The practical cognitive interest of hermeneutic inquiry takes its form in the medium of language. This statement would seem to be redundant, particularly if we conceive of language broadly. But, if hermeneutic understanding is grounded in ordinary language, as Critical Theorists hold, then this reformulation emphasizes the specific function of ordinary language: interpreting itself.
Just as the character of positivism was determined by its interest in technical control, just as the character of hermeneutics was determined by its interest in mutual understanding, so Critical Theory has its defining interest as well: emancipatory cognitive interest. Critical Theory takes its form in the medium of authority.\textsuperscript{48} It is interested in "analyzing the supposed and actual 'necessity' of historical modes of authority."\textsuperscript{49} It is this interest which allows Critical Theorists to speak of the authority of positivism, which we have already discussed. We noted earlier that Critical Theorists are constantly "looking backward." This is an attempt, as Saroyer puts it, to "restore missing parts of the self-formation process to men and in this way force a process of self-reflection that will enable them to reinterpret the legitimacy of existing control systems."\textsuperscript{50} From the point of view of Critical Theory, positivism continues to be the controlling system of inquiry, and its philosophy of science is seen as the authority by which its control is legitimated. The analysis by Habermas and Apel revealed the role of hermeneutics in the history of inquiry to be one of signaling that authority by setting into relief its competing cognitive interest. The Geisteswissenschaften were interested in setting themselves apart from the Naturwissenschaften by claiming their own subject matter; Critical Theory reflected on the need for both competing interests and on the persistent historical
dissolution of the competition. Critical Theory's task thus has been to show the appearance of the increasing authority of science. In light of this historical development, Critical Theory, guided by its interest in emancipation, has taken up what has for American communication studies amounted to an argument against a science of human communication.
Notes


It is appropriate and helpful to learn and document the philosophical assumptions behind the conduct of most communication inquiry in the United States. It is a fruitful hunch that, if we can speak of variant philosophies at all within communication inquiry, the dominant approaches are variations within the philosophy of science. This I have begun documenting elsewhere, the first result of which is to be in the form of a Ph.D. dissertation, tentatively titled, "The Philosophy of Science in Communication Inquiry as Reflected in the Work of Paul Lazarsfeld: The Death of the Epistemological Subject" (Iowa City: University of Iowa, in progress).

methods in contemporary behavioral science is better characterized as complementary rather than supplementary to normative quantitative research," p. 159.

3. Cf. Trent Shroyer, "Toward a Critical Theory for Advanced Industrial Society," in *Recent Sociology* No. 2, ed. by Hans Peter Dreitzel (New York: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 210-34. Habermas is rightfully viewed there as the primary representative of the Frankfurt School who finds hermeneutics central to his theoretical work. But Shroyer fails to mention Apel, whom Habermas himself acknowledges as central to his own theoretical efforts: "Without my discussions with Karl-Otto Apel, which extend back to the time of my university studies, without his suggestions and disagreements, this theoretical framework would never have found its present form." Habermas is referring to his framework developed in his *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. by Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon, 1971), p. vii. I therefore feel justified in including Apel as part of the Frankfurt School.


15. *Ibid.*, p. 650. For a comprehensive analysis of this philosophy, see Apel, *Analytic Philosophy*. I have elsewhere summarized the development of the Vienna Circle in terms of its programme to existentially unify the sciences in "Can Science Understand Itself?"


19. Jay, p. 44.


21. Habermas' summation of Dilthey's work on understanding appears in Chapter 7 of *Knowledge and Human Interests*.


24. Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, pp. 177-186.


27. *Ibid.*, pp. 168-69. Habermas writes: "Many categories of allusions of this sort have become conventions, either in subsystems such as wit and poetry, or in stylized linguistic forms such as irony, understatement, and imitation, or in established figures of speech such as the rhetorical question, the euphemism, etc."
28. Ibid., p. 168.
29. "Duologue" is a term designating a situation of potential dialogue where the potential communication partners get together for the purposes of monologue. As far as I know, the term was originated by Abraham Kaplan, "The Life of Dialogue," in Communication: A Discussion at the Nobel Conference, ed. by John D. Roslansky (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1969), pp. 87-108. "The cocktail party is the institutionalization of duologue," p. 97.
30. Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests, p. 180
31. See Apel, Analytic Philosophy, and my "Can Science Understand Itself?"
32. Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests, p. 179.
33. Ibid., pp. 179-180.
35. Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests, p. 189.
37. Ibid., pp. 633-654.
39. Ibid., pp. 7-26.
40. Ibid., p. 40.
41. Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests.
42. Shroyer, p. 215.
43. Habermas, Theory and Practice, p. 256.
44. Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests, p. 313.
45. Habermas, Theory and Practice, p. 264.
46. Ibid., p. 269.
47. Habermas, "Knowledge and Interest," p. 296.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. Shroyer, p. 228.