
Habermas's Reconciliation of The Two Images: The Free Will Problem and Responsibility

Krzysztof Kedziora*¹

¹University of Łódź – ul. Narutowicza 65 90-131 Łódź, Poland

Abstract

At the end of his famous essay "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man", Wilfrid Sellars concludes that the notion of "man as a *person*" is at stake in the clash between "the manifest image" and "the scientific image". The risk that the scientific image of man poses to our self-understanding as persons may be interpreted as one of self-objectification. As a result of the development of modern science, we have begun to think of ourselves as just another object of scientific scrutiny, similar to other natural entities in the world. Yet, such a view contradicts the image of ourselves as freely acting agents. The task of the philosopher is to reconcile these two opposing images into one "synoptic vision": to vindicate the "manifest image" and simultaneously reconcile it with our scientific outlook.

Jürgen Habermas's work on the free will problem can be read as an attempt to take on the task of reconciling the two images. On the one hand, we have a firm belief that we are free in our actions. On the other, we accept as the source of knowledge the natural sciences and their method of explaining the world, which presuppose a kind of determinism, namely that states and events in the world can be explained only in terms of nomological causal relations. These beliefs seem to be contradictory. If we accept the scientific image of the world and we cannot invoke metaphysics to explain free will, then free will turns out to be an illusion.

To provide the conceptual framework necessary to explain the possibility of reconciling the two opposing beliefs, Habermas introduces the ideas of epistemic dualism and ontological monism. Epistemic dualism claims that there are two perspectives: that of a participant and that of an observer. These perspectives are irreducible to one another. Habermas rejects the idea of the view from nowhere and gives priority to the perspective of an observer. The gist of ontological monism is that all reality, including the reality of acting agents, is homogenous, i.e. we are, as persons, a part of nature.

Epistemic dualism helps Habermas to show that free will is a necessary presupposition of "the language game of responsible agency". This presupposition is an integral part of any practice, including scientific practice. This means that science also presupposes free will. When we engage in the scientific quest for truth, we have to operate on the assumption that we are free, or else we are in a performative self-contradiction. These limits are not moral in character; rather, they are conceptual limits in the first instance. I suggest, however, there is a tension between epistemic dualism and ontological monism.

In order to elucidate Habermas's vindication of freedom and responsibility, in my concluding remarks, I propose reading it in the light of Strawson's paper "Freedom and Resentment". The similarities between the respective approaches of Habermas and Strawson are rather

*Speaker

general, but the differences are more profound than it might seem at first glance. The differences are as follows: (a) Habermas vindicates human practices in terms of counterfactual presuppositions of communicative actions. Strawson elucidates them in terms of psychological reactive attitudes; (b) This difference results in different ways of explaining the impossibility of a total self-objectification. For Habermas, it is a matter of performative contradiction. For Strawson, it is a matter of psychological implausibility. The differences can be explained via the Kantian threads within Habermas's philosophy and the Humean bent of Strawson's thought. This helps to answer the question whether Habermas's attempt to reconcile the two images succeeds.