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**Title:**

Critique as Lending Voice to the Mystical

**Abstract:**

In this paper, I contemplate the relationship between two apparently opposing approaches to critical theory: one privileges the focus on the rational coherence of discourse (which is characteristic, for instance, of Habermas) , while the other privileges the focus upon experiential world disclosure (which is characteristic of those influenced by Heidegger). I will suggest that these two approaches complement each other in that they accentuate two different dimensions of intellectual and practical approaches towards the world: the quest for systematicity and the quest for adequacy. Habermas' claim that critique that is not based in the protocols of rational coherence quickly becomes obscurantist and reactionary does admittedly articulate an important point in relation to critical reflection when it aims at articulating alternatives to an entrenched power structure. It will, however, be argued that critical reflection also needs an openness towards alternative narratives that are not bounded by fixed truth-claims, but rather operate through problematising the prevailing horizons of truth. This will be my starting point for suggesting that the critical aspect of world-disclosing approaches consists in their showing alternative *potentialities* – rather than alternative *realities*. In order to carry out this argument, I propose a distinction between *rationality*, *irrationality* and *the non-rational*, which leads to the claim that it is not *irrational* for *rationality* to be contemplated in relation to the *non-rational*.

**Keywords:**

Critique, rationality, worlddisclosure, mysticism

# Critique as Lending Voice to the Mystical

## I.

When Habermas in 1985 challenged a certain *world-disclosing* current in twentieth century philosophy,<sup>1</sup> it set the terms for an ongoing debate inside critical theory over whether or not this world-disclosing approach could have any critical value – and if so, what the character of this value could be. This paper inscribes itself in this debate by suggesting that the world-disclosing approach *is* important in critical reflection, but not as an *alternative* or replacement of critical rationality, but rather as a complementary supplement. Habermas' claim that critique cannot fundamentally do without rational coherence does admittedly articulate an important point in relation to critical reflection; to put forward affirmative statements about states of affairs that cannot be comprehended within some kind of rationality is problematic. Yet this argument seems to me to distort the core of the world-disclosing approach, which is to find alternative narratives existing under the surface of the present that are not bound by fixed truth-claims, but operate through problematising the prevailing horizons of truth (or rational outlook) of a given historical moment. In order to problematise horizons of truth, one must loosen one's commitment to the orthodox presentation of truth claims – since the very horizon of truth is what is being contested.

This will be my starting point for suggesting that world-disclosing approaches can be critically relevant in that they show alternative *potentialities*, rather than alternative *realities*. In order to carry out this argument, I propose using a distinction between *rationality*, *irrationality* and *the non-rational* in order to make the claim that it is not *irrational* for *rationality* to be contemplated in relation to its relationship to the *non-rational*.

My argument moves through five stages. First, I begin in (II) by sketching the discussion, articulating Habermas' concerns, and acknowledging his main intuition that critical reflection needs to be open towards views held by every relevant agent. I then set out to problematise Habermas' account. On the one hand, in (III), I show how Axel Honneth's account of recognition shows us that the seemingly anodyne notion of "every relevant agent" is itself open to critical scrutiny. On the other hand, in (IV), I argue that we need to rethink whether rationality as it is used in Habermas' sense is sufficient, which leads to the dissolution of the automatic logical conclusion that any challenge to rationality necessarily leads to *irrationality*. Rather, I contend, we should distinguish between the *irrational* and the *non-rational*. This leads to (V) some reflections upon how Derrida's account of spectres may be rationally fruitful – even though it might very well be argued that it is fundamentally *mystical*. Through these contemplations I hope to demonstrate that the world-disclosing approach is critically fruitful, because it lends voice to the mystical. In the final section (VI) I argue that for world-disclosing critique to become operable in actual, political and social actions, it needs to be articulated *within* rationally committed narratives. The world-disclosing critique thus requires a framing rationality-based critique to become politically operable.

## II.

Discussions of contemporary accounts of critical theory often focus on the relationship between reflections upon rationality (e.g. Jürgen Habermas) and experiential "world disclosure" (associated with Heidegger, Foucault and Derrida).<sup>2</sup>

The notion of world-disclosure presupposes that it is possible to talk about a world that is closed or at least underexposed. This assumption rests on an intuition about what it takes to understand something and to approach the world creatively; it is the intuition that we have to understand every theoretical and practical approach to the world in a tensed fashion: on the one hand there is an urge for *systematicity*, clarity and coherence (a focus that is based on norms of relevance). On the other hand there is an urge for *adequacy* in accounting for what is relevant in the world. This calls for a receptive awareness of the diversity of ontic regions within the world. Notice that both the quest for

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1 Habermas 1985.

2 Examples can be found in Habermas 1985; Kompridis 1993 & 2006; Lafont 1994. Also in Hansen 2005.

systematicity and for adequacy are tempered by notions of relevance. Absolute systematic unity would block perceptive adequacy – by relegating the ontic status of anything outside its boundaries to fiction or delusion; and absolute perceptive adequacy would block systematicity – by creating an unsynthesizable scatter of occasions. Both, then, are appropriate in a given discursive situation only with relation to some notion of relevance that legitimates them.

The urge for systematicity calls for normativity in the original Greek sense (*measures* that introduce the foci of the systems), whereas the quest for adequacy calls for receptivity towards the diversity of reality. The latter is relevant when we seek to understand the world in relation to the knowledge we have already, and in social activities where we seek to relate to other persons as both individuals and types, as well as in ethical problems where we seek to understand the relevant implications of certain state of affairs (in relation to what we take to be ethically right).

Our notions of systematicity and adequacy are, however, not fixed – among other things because they are mutually tensed between norms of systematicity and adequacy. If we emphasise the quest for adequacy, we will tend to dissolve the systematic apprehension of the manifold. If we emphasise the quest for systematicity, we will have to focus upon certain aspects of the world to the exclusion of others. It is therefore important to keep our accounts of both systematicity and adequacy open, which is the task of critical scrutiny. A focus on notions of systematicity typically leads to reflections upon rationality (reflections upon inner coherence), whereas a focus on adequacy typically calls for world-disclosing critique (becoming aware of new aspects of the complex world(s)).

This notion of rationality is, admittedly, very simple. It is meant as a preliminary analytic placeholder, and as will become clear in this paper, it needs to be supplemented with a notion of directedness. The point is, however, that Habermas' account of rationality is very much focused upon intersubjective coherence: rationality is understood as a reflection upon whether the proposed validity claims can be meaningfully connected with the (lifeworld based) horizons of other participants in the prevailing settings.

Habermas is generally rather sceptical towards world-disclosing accounts of critique:

In dem Maße wie die poetische, welterschließende Funktion der Sprache Vorrang und strukturbildende Kraft gewinnt, entwindet sich die Sprache nämlich den strukturellen Beschränkungen und kommunikativen Funktionen des Alltags [...] die einen verständigungsorientierten Sprachgebrauch ermöglichen – und damit eine über die intersubjektive Anerkennung kritisierbarer Geltungsansprüche laufende Koordinierung von Handlungsplänen (Habermas 1985, 240).

Habermas is sceptical about a world-disclosure that is not under some kind of *Bewährungszwang* (Habermas 1985, 234) – i.e. a use of a language that claims immunity from criticisable validity-claims. The probation-constraint has to come from the linguistic relation to the world. Habermas is consequently rather suspicious of approaches that seek to introduce separate discourses – i.e. fields of discourse that are separated from all other discourses. Habermas finds examples of this in Heidegger's reflections on "das wesentliche Denken" (as opposed to "das exakte Denken"; Heidegger 1943, 308-12) and in both Heidegger and Derrida's turn towards poetry and literature (e.g. in Heidegger 1950; Derrida 1969):

die anderen beschworen die mytho-poetische Kraft einer Kunst, die den Mittelpunkt des regenerierten öffentlichen Lebens bilden sollte [...] erst Heidegger hat dieses konkrete Bedürfnis ontologisierend und fundamentalisierend zu einem Sein, das sich dem Seienden entzieht, verflüchtigt. [...] Aus Heideggers Spätphilosophie ergibt sich als weitere Konsequenz, daß sich die Kritik der Moderne von wissenschaftlichen Analysen unabhängig macht (Habermas 1985, 166-7).

This passage neatly summarizes Habermas' succeeding critiques of Heidegger, Derrida and Foucault. On the one hand, they (according to Habermas) give up the reflective approach to important problems. On the other hand, they hereby get to a position in which critique cannot be carried out from a scientific (read: rational) basis. The problem is that they operate with a notion of something (e.g. being, différance, trace, power) that is beneath or beyond the lifeworld. Habermas is uneasy about the following aspect of their views,

Die Phänomene entziehen sich dem direkten Zugriff, weil sie sich in ihren ontischen Erscheinungen gerade nicht zeigen als das, was sie von sich aus sind (Habermas 1985, 172).

The idea here is that there is a relevant distinction to be made (or difference to be found) between the world as it appears and the world as it is by itself. The problem is that if it is granted that rationality generates such ontic differences, then (according to Habermas) the argumentative reason-based critique will be overruled by an *irrational* critique. At that point, according to Habermas, critique becomes arbitrary, and it becomes difficult to find an objective standard according to which the process and outcomes of the critique are more valid than the objects (for instance, oppressive social arrangements) that are subjected to critical scrutiny.

One way of interpreting Habermas' continuous accentuation of the importance of rationality in social and political settings is that he is worried that social communities tend to become self-enclosed if they are not related to a larger context. This is, in a certain sense, what the notion of "lifeworld" is supposed to yield in the confrontation with Luhmannian system theory. Habermas' account of rationality is shaped by the insight that for a norm of action to be valid, it is necessary that *every* possible affected participant (granting that they have, in Kant's sense, a good will) could accept it. This feature of lifeworlds is what prevents our systemic outlooks from becoming absolutely self-enclosed (e.g. in Habermas 1992, 138).

This is what rational reasoning, according to Habermas is (or should be) about: Rational reasoning is the act of committing ourselves towards the critical norms of the lifeworld. The lifeworld contains the urge of being able to articulate how our views and practices make sense or are valid when related to what we know already. And this kind of rational reasoning is important because it is necessary in order to make ourselves understood (*verständigung*) but also because it ensures that our actions can be assessed against critical ideas of a common society – according to Habermas a precondition for ethical validity – rather than being merely assessed against narrow system-internal ideas of efficiency (pragmatic system-validity). Rational reasoning thus embodies the ability of evaluating ideas and practices according to norms that are not merely internal to the prevailing systems.

### III.

However, in his reflections upon recognition, Honneth has demonstrated that the rational deliberations of affected participants is itself a part of social struggle, because the notion of whom we recognize as (relevant) participants is a product of these social struggles. Or, to be more precise: even if we take *every* affected participant into account, it still remains open which parts of the affected participants we recognize as relevant (this account is most famously carried out in Honneth 1992; see also Honneth 1994; 2001). To take an example, even though we recognize terrorists as affected participants, it is considered reasonable not to affirmatively recognise the terrorist aspirations of these individuals.

If we accept Honneth's insight, here, we can see that even though Habermas' worry about irrationality in critique may be legitimate, it is nevertheless deleterious to stick to a purely rational approach. Or to put it as Foucault does:

I think that the central issue of philosophy and critical thought since the eighteenth century has always been, still is, and will, I hope, remain the question: *What* is this Reason that we

use? What are its historical effects? What are its limits, and what are its dangers? [...] In addition, if it is extremely dangerous to say that Reason is the enemy that should be eliminated, it is just as dangerous to say that any critical questioning of this rationality risks sending us into irrationality (Foucault 1982, 249 – emphasis by Foucault).

The point is that one should be cautious not to over hastily reject those approaches that seem to violate the canons of reasonable argumentation when one has grounds to question whether the prevailing processes of such argumentation actually produce fruitful and reasonable views. In the light of some present states of affairs, one might reasonably want to consider the gains and losses in approaching the world solely in terms of a presently prevailing normative outlook – it can even be irrational *not* to ask such questions. If the foci of our normative outlooks are never themselves to be put under critical scrutiny, rationality begins to slide into an obscurantism that is as arbitrary as the world disclosing approach it seeks to expel.

The obvious objection towards such a claim of course is: *how* is it possible to question the rationality that founds the very process of questioning? This is the concern that shapes the writings of – among others – Heidegger, Foucault and Derrida.

Subsequent sections will take Derrida's writings on spectres as an example of how rationality can be productively challenged. In order to articulate this, however, it is necessary to introduce a distinction between the *irrational* and the *non-rational*. I will argue that Habermas, in his rejection of the world-disclosing approaches, confounds irrationality with the non-rational.

#### IV.

As argued above, it makes sense to think of rationality as (among other things) a systematic focus upon certain aspects of the world to the exclusion of other aspects. I take “world” to signify the “outside” of rationality. This outside is in a certain respect *created* through the rational approach, because it is a product of the foci that are pushed forward by rationality. At the same time the outside (the world) is that which rationality is *directed* towards – and therefore the world is also what *challenges* rationality (the rational approach can fail in its directedness). Worlds are thus created through rational approaches while at the same time challenging these approaches.

To take an example, the world of a biological rationality (animals and plants) is the product of the foci that are put in place through the epistemological criteria of biological rationality (for instance, by using a taxonomy that sorts relations between living beings relative to their descent from common ancestors). At the same time, biological rationality would be challenged if its objects were found not to correspond to the organization it imposes upon them (if certain of the studied objects for example started behaving in surprising ways).

Rationality thus has a *horizon* inside which something can be meaningfully said. If you fail to adhere to the norms that constitute the horizon, your expressions will become *irrational*. The irrational is defined in rationality as the *failure* to live up to the norms of rationality. It is a “wrong” move inside rationality.

As stated above, however, rationality is not self-enclosed, but rather *directed*; it has an *outside*. This “outside” may very well have rational dimensions, but no rationality is about itself: Rationality ‘A’ cannot aim at Rationality ‘A’ itself. Seen from the horizon of Rationality ‘A’, the outside is not rational – it is the non-rational. To take an example: Seen from the perspective of a social rationality, the subjective experiences are under normal circumstances not rationally approachable. This is, however, not to say that they are not rational when contemplated within a subjective rationality, but from the social perspective they are, as it were, non-rational – they affect the social reality, but cannot be contemplated through social rationality.

The non-rational is (a) that which rationality is directed towards (the world), and (b) the excluded, that which is not visible within the rational outlook (cf. below: the specters). The non-rational can thus challenge the rational horizon if it becomes evident that it fails in its directedness or if the excluded aspects of reality become urgent or pressing. In sum, the non-rational can

challenge the rational outlook by demonstrating that it is *inadequate*.

To return to Habermas' account of rationality, one could say that *irrationality* is problematic because it makes it possible to be less committed towards the entirety of the rational horizon. The *non-rational* can, however, actually be used to *radicalize* Habermas' quest for holism, if it is used to seek extensions in the rational outlook – by demonstrating deficiencies in the rational directedness whereby certain parts of the world are left out of sight.

In order to demonstrate this, I will now turn to Derrida's notion of specters.

## V.

The notion of spectres is developed most explicitly in his *Spectres de Marx* (1993), where it is contrasted with the notion of spirit. In Derrida's account, spirit is not *one* thing; rather, we should think of spirit as the figural representation of coming to understand something. Spirit is the happy relationship between a systematic understanding and a plural, differentiated world.

The spectres are also products of this relationship – albeit a kind of residual product – but no less important than spirit. The spectres are what have been excluded in order for spirit to come about. To understand the plural world systematically, it is necessary to focus and to reduce (Derrida 1993, s. 201ff). The spectres are the “remainders” that come about in spirit's coming to itself.

This remainder continually challenges spirit, because its trace points to alternative potentialities within which we can approach and understand the world. In this way, the spectre becomes the carrier of the spirit's constant disquiet. Spirit is always being challenged by the manifoldness of worlds and potential worlds. The spectres continuously raise the question whether our practices aim towards the *relevant* aspects of the world (whether our accounts of *relevant* systematicity and adequacy are fruitful). The spectres are, as it were, questions that challenge and urge us to continuously inspect the boundaries of a prevailing outlook. It is the work of ideology to make these boundaries appear natural – and it is spectral work to show that they are constructed and always being constructed. Thus, the spectres watch us.

At the same time, however, it is evident that we cannot “see” the spectres; at least not in a spiritual manner – i.e. we cannot *articulate* them. As soon as spectres are articulated, we have, as it were, come to terms with them, and they have metamorphosed into spirits. They have ceased to exist at the boundaries.

Spectres are thus essentially non-rational. They are figuratively speaking situated *outside* the horizon of rationality. At the same time they are, however, extremely relevant as challenges towards rationality – because they make it possible to contemplate the adequacy of the rational outlook. In a certain respect, one can say that spectres make it possible to reflect on the results of the directedness of rationality outside of rationality's own self-interest – its enclosure within its own standards.

It is thus perfectly reasonable to reflect upon the non-rational because it makes us aware of the perspectives and foundations of the rational (how the rational establishes a dividing line between the inside and outside). It would be wrong to state that specters are *irrational* since they are essentially outside of, and undetermined by, the rationality/irrationality dichotomy. They are neither irrational nor rational. Rather one should say that they are *mystical*.

If one understands mysticism to be an awareness of what cannot be understood inside prevailing norms of rationality, it may be very rational to listen to insights that spring from such mysticism – not as affirmative insights about the real state of the world, but rather as a critical questioning of the adequacy of current accounts of the world that articulate potential alternative outlooks.

As a tool for *critical* analysis, mysticism may thus be very relevant. An *irrational* use of mysticism would be if the mystical points were taken to have *affirmative* significance, i.e. if Derrida's reflections upon the spectre of Hamlet's father in *Spectre de Marx* were considered to imply that “when we die, we may sometimes have the chance to return to our off-spring and communicate with them”. Just as we have no legitimate reason to deny this, we have no legitimate reason to affirm it.

Taken as non-rational, mysticist claims can be used to point out that the limitations in our current

outlooks are not simply apriori or natural – they are historical products. The mystic can be used to *problematise* our prevailing outlooks without being taken to indicate what to do about them. World-disclosing critique can thus be used to demonstrate *deficiencies*, but not to *articulate* solutions. In order to make the move to possible solutions, the spectres must again be displaced, and translated into spirits.

## VI.

Given this plea for the mystical as a legitimate aspect of critique, I will now return to the discussion between Habermas and the world-disclosing approaches to critique. In order for the world-disclosing critique to become really fruitful and effective, it is necessary to translate its account of the world into non-mystic points. This transaction is one of going from an exterior to an interior relation to Reason – from the non-rational to the rational. This is where the Habermasian account is at its strongest. In order to make certain that the world-disclosing points do not turn into irrationality, it is important that they are incorporated into some rational framework whereby it is made certain that they do not form self-enclosed systems. World-disclosing critique thus needs to acquire two rational habits: one is the habit of translating from the non-rational to the rational, which involves how best to incorporate the discoveries of the specters; the other is to take the norms of the lifeworld seriously. In other words, world-disclosure must acquire some account of the ordinary in order to become comprehensible. We cannot have mere receptive adequacy – the contents of the receptive approaches need to be incorporated into a holistic systemic outlook in order to become operable.

Reflective and receptive approaches should thus be seen as mutually complementary rather than as mutually exclusive. I think that much of the debate in the late twentieth century between the two critical approaches can be explained by a confusion of the irrational and the non-rational. It is true that we should be reluctant to tolerate claims that seem arbitrary and that cannot adduce good reasons for their validity. But this should not be confused with the turn towards what is, in a certain sense, non-rational or mystic, i.e. the world that our theories and practices are directed towards. Even though it may be true that we cannot approach the non-rational in a non-rational manner, this does not mean that the non-rational is exhausted by the rational account of it. The non-rational always retains the potential to challenge our rational outlooks.

Critique thus needs to be doubleheaded: it must have both rational and world-disclosing features. If critique is to be fruitful it has to contemplate both the systematic coherence and the receptive adequacy of prevailing outlooks, because rationality without world-disclosure is empty – and world-disclosure without rationality is blind.

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