MICHAEL BAURMANN

UNDERSTANDING AS AN AIM AND AIMS
OF UNDERSTANDING

*Comments on Jürgen Habermas**

1. The distinction between communicative, consent-oriented action and teleological, success-oriented action plays an important role in Habermas's characterization of the concept of communicative action. According to Habermas the success-oriented agent conforms to the criteria of purposive rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) and is therefore primarily oriented towards the achievement of an aim. He chooses means which seem suitable in the given situation and calculates other foreseeable consequences as possible constraints on his success. In the context of social relationships this type of action would correspond to strategic action, in which the agent is guided by an "egocentric success calculation" and regards his interlocutors as mere opponents, as something "in the objective world, which can be perceived and manipulated" (I 385, cf. also I 525, P 154f.).[1] In the case of consent-oriented action, on the other hand, it is not a matter of the plans of solitary subjects and purposive interventions in ojectively given situations, but of establishing an interpersonal relationship, "which subjects capable of speech and action enter into, when they communicate with each other about something". (I 79, cf. also I 525) Habermas adds a number of further dichotomies to the distinction between teleological and communicative action: he states that "mechanisms for coordinating actions" can be classified according to whether they are based on "influence" (*Einflußnahme*) or "consent" (*Einverständnis*). (P 152) Accordingly, social systems may be classified by the extent to which they solve their problem of order "functionally" by a strategic-teleological orientation of their members ("system integration") or whether the individual actions are coordinated with each other by the mechanism of consent ("social integration") (II 271). Distinction is made between two types of rationality, "cognitive-instrumental rationality" on the one hand, whose "inherent telos" is "instrumental disposition" and whose paradigm is control of nature, and "communicative rationality" on the other hand, which is concerned with "ascertaining the intersubjectivity of the life-world" and with culture. (I 28, cf. also I 30, P 157f.) Finally, teleological and communicative action are "worlds" apart, namely the "objective" world

187

"of the observable and manipulable objects on the one hand" and the "social" world "of the normatively regulated interpersonal relationships on the other". (I 105, cf. also P 161)

This far-reaching definition of dichotomic types has not only a descriptive function but also an important normative meaning. Our hopes of a free and just society are, according to this, an expression of the rationality of communicative action, whereas our fear of totalitarianism based on social technology is a sign of critical distance to the model of purposive rationality. It is consequently also a question of the foundations of a critical social science which does not want to content itself — and rightly so — with mere description and explanation.

Nevertheless, the entire conception is based essentially on a conceptual distinction between two types of action, which must first prove its descriptive-classificational value, if it is to be reliable enough for more extensive inferences. At this point I would like to examine whether the proposed distinction between teleological and communicative action leads, as intended, to the formation of two exclusive sets of actions or types of action.

2. For this purpose it is expedient to differentiate between four variants of consent-oriented resp. communicative action. In accordance with its usual meaning and, presumably, in accordance with Habermas's use of this concept we can speak of a consent-oriented resp. communicative action

(1)   when an agent considers communication as an end in itself and seeks a discussion with somebody for the sake of discussion (e.g., if he discusses the problems of housebuilding for love of conversation),

(2)   when an agent wants to reach consent with his interlocutor about a question or problem (e.g., if he wants to reach consent about the question, whether building a house under the present conditions is advisable or not),

(3)   when an agent wants to reach consent with his interlocutor in order to induce the latter to adopt a certain attitude or way of acting (e.g., if he wants to induce him to help with the building of the house),

(4)   when an agent makes the realization of his intentions dependent on the agreement of his partner (e.g., if he is prepared to build his house only on condition that his neighbour agrees to it).

Let us now look at these four variants with regard to the question, whether

a consent-oriented action in each respective case is incompatible with the fact, that the agent observes the criteria of purposive rationality and looks for suitable means to his ends.

In the first case it seems to me, on purely conceptual grounds, evidently *right* that the agent in this variant of communicative action cannot be acting according to purposive rationality, for if his action is an end in itself, it follows analytically that it is not part of a means-end calculation. However for us (and it seems for Habermas, too) this case is the least interesting one, as an 'aimless' communicative action in this special meaning of pure conversation is, regarding the social function of consent-oriented actions, at most, a marginal phenomenon.

In the second case it seems to me almost as evidently *wrong*, if one regards the intention to reach consent as incompatible with a rational calculation of means and ends. Someone, who aims at a consensus with his co-agent, certainly aims at an identifiable end, for which he must use suitable means. One looks, for instance, for the best possible arguments, i.e., the most relevant and forceful ones, whose suitability one examines in an altogether success-oriented way. Moreover, one has the difficulty of choosing between purely communicative acts and other methods to reach a common view of the world; this choice is a matter of rational deliberation and decision. Under certain circumstances it is perhaps more promising for this purpose to make new experiences possible for the interlocutor or to improve his ability. A rational communicative action of this kind, cannot therefore be carried out without empirical knowledge, because one should know, to what kinds of arguments and experiences an interlocutor, on account of his characteristics and biography, is especially receptive. Finally the question arises, why the effect of a reasonable argument on an individual who has the disposition to form and revise his opinions on the basis of reasonable arguments, should not be viewed as an 'influence' or 'effect' in a causal-empirical sense? If we are forced to concede that our reasonable arguments do not affect a person, because he cannot understand them or is incapable of acting according to his better judgement, then we give up any further attempt at convincing him, not because our arguments are not valid, but because, in this case, they are *empirically ineffective*, i.e., not suitable as a means to our end.

But I do not want to pursue this variant of communicative action any further, because from the point of view of coordination of action — emphasized by Habermas — the third and fourth variants are much more interesting. What is the situation here concerning the purposive rationality of consent-oriented action?

3. 'Not too good!' may be the answer after a first glance. Someone who aims at inducing another person to adopt a certain attitude or mode of behavior will, in the case of a rational calculation of his alternatives, primarily look for the most effective ways to realize his intention. It is not improbable that he will include (resp. *must* include) means and methods in his calculation which may possibly promise him quick success, but which, however, have nothing to do with coordinating actions by mutual consent in the usual sense of this term. Perhaps it is more promising to manipulate the other agent by withholding relevant information, by conditioning him with elaborate psychological techniques or simply by forcing him to behave in the desired way. Consent-oriented action does not however appear to be a very effective strategy in these cases and is therefore not adequate according to the criteria of purposive rationality. Making the realization of one's aim dependent on consent in this way is giving others the control over important conditions of effective action from the start. 'The force of argument' has to be assessed so sceptically that the person who relies on it entirely has to subordinate his success to other values.

On closer examination, however, this answer does not seem quite so convincing. After all, the desired consent is supposed to be a suitable means of realizing a clearly recognizable end. It is, therefore, quite definitely also a question of a rational calculation of the possible empirical consequences of communicative action. The fact that a person makes the realization of his intentions dependent on certain limiting preconditions is not sufficient reason to speak of him as not using his means rationally to achieve his end. Habermas himself emphasizes expressly that consent fulfils "the instrumental role of an action-coordinating mechanism" (I 438, cf. also I 128, P 152, P 153, P 163). How is this way of speaking to be justified outside of a teleological scheme?

I believe that the uncertainty in the assessment of these variants of communicative action is due to our inclination to use the concept of rationality ambiguously. The following is an attempt to show that it is not expedient to consider teleological and communicative action as alternative and mutually incompatible types or structures of action on the basis of a clear-cut concept of purposive rationality.

4. An illustration of this ambiguity is provided by our everyday use of the predicate 'rational'. This is to be explained by the prevailing pressure or the prevailing need in everyday life to classify and judge situations often in extracts or isolated from one another. For example, one would no doubt define the building of a house with which the owner can satisfy his housing

needs without hesitating as a purposively rational action, although one may not be informed in detail about the personal situation of the owner or the consequences of the building of the house. We tend to define an action as rational when the means applied achieve the directly recognizable or declared aim effectively, i.e., we more or less emphasize the criterion of suitability of the means chosen in such everyday situations.

Let us assume a neighbour builds under otherwise similar conditions but because of ecological considerations a considerably smaller house, which is no longer optimal for his housing needs. I think one would at first hesitate if one had to answer the question, whether this neighbour had also acted in a purposively rational way, respectively, which of the two neighbours had acted more rationally. This uncertainty would probably only be removed in the case of drastic conditions, under which the building of the bigger house leads to such catastrophic environmental damage, that the quality of life suffers considerably.

The lack of clarity in the use of the concept of rationality here is based above all on an unsystematic and selective calculation of the side-effects of the means applied; the rationality of the choice of means and thereby of the whole action tends to be measured merely by the effectiveness of the means with regard to a certain isolated aim. In most cases side-effects only play an important part if they affect the successful realization of just this aim. One can define an action in accordance with this attitude as 'one-sidedly oriented towards success' or 'aim-fixated'. In the case of aim-fixated actions in this sense it is guaranteed that the chosen means are calculated rationally to achieve a certain aim, but not, however, that the performed action is the best possible one for an agent among all his alternatives.

5. In contrast to this a definite criterion for purposive rationality can be established if one does not only or mainly consider the suitability or effectiveness of the given alternatives for the immediate aim, which gives rise to a planning of action, but, when choosing an alternative, includes the totality of the aims and ends of an agent and his entire value-system. According to this criterion only the person who chooses the alternative with presumably the best possible consequences as a means to realize his end acts rationally. A teleological attitude in this sense requires the abandonment of an isolated consideration of the immediate end and the inclusion of all the secondary-consequences, which could be relevant for the aims and value-system of the agent — therefore it is not only a question of 'how good a certain means is to achieve an end'.

According to this criterion of purposive rationality it is indicated under certain normative and empirical preconditions to strive for the achievement of an end only under restrictive limitations and under general repression of the effectiveness aspect (e.g., in the case of a dangerous technical plant in regard to the safety regulations). These limitations can go so far, that the remaining possibilities make the realization of the desired state hardly more probable than it was before (e.g., in the case of constitutionally limited supervisory measures). Nevertheless we are dealing in this case with teleologically calculated action and the suitability and the effectiveness of the means at our disposal are in no way left out of consideration. This becomes formally clear too, when one includes the rational calculation of the secondary-consequences in the description of the aim of an agent. For the house-builder who takes the environment into account, it would then mean, that he not only pursues the end of *building a house*, but the end of *building a house which is not ecologically harmful*. He can now in fact try to realize *this* end in a success-oriented and effectiveness-oriented way. The degree of success-orientation of a rational action is therefore dependent on whether the remaining aims and the value-system of the agent are integrated into a more complex description of his aim, rather than on the given attitude of the agent.

When assessing the purposive rationality of an action according to the criterion of the best possible choice, it will, however, also play an important part, in how far the value-system of the agent is consequentialistically structured. An agent who reduces the number of his alternatives 'value-rationally' (as defined by Max Weber) by making certain ways of action taboo, will be conceded a lesser degree of purposive rationality than the agent who makes his decisions on the basis of a consequentialistic ethic — even if both of them have chosen the best possible alternative for themselves.

The concept of purposive rationality which I have just outlined is, of course, neither new nor original. On the contrary, no one would introduce the concept without referring to the importance of the problem of side-effects. Nevertheless, there is a tendency to underestimate this problem as being trivial, especially when it is no longer a question of the analysis of the formal structure of rational action but of concrete alternatives. A great deal of the scepsis towards consequentialistic argumentation in the case of moral and legal questions is due, in my opinion, to the neglect of this important aspect of teleological action and the accompanying reduction of purposively rational action to aim-fixated action.

6. Let us come back to the question of whether consent-oriented action in the sense of the third and fourth variant is incompatible with the agent acting according to the criteria of purposive rationality.

If one reduces the concept of purposively rational action to the concept of aim-fixated action, the possible incompatibility of a purposively rational and a consent-oriented attitude seems plausible and the corresponding types of action seem indeed to belong to mutually exclusive classes. A resolute agent who wants to realize an isolated end as effectively as possible, will not of his own free will make his plans dependent on the agreement of other persons. A house-builder with an aim-fixated attitude will — as far as he is able — simply force his fellow-men to help him regardless of their possible protest.

If one, however, takes the concept of purposive rationality in the sense of the criterion of the best possible choice as a basis, a purposively rational and a consent-oriented attitude needn't be mutually exclusive.

Let us consider the third variant of consent-oriented action, in which an agent would like to reach consent with a co-agent, in order to induce in him a certain attitude or way of acting. If the value-system of an agent does not allow him to instrumentalize other persons as mere means to an end and "the conditions of communicative consent" are so important to him, that he would not sacrifice them to the realization of his immediate end, it is, then, under these circumstances the best possible choice for him to fall back on means and methods for the realization of his end, whose side-effects do not lead to a breach of these conditions. In the case of communicative action for one thing such side-effects are not to be feared, for another thing a communicative action is also a suitable means (even if, in comparison with others, perhaps limited) to induce other persons to adopt a certain attitude or way of acting. The decision of the agent in favour of communicative action can therefore, according to the criterion of the best possible choice, quite definitely be purposively rational. If one defines the desirable state for this agent, which should not be jeopardized by the side-effects of his actions, as *participation in interpersonal relationships*, one can elucidate the teleological structure of his communicative action by a more complex description of his end: *to induce a co-agent to act in a certain way in the context of inter-personal relationships*. In the case of this end he can now rack his brains about the effectiveness and efficiency of his means, without running the risk of showing an ethically dubious attitude.

With regard to the fourth variant of communicative action an agent makes the realization of his intentions dependent on his interlocutor agreeing

to them. If an agent executes a plan without securing the consent of his social group, he is running the risk of being sanctioned, of being no longer respected as a person, or of being ostracized. Here, too, an agent's interest in ensuring his future participation in interpersonal relationships can be relevant to the decision. In this case it is not a matter of calculating possible negative side-effects of the means to choose from, but of calculating the effects of a realization of the desired state itself. According to the criterion of the best possible choice it is necessary for the agent to take these consequences into account as well as the effects of the means at his disposal. Here too, the teleological structure of his action can be elucidated by a more complex description of his end: *to realize an intention within the framework of interpersonal relationships*.

7. On the basis of the concept of purposive rationality used here it is therefore not appropriate to outline teleological and communicative action as alternative and mutually exclusive types of action. It is, of course, possible that a person attempts purposive-rationally to induce his co-agent to act in a special way, without deciding in favour of a consent-oriented action. It is also possible, that a person acts in a consent-oriented way without acting purposive-rationally at the same time. But the question whether consent-oriented action is teleological or whether teleological action is consent-oriented is not a question of incompatible structures or attitudes, but a question of the purpose of an action, of the aims and the value-system of an agent and of whether under given circumstances a consent-oriented action is the best possible alternative for him.

Of course, it also plays an important role in the assessment of the purposive rationality of communicative action in how far the aims and values of an agent are consequentialistically structured. An agent, who only decides in favour of communicative action because to him consent is an unsurpassable value in itself, is not particularly well suited as a paradigm of a teleological *and* consent-oriented attitude. However, in view of the many good reasons, which Habermas can name for his high esteem for communicative action, the hope does not seem completely unfounded, that in the case of a decision in favour of consent-oriented action it must not necessarily be a matter of decisionism in the sense of Weber's value-rationality.

Contrasting teleological action with communicative action only makes sense if the concept of teleological action is reduced to the concept of aim-fixated action in the above defined sense. What Habermas has in mind is a one-sided success-orientation of the agent and this becomes clear in the

passages, in which he identifies the teleological attitude with a straight orientation towards an isolated end. But teleological action in the sense of the criterion of the best possible choice does not in any way imply that the purposively rational agent is primarily oriented towards the realization of his isolated aim, pursues an egocentric success calculation and only regards his interlocutors strategically as opponents, whom he can instrumentalize and manipulate. Certainly, there may be agents for whom this way of acting represents the best possible choice — but one should attribute this to their aims and their value-system rather than to their teleological attitude.

8. Now I would like to indicate very briefly some of the consequences of my considerations. At the beginning of my comments I pointed out, that the dichotomic classifications introduced by Habermas not only have a descriptive but also a normative meaning. I believe that it is just that sharp distinction between the teleological and the communicative type of action which prevents us from finding an ethically satisfactory solution to important social problems. This is especially pertinent for social fields, in which "the integrative capacity of consent-oriented action" is overtaxed (II 167). I would like to illustrate this by means of the example of penal law. Here we are confronted with the question, whether the principle of retribution should be replaced by a principle of reformation. Retribution means punishment in the sense of inflicting evil on someone without consideration of its empirical consequences. Reformation means rationally calculated measures for guiding behavior. Both principles in their pure form appear to be ethically unsatisfactory: a purely retributive penal law is metaphysical, meaningless and contributes only to an increase of harm, whereas a purely reformative penal law threatens to injure the autonomy of the subjects and to degrade them to mere objects of state manipulation. Thinking in the dichotomy of teleological and communicative action does not lead us out of this dilemma but into it. Either one has to resign and do without effective reactions or one has to resign and transfer the human objects of social control into the 'world of the observable and manipulable objects'. These are alternatives which are entirely in the tradition of the Kantian distinction between the empirical and the moral subject. But if the comparison between teleological and communicative action in this form is not tenable, a 'cognitive-instrumentalistic rationality', whose 'inherent telos' is domination and control, is not necessarily connected with the structure of teleological action either. The ethically problematical step would not then be the switch to a rational calculation of the consequences of action, but the isolated pursuit of certain aims with the result that

a one-sided emphasis is laid on the aspect of effectivity, instead of binding the
pursuit of an aim and considerations of effectivity to acceptable constraints.
If one takes such constraints into consideration, it is then possible, in such
fields as penal law, too, in which consent-oriented action has for the time
being failed, to look for other forms of interpersonal action, which combine
a teleological calculation of the consequences with respect for the personality
and the autonomy of the co-agent.

NOTES

* Translation by Margaret Dörfel.
[1] Numbers which follow I or II refer to pages in: Habermas, Jürgen: 1981, *Theorie des
kommunikativen Handelns*, vols. I–II. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag. Numbers which
follow 'P' refer to the article by Habermas which appears in this volume.