Reading/Study Guide:  
Reason, Ethics, and Democracy: Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action

I. Kant’s “What is Enlightenment?”

A. What does Kant mean when he defines enlightenment at the beginning of his essay as “man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage”? What does it mean to be released from tutelage? When is tutelage “self-incurred”?

B. What does Kant mean when he writes at the end of his essay that our “propensity and vocation of free thinking . . . gradually works back upon the character of the people, who thereby gradually become capable of managing freedom”?

Habermas’ The Theory of Communicative Action

II. Rationality - a Preliminary Specification (8-22)

A. In what way can beliefs and actions be rational or irrational? What does Habermas mean when he says that the rationality of an expression involves “its being susceptible of criticism and grounding”? (9)

B. How does Habermas distinguish between communicative and instrumental rationality in terms of communicative understanding and instrumental mastery as two distinct goals we can have with the claims we make?

C. What does Habermas mean when he says that it is through our communicative practices that we assure ourselves of “an intersubjectively shared lifeworld”? (13)

1. What does Habermas mean by the “lifeworld”?

2. How is communicative reason a response to disagreements about the lifeworld?

D. In addition to claims to truth what are the two other sorts of claims that our attempts to be communicatively rational can concern? (15-18)

III. Rationality and Argumentation (22-42)

A. Can we replace the concept of the “validity” of arguments with the social “acceptance” of an argument? (Wolfgang Klein) (26-30)

1. Why does Habermas believe that Klein’s approach to argumentation fail to distinguish between the “social currency” of an argument and its
“validity”? (29) Why is this a problem?

B. What does Stephen Toulmin mean in advancing the idea that we are unable to understand what it is for an argument to be valid apart from understanding how it serves to advance the “rational enterprise” (32) of which it is a part? How does his position differ from that of Klein’s? (31-42)

1. How does Habermas argue that Toulmin’s account of rationality does not do justice to the distinction we draw between “conventional claims, which are context-dependent” and “universal validity claims” (36)?

2. What does Habermas mean with his stipulative definitions of the terms terms “discourse” and “critique” (42)?

IV. Mythic Rationality? (43-53, 66-74)

A. Myth and Communicative Reason (43-53)

1. In what way does Habermas believe mythic understandings of the world fail to differentiate between nature and culture?

2. In what way does Habermas believe mythic understandings of the world fail to differentiate between language and the world?

3. Why does Habermas believe the failure to make the former distinctions leads to a state of affairs in which the participants in a mythic world view cannot perceive their world view “as an interpretation of the world that is subject to error and open to criticism”? (50)

B. The Formal Conditions of Communicative Rationality (66-74)

1. How does cognitive development require “the decentration of an egocentric understanding of the world”? How does this “decentration” involve the distinction between a “demarcation of the objective and social worlds from the subjective world”? (69) How do mythic world views lack this “decentration”?

2. What does Habermas suggest that the three formal concepts of worlds (social, subjective, and objective) form the “formal scaffolding” (70) which enables us to reflectively and cooperatively deal with aspects of our life world which we no longer agree on? How do these formal world concepts enable the “cooperative negotiation” (69) of our life world?
V. The Universality of Communicative Reason (102-107, 131-141, 286-305)

A. Linguistic Understanding requires Communicative Rationality (102-107, 131-141, and a bit from 286-305)

1. The point of pages 102-107 is to try to suggest that understanding communicative action is impossible apart from a communicative rational attitude in which we are critically evaluating the validity claims raised in the utterances we are trying to understand. In this way Habermas wants to begin to show the universality of communicative reason as something anyone competent with linguistic understanding has to possess. The problem, though, is that we usually distinguish between understanding the meaning of an expression and evaluating its validity (I don’t necessarily have to agree or disagree with what you say to understand what you say) (106). So how is Habermas to make a case for this point? We’ll see as we read on.

2. What does Habermas mean when he says the task of interpretation “consists in gaining access to the definitions of the situation presupposed by the transmitted text (the text we are trying to understand - Hendley) through the lifeworld of its author and his audience”? (131)

3. How does the former task involve grasping “the reasons that allow the author’s utterances to appear as rational”? (132)

4. What does Habermas mean when he insists that “the interpreter absolutely cannot present reasons to himself without judging them, without taking a positive or negative position on them” (132)?

5. What does Habermas mean when he generalizes the above points with his claim that “We understand a speech act when we know what makes it acceptable”? (297)

   a. Habermas makes this point in “a distinct analogy to the basic assumptions of the semantics of truth conditions” (297). We will have more to say about this analogy in class but be sure to note Habermas’ appropriation of Austin’s distinction between locutionary and illocutionary dimensions of speech in this section.

B. Understanding as the “telos of human speech” (286-295)

1. What is the difference between an illocutionary and a perlocutionary act? (286-292)
2. How does Habermas argue that “language with an orientation to reaching understanding is the **original mode** of language use upon which (others - Hendley) . . . are parasitic” by noting the way perlocutionary uses of language presuppose illocutionary uses of language? (293-295)


A. The Principle of Universalization (62-68)

1. What does Habermas mean by the principle of universalization? (65)

2. Why does Habermas believe that “It is not sufficient . . . for one person to test whether he can will the adoption of a contested norm after considering the consequences and the side effects that would occur if all persons followed that norm” (65) and why does this require “the perspective of real-life argumentation” (66)?

3. How does Habermas try to distinguish his position from that of Ernst Tugendhat? Why does Habermas believe it is crucial to stress the cognitive nature of practical discourse (discourse about practical/moral norms) against Tugendhat’s understanding of it as merely a means to ensure that all concerned have an equal chance to participate in the process through which norms are formulated and adopted? (67-75)

B. Universalization as a Presupposition of Argumentative Discourse (78-92)

1. Why does Habermas consider it necessary to justify the principle of universalization as a principle valid for all? (78-79)

2. What does Habermas (and Apel) mean by a “performative contradiction”? (80-85)

3. In what way does Habermas’ justification of the principle of universalization draw on “the intuitive preunderstanding that every subject competent in speech and action brings to a process of argumentation”? (89-90) How do R. Alexy’s “rules of discourse” (89) involve such an “intuitive preunderstanding”?

4. How does someone who tries to defend statement 4 (on p. 91: “*Having excluded persons . . . “) involve her/himself in a performative contradiction?
5. How, on the basis of his consideration of our “intuitive preunderstanding” of what is involved in engaging in a process of argumentation, does Habermas conclude that “everyone who seriously tries to discursively redeem normative claims to validity intuitively accepts procedural conditions that amount to implicitly acknowledging (U).” (92-93)

C. The Roots of Discourse Ethics in Communicative Action (99-102)

1. What does Habermas believe we can say to a “consistent skeptic” who refuses to argue with us about the principle of universalization (and so avoids the dreaded performative contradiction that would result from arguing against the validity of principle U)? (99-101)

2. What does Habermas believe we can say to a skeptic who completely refuses to engage in communicative action? (101-102)

D. Morality and Ethical Life (102-109)

1. Why does Habermas insist that discourse ethics presupposes the background of a lifeworld in which we take for granted certain norms? (103)

2. How does Habermas distinguish between “moral questions” and “evaluative questions”? (108)

VII. Discourse Ethics and Democracy (from *Between Facts and Norms*, 105-131)

A. How does Habermas understand the relation between law and morality (105-110)

1. How does the law differ from morality as a form of “cultural knowledge”? (107)?

2. How does the reference of morality differ from that of law? (108)

3. How does Habermas understand the relations between the discourse principle, the principle of universalization and the principle of democracy?

B. Law as a Supplement to Morality (111-118)

1. Note Habermas’ “functional” argument for the necessity of the law to supplement for the cognitive, motivational, and organizational deficits of morality.
C. “A Discourse-Theoretic Justification of Basic Rights” (118-131)

1. How does Habermas justify rights to *private* autonomy as “basic rights that citizens must mutually grant one another if they want to legitimately regulate their life in common by means of positive law”? (118-120 & 123-126)

2. How does Habermas justify rights to *public* autonomy as “basic rights that citizens must mutually grant one another if they want to legitimately regulate their life in common by means of positive law.” (120-121 & 126-126-129)

3. Does Habermas succeed in understanding our rights to private and public autonomy as equal and ‘co-original’?