Chapter 3
Rationality and Communicative Action

Habermas agrees with Weber that the ultimate consequence of religious and cultural rationalization is that modern culture fragments into different value spheres following their own inner logics of elaboration. He also agrees that this particular rationalization of culture and society is responsible for widespread feelings that modern life has become confusing and oppressive. In our day this contributes to a number of reactions, from religious fundamentalism to “postmodern” suspicions of rationality itself.

However, Habermas contends that the fragmentation of culture is not the destruction of reason but its differentiation into distinct “voices.” This differentiation is disorienting but it also opens up possibilities for knowledge that are closed off to more traditional views. Furthermore, the autonomous value spheres of contemporary understanding need not be irredeemably antagonistic toward the perspectives of each other. Although reason can no longer be convincingly unified on the level of a comprehensive worldview, the different aspects of rationality can be brought into communication with each other through the elaboration of a philosophical theory of argumentation, on the one hand, and through the interplay of these varied perspectives in a more open everyday life on the other. Habermas thereby seeks to defend reason against skeptics. Contrary to Weber, ineluctable struggle is not our fate.

In his portrayal of the different dimensions of rationality, Habermas brings forth the promise that the currently dominant kind of social rationalization is not the only possible kind. He argues that contemporary society is actually only “selectively” rationalized. Certain types of rational action are encouraged in contemporary
society and other types are stunted. It is this selective rationalization that leads to loss of meaning and loss of freedom, not rationalization itself. By posing the question of rationality in a new way Habermas boldly intends to defend the Enlightenment project against those who have concluded that the application of reason in human affairs is futile, dangerous, or both.

**What is Rational Action?**

It is quite intimidating to ask what “rationality” means. However, since we use the word meaningfully in conversation, we must have criteria to which we are implicitly appealing when we say that this or that is “rational” but something else is not. To explore what rationality means is to clarify and critically examine the criteria that govern our everyday usage of the term. This is essentially Habermas’s approach.

In much of the philosophy of the last century, the study of language has displaced the study of “consciousness.” Language appears to be the necessary manifestation of consciousness—“consciousness concrete” as Marx once put it—and is more amenable to rigorous study than the necessarily ambiguous realm of consciousness. Drawing on speech act theory, one branch of this “linguistic turn” of contemporary philosophy, Habermas tries to reconstruct the idea of what rational belief or action is from the ordinary intuitions guiding our use of the term. His project therefore requires “mak[ing] explicit . . . the pretheoretical grasp of rules on the part of competently speaking, acting, and knowing subjects.”

In the first instance, we typically say an action is rational if it selects effective means to accomplish some goal. The image that comes to mind is that of a person attempting to successfully intervene in the world, to alter it in some way with least effort and cost. Rationality is at least, as Weber indicated, bound to the idea of efficiency. Habermas states that this dimension of rationality—“instrumental” rationality—exerts an especially powerful influence over modern thought. However he also insists that human interest in responding to demands of the environment has always encouraged regard for “economy of effort and efficacy of means.”

Nevertheless, Habermas contends that the image of a solitary actor intervening in the world limits our understanding of rationality in a number of ways. Mere success of the action is not sufficient to establish rationality. The success could be accidental, like “choosing” a winning lottery number. Or the action could be mere stimulus–response behavior like that of simpler organisms. Although Habermas