Response to Jürgen Habermas

The initial sections of Jürgen Habermas' paper provide a very sympathetic and perceptive account of the motives which led me hold my present philosophical views. I understand the course of my own thinking much better after reading this account. Those sections also illustrate the extent to which Habermas and I see the history of philosophy, and the current situation of philosophy, in very similar terms.¹ His philosophical discourse of modernity made an enormous impression on me. Ever since I read it I have thought of the “linguistic turn” as subsumable within the larger movement from subject-centered rationality to communicative rationality. But the motives Habermas has for commending this movement are the same as those which lead me to take what he calls “the pragmatist turn”—that is, to exalt solidarity over objectivity, to doubt that there is such a thing as “desire for truth” distinct from desire for justification, and to hold that, in Habermas’ words,

¹ I entirely agree with Habermas when he says that philosophical “paradigms do not form an arbitrary sequence but a dialectical relationship”. I regret having given him the impression that I believe that the Ways of Things, Ideas and Words are incommensurable with one another. I think of them as having succeeded one another as a result of the need for a Kuhnian “revolution” in order to overcome piled-up anomalies. Habermas’ remark that, just as the scholastic dispute about universals led to the devaluation of objective reason, so “the critique of introspection and psychologism at the end of the nineteenth century contributed to the shaking up of subjective reason” is an admirable account of the relevant anomalies.
‘being in touch with reality’ has to be translated into ‘being in touch with a human community’ in such a way that the realist intuition, to which mentalism wanted to do justice with its mirror of nature and its correspondence between representation and represented object, disappears completely.

The remaining disagreements between us begin to emerge at the beginning of the section of Habermas’ paper called “Truth and Justification”. There he says that “the correspondence idea of truth was able to take account of a fundamental aspect of the meaning of the truth predicate”—the notion of unconditional validity.” This is a notion for which I can find no use. In an article called “Sind Aussage universelle Geltungsansprüche?” to which Habermas refers, I argued that the switch to “communicative rationality” should lead us to drop the idea that when I make an assertion I am implicitly claiming to be able to justify it to all audiences, actual and possible.

That claim would, I urged, be like the village champion, swollen with victory, predicting that he can defeat any challenger, anytime, anywhere. Maybe he can, but he has no good reason to think so, and it would be pointless

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2 The English original of this paper, which was an excerpt from a longer manuscript, has not yet been published. I am still working on the manuscript, and hope to publish a still longer version of it. before long.
for him to make such a claim. Analogously, I argued, when we have finished justifying our belief to the audience we think relevant (perhaps our own intellectual conscience, or our fellow-citizens, and the relevant experts) we need not, and typically do not, make any further claims, much less universal ones. After rehearsing our justification, we may say either “That is why I think my assertion true” or “That is why my assertion is true”, or both. Going from the former assertion to the latter is not a philosophically pregnant transition from particularity to universality, or from context-dependence to context-independence. It is merely a stylistic difference.

So when Habermas says that there is an “internal connection between justification and truth”, one which “explains why we may, in light of the evidence available to us, raise an unconditional truth claim that aims beyond what is justified”, I protest that the explicandum is just not there. We do not aim beyond what is justified. No unconditional claim has been made. It is not the case, as Habermas says, that “What we hold to be true has to be defendable on the basis of good reasons, in all possible contexts”. If it were, I would, whenever I acquired a belief, be tacitly making an utterly unjustified empirical prediction about what would happen in a potentially infinite number of justificatory context before a potentially infinitely diverse set of audiences. I find this as implausible as the suggestion notoriously made by the logical positivists:
that every empirical assertion is an empirical prediction about a potentially infinite number of future sense-data.

Again, when Habermas makes a distinction between “two pragmatic roles...played by the Janus-faced concept of truth in action-contexts and in rational discourses respectively”, and when he goes on to say that “the concept of truth” allows translation of shaken-up behavioral certainties into problematized propositions”, I would rejoin that he is ignoring Peirce’s point that beliefs are just habits of action. A rational discourse is just one more action-context in which a behavioral certainty evinces itself. There is no Janus-like role to be played, and no translation to be performed.

Rational discourses are the species of action-context in which you are trying to acquire better habits of action by comparing and contrasting your own habits with those of others. In such contexts, your behavioral certainty makes itself evident in your attempt to justify your belief. You may well change your belief as a result of participation in rational discourse, just as you may change it as a result of its lack of success in dealing with the non-human environment. But when you turn from encounters with the non-human, non-linguistic, part of your environment to encounters with the human, language-using, arguing part, there is no transition that needs explanation or mediation. The passage from the one action-context to the other raises no philosophical problems which could be solved by a better understanding of the concept of truth.
There is nothing to be understood about the concept of X except the various uses of the term ‘X’. This goes for the concept of truth as well. “True” is a term we can, if we like, apply to all the assertions we feel justified in making, or feel others are justified in making. We thereby endorse those assertions. But we can also add, after any assertion we or others make, “But of course somebody someday (maybe we ourselves, today) may come up with something (new evidence, a better explanatory hypothesis, etc.) showing that that assertion was not true.” This is an example of ‘true’s” cautionary use. I do not see why the fact that the term ‘true’ has both an endorsing and a cautionary use should lead us to think that there is an “internal connection” between justification and truth, or between assertion and unconditionality, or to think that a deflationary account of truth is, as Habermas claims, acceptable only if it “can continue to sustain realist intuitions.”

There is, to be sure, something unconditional about truth. This unconditionality is expressed by the fact that once true, always true: we regard people who use the word in such expressions as “true then, but not now” as using it incorretly. Since “once justified, always justified” is obviously false, one can indeed express the contrast between truth and justification as a contrast between the unconditional and the conditional. But the unconditionality in question does not provide a reason for the fact that the cautionary use of “true” is always apropos. To say that truth is eternal and unchangeable is just a
picturesque way of restating this fact about our linguistic practices. The whole pragmatic force of the claim that truth is not conditional is to express willingness to change one’s mind if circumstances alter, not to explain or justify this willingness. We are not contritely fallible because we are in awe of the unconditionality of truth. Rather, to speak of truth as being unconditional is just one more way of expressing our sense of contrite fallibility (or, more robustly put, our sense of the desirability of comparing one’s habits of actions with those of others in order to see whether one might develop some more effective habits). The unconditionality of truth has no positive content over and above the cautionary function of such expressions as “justified, but maybe not true.”

As I see it, philosophers who think that we have a duty to truth, or that we should value truth, or that we should have faith in truth, are engaging in needless, and philosophically mischievous, hypostatization. So are philosophers who worry about whether our practices of justification are “truth-indicative”—about whether epistemologists will ever be able to demonstrate that justification will eventually, somehow, God willing, lead to truth. So, it seems to me, is Habermas when he says that it is a “fact” that “a justification is successful in our

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3 The expression “valuing truth” is used by Akeel Bilgrami and the expression “faith in truth” by Daniel Dennett. I criticize their polemical use of these expressions in my “Response to Dennett” below.
justificatory context points in favor of the context-independent truth of the justified proposition”.

“Our justificatory context”. Whose justificatory context? Surely not any and every such context has this desirable feature? Have not past justificatory contexts (those of primitive science, racist politics, and the like) pointed us away from truth? In order to deal with such rhetorical questions, Habermas brings in the distinction between rationally convincing people and strategically manipulating them into agreeing with you. He wants to say that only in the former case do we have genuine, and therefore truth-indicative, justification. Some the so-called “justifications”—the ones which strike us as more like brainwashing than like putting forward arguments—must be ruled out in order to save the claim that “success in our justificatory context points in favor of context-independent truth”.

Ueberzeugen, in short, points in favor of such truth, but ueberreden does not. Thus we find Habermas criticizing me for sweeping this distinction under the rug:

A...refusal to differentiate between the strategic and non-strategic uses of language, between upon success-oriented and understanding-oriented action deprives Rorty of the conceptual tools to do justice to the intuitive distinctions between rationally convincing and persuading, between motivation through reasons and causal exertion of influence,
between learning and indoctrination." (…zwischen Ueberzeugen und Ueberreden, zwischen der Motivierung durch Gruende und kausaler Einflussnahme, zwischen Lemen und Indoktrination…)

Habermas and I can agree that certain desirable social practices and institutions could not survive unless the participants could make these latter, commonsensical, distinctions. But I see these distinctions as themselves just as context-dependent as the distinction between sufficient and insufficient justification. So I cannot see how they could serve as conceptual tools for telling us when we are being steered in the direction of context-independent truth. The whole idea of context-independence, in my view, is part of an unfortunate effort to hypostatize the adjective “true”. Only such hypostatization creates the impression that there is a goal of inquiry other than justification to relevant contemporary audiences.

This hypostatization is exemplified by Habermas’ claim that “true propositions are resistant to spatially, socially and temporally unconstrained attempts to refute them”4. But propositions are just hypostatized assertions. Endowing them with causal powers, such as the ability to resist, is the same

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4 The original here reads …wahre Aussagen gegen rauemlich, sozial und zeitlich entschraenkte Versuche der Widerlegnugn resistent sind. But Maeve Cook, the translator, is right to render Aussagen as “propositions” in this context. For assertions, which are events, are not resistors, though assertors may be. Assertors, however, are always pretty well locked into both spstio-temporal and social situations.
move that Plato made when he hypostatized the adjective “good” and gave causal power to the resulting Idea. Plato thought that only by giving The Good power he explained the appeal of moral virtue. Habermas thinks that only by giving true propositions power can he explain the appeal of such intellectual virtues as eagerness to hear the other side. But “Truth resists attempts to refute it” or “Truth cannot lose in a free and open encounter” is as pragmatically empty as “Healthy people do not get sick.” If they get sick, they weren’t healthy. What is refuted was never true. An intrinsic property called “truth” no more explains resistance to refutation than one called “health explains resistance to disease.”

Habermas says, correctly, that I am trying to substitute a neo-Darwinian description of human beings for one which distinguishes sharply between what animals do (causal manipulation) and what we do (offering rationally convincing arguments). To effect this substitution, I need to claim, first, that all argumentation is, under one useful description, causal manipulation (kausaler Einflussnahme). Second, I need to assert that some sorts of causal manipulation by means of language are highly desirable. The difference between strategic and non-strategic uses of language is the difference between the kind of causal manipulation we are glad to have practiced on us and the kind we resent.

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5 See William James, “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth”, in his Pragmatism, for his use of the analogy between truth, health, and wealth, and for his citation of Lessing’s Hanschen Schlau: Wie kommt es, Vetter Fritzen/dass grad’ die Reichsten in der Welt, das Meiste Geld besitzen?”
having practiced on us. In this respect it is like the difference between having our body manipulated by a knowledgeable doctor, one who has our interests at heart, and having it manipulated by a quack chiropractor trying to make a quick buck.

As I see it, the philosophical distinction between non-strategic and strategic uses of language adds nothing to the common-sense distinction beween dishonesty and sincerity. You are being what Habermas calls "non-strategic" if the arguments you offer others--mere rhetorical diatribes though they may seem to your critics--are ones you yourself find entirely persuasive. You are being what he calls "strategic" if you say to yourself something like "My interlocutor either would not understand or refuse to accept the arguments that convinced me, so I shall use premises he will grant, and terms he understands, even though I should disdain to use either when talking to myself."6 In the latter case, your interest in your interlocutor is like the quack chiropractor's interest in her patient. But a sincere, ignorant, chiropractor is no more being “strategic” than is a sincere, ignorant Nazi orator. Both are being honest and non-strategic, but neither is likely to do you any good.

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6Being strategic in this way is sometimes morally blameable, as when you could easily equip your interlocutor with the ability to understand better arguments. Sometimes it is blameless, as when you are trying to prevent an imminent injustice from being committed, using whatever means will work in the short time available.
The distinction between honesty and sincerity is not itself context-dependent (or at least no more so than the distinction between the straight and the crooked). The distinction between logic and “mere rhetoric”, on the other hand, is just as context-dependent as that between the presence and absence of adequate justification. For a sincere Nazi can successfully use really pitiful arguments to justify infamies—arguments that nobody outside his remarkably provincial, illiterate, and stupid audience would take seriously. They are arguments which we rightly describe as “mere” causal manipulation or “mere” rhetoric, even though to the Nazi and his stupid audience they seem paradigm cases of rational persuasion, überzeugende Argumentation.

From a pragmatist perspective, to describe someone as succumbing to the appeal of “the better argument” is to describe her as being convinced by the sort of reasons that have convinced us, or would convince us, of the same conclusion. Our criteria for bettiness of argument are relative to the range of arguments at our disposal, just as our criterion for bettiness of tool are relative to the technology at our disposal. To describe someone as having come to a certain conclusion for bad reasons is simply to say that the reasons which convinced her would not convince us.

Habermas, however, says that when we enter into a serious discussion we “presume performatively that the participants allow their ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to be determined by the force of the better argument.” But this is to hypostatize
arguments as he elsewhere hypostatizes true propositions. Arguments no more have a context-independent property of betterness than propositions have a context-independent resistance to refutation. When we enter into a serious discussion we of course hope that our interlocutors will find the same sorts of considerations convincing that we do; indeed, we are not sure whether or not the discussion will count as serious until we have discovered that this hope will be gratified. But that hope is not a presumption about our interlocutors’ relation to a natural order of reasons, an order in which the betterness of arguments is apparent without any need to consider the “spatial, temporal, and social restraints” on any actual discussants.

To say that there is no such thing as a proposition being justified tout court, or an argument better tout court, amounts to say that all reasons are reasons for particular people, restrained (as people always are) by spatial, temporal and social conditions. To think otherwise is to presuppose the existence of a natural order of reasons to which our arguments will, with luck, better and better approximate. The idea of such an order is one more relic of the idea that truth consists in correspondence to the intrinsic nature of things, a nature which somehow precedes and underlies all descriptive vocabularies. The natural order of reasons is for arguments what the intrinsic nature of reality is for sentences. But if beliefs are habits of action the one regulative ideal is as unnecessary as the other. Yet Habermas can only go beyond the common-sense distinctions
between dishonest and honest use of language on the one hand, and arguments acceptable and not acceptable to us on the other, if he appeals to this implausible idea. For that would be the only way to make plausible the claim that there is a non-context-dependent distinction between real and apparent justification, or that the ueberzeugen-ueberreden distinction is not just in the ear of the audience.

From my neo-Darwinian perspective, of course, the Cartesian idea of a natural order or reasons is as bad as the suggestion, mentioned by Wittgenstein, that the great advantage of the French language is that words occur in the order in which one naturally thinks them. Familiar French words do indeed occur in the order in which the French typically think them, just as arguments which strike us as ueberzeugend rather than merely ueberredend have premises we accept arranged in the order in which we ourselves would arrange them. But what counts as rational argumentation is as historically determined, and as context-dependent, as what counts as good French.

Habermas gives, in his paper, excellent reasons for abandoning as useless Peirce's notion of "the end of inquiry". But it seems to me that these are also reasons for abandoning all similar idealizations. They all sound inspiring, but they all deflate on closer inspection, in the same way that Peirce's notion deflates. The notions of a natural order of reasons, of the way things really are apart from human needs, of an ideal language, and of universal validity can only be
explicated by invoking the notion of the ideal audience--the audience that has witnessed all possible experiments, tested all possible hypotheses, and so on. To explain what any of these idealizations amount to you have to resort to the idea of an audience whose standards of justification cannot be improved on. But such an audience seems to me as hard to envisage as the largest number, the largest set, or the last dialectical synthesis--the one which cannot become the thesis of a new dialectical triad. Our finitude consists in the fact that there can never be an ideal audience, only more spatially, temporally, and socially restrained audiences. So the idea of “universal validity claims” seems to me one more attempt at the sort of evasion of finitude Heidegger rightly criticized.

My conclusion is that what is needed is not an attempt to get closer to an ideal, but rather an attempt to get farther away from the parts of our past that we most regret. We should give up on the Kant-Peirce-Apel strategy of finding regulative ideas to serve as surrogates for the authority of some non-human power, thereby replacing metaphysics with transcendental philosophy. Instead, we should answer the questions "What breaks us out of our parochial contexts and expands the frontiers of inquiry?" “What keeps us critical rather than dogmatic?” with "The memory of how parochial our ancestors have been, and the fear that our descendants will find us equally so". In short, we should be retrospective rather than prospective: inquiry should be driven by concrete fears of regression rather than by abstract hopes of universality.
This substitution of fear for hope is my strategy for answering another criticism made by Habermas. He says "As soon as the concept of truth is eliminated in favor of a context-dependent, epistemic validity-for-us, we lack the normative reference-point (normative Bezugspunkt) that would explain why a proponent should struggle to secure acceptance for 'p' beyond the bounds of his own group". (…ueber die Grenze der eigenen Gruppe hinaus bemuehen sollte.)

Here I need to distinguish between wanting to go beyond those borders and being under an obligation to do so: between hinaus bemuehen will and hinaus bemuehen soll. I regard it as a fortunate historical accident that we find ourselves in a culture—the high culture of the West in the twentieth century—which is highly sensitized to the need to go beyond such borders. This sensitization is a result of our awareness of the blind cruelty which has resulted from not doing so in the past, and our fear of falling back into barbarism.

I do not think that we are under an obligation to go beyond these borders, but that is simply because I am deeply suspicious of the notion of obligation. I tend to agree with Elizabeth Anscombe when she doubts, in her famous essay "Modern Moral Philosophy", that those who do not believe in the existence of God, are entitled to use the term "moral obligation". On this point,

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theists like Anscombe and atheists like myself can make common cause against Kantians who think that you can preserve, and must, preserve a non-prudential "ought". We can line up with Mill and Dewey in being as suspicious of the morality-prudence distinction, when it is given a transcendental twist, as we are of the truth-justification distinction, when it is given the same twist.

However, I would concede, as Anscombe might not, that one can give the notion of "moral obligation" a respectable, secular, non-transcendental sense by relativizing it to an historically contingent sense of moral identity. As someone whose sense of moral identity is tied up with the need to go beyond the boundaries of my own group, I can recuperate the notion of hinaus bemuehen soll, though perhaps not in a way that Habermas would find adequate. For I can say that I could not live with myself if I did not do my best to go beyond the borders in question. In that sense, I am morally obliged to do so, but only in the same sense that a Nazi who could not live with himself if he spared a certain Jew is under a moral obligation to kill that Jew.

But my moral identity is not an expression, or an account, of myself as a language-user. So it cannot be incorporated within Habermas' "discourse

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8 I discuss change of moral identity in my "Justice as a larger loyalty". There I treat it as change in our sense of who counts as "us", of what sort of people need to be consulted in the course of deliberation. The idea is to see moral progress as a result of extending the bounds of our imagination rather than as a result of stricter obedience to a context-independent imperative.
ethics', or treated as a universal obligations of any language-using being. It is merely a remark about whom I happen to be, not about what I must, to avoid performative self-contradiction, conceive myself to be. Perhaps I also could not live with myself if I consumed a rich meal in the presence of a starving child, with whom I refused to share my food. But this too is a fact about the way I happened to be brought up, not a fact about what it is to be a human being.

In short the only normative Bezugspunkt that I find myself in need of is something which fits easily into a naturalistic, Darwinian picture of myself: I am an organism whose beliefs and desires are largely a product of a certain acculturation. Specifically, I am the product of a culture which worries about the fact that American black slavery and European pogroms seemed sensible and right to previous generations of white Christians. As such a product, I spend time worrying about whether I may not now be taking similar, current atrocities for granted. I have acquired a moral identity, and a set of obligations, from this culture. I think I am lucky to be have been raised within this culture. But I am well aware that my barbarous ancestors thought themselves lucky to have been raised within their culture, that my cousins in Germany thought themselves lucky to be able to enroll in the Hitler Youth, and that my descendants in an hypothetical fascist culture would have a similarly warm sense of gratitude for their own upbringing.
Philosophers who fear relativism are committed to the idea that we need a criterion for telling real justifications and obligations from apparent ones, and real maturation from apparent maturation. Since the reality-appearance distinction seems to me a relic of our authoritarian past (a secularizing attempt to move The Intrinsic Nature of Reality into the role previously played by The Person Who Must Be Obeyed) I am not worried about relativism. Fear of relativism seems to me fear that there is nothing in the universe to hang on to except each other. As I see it, we do not treat each with respect because we are rational. Rather, “rationality” is, in our culture, one of our names for our habit of listening to the other side—treating most of our interlocutors with proper respect. There is no faculty called “reason” which tells us to listen to the other side (tells the slave-owner to listen to the slave, or the Nazi to listen to the Jew). Rather, there are social virtues called “conversability”, “decency”, “respect for others”, “toleration, and the like. In our culture, we restrict the term “rational” to people who exhibit those virtues. That is why Richard Hare’s designated monster, the “rational Nazi,” is a genuine possibility. It is possible to hear the other side and still do the wrong thing, for it is possible to listen to arguments which we know to be ueberzeugend, yet not be ueberzeugt.

Once one accepts the shift Habermas proposes from "subject-centered" to "communicative" reason, it seems to me, one should be happy with the idea that one's only obligations are to other human beings and to oneself. Habermas,
however, believes that Kant was right in thinking that we cannot altogether do without the notion of unconditionality. He sees unconditional, universal validity not only as a useful, but as an indispensable, notion. I not only cannot see why it is indispensable, I cannot even see that it is useful. It seems what Wittgenstein calls "a wheel that turns even though nothing else turns with it, and is therefore no part of the mechanism". The only function it might have is intimidate us by making us feel that no matter what we do, it is probably not good enough-the function once performed by the doctrine of Original Sin. But once we start thinking of inquiry as a relation between organisms and their environment, rather than as a relation between human beings and something awesome--something like Truth or Reality--we no longer need to be scared.

I see the opposition between Hume and Kant--or, in contemporary moral philosophy, between contemporary Humean moral philosophers like Annette Baier and contemporary Kantians like Cristine Korsgaard--as centering around their respective accounts of moral motivation. For writers in the Kantian tradition, the interlocked notions of rationality and universality are indispensable. Baier interprets Hume, "the woman's moral philosopher", as treating the very idea of universal rationality as a relic of patriarchal authoritarianism. That seems to me right, and that is why I see pragmatism, and the neo-Darwinian redescription of inquiry it offers, as part of a more general anti-authoritarian movement—the movement which assumes that if we take care of constitutional democracy,
academic and press freedom, universal literacy, careers open to talents, and similar democratic institutions, then truth will take care of themselves.

From this Humean point of view, moral progress is what Hume called "a progress of sentiments"—an ability to overlook what one had previously thought to be moral abominations: for example, women speaking in churches, or interracial marriage, or Jews having the same civil status as Christians, or same-sex marriage. From my pragmatist point of view, intellectual progress is a subdivision of moral progress—it is progress in finding beliefs which are better and better tools for accomplishing our communal projects. One of these projects is to replace resentment with good will, and authority with democracy.

What Peirce called "blocking the road of inquiry" occurs whenever a given view—Copernicus' theory of planetary motion, or Darwin's theory of the descent of man, or James' pragmatism, or Hitler's racism—is suspected of being a moral abomination. Sometimes, as in the case of Hitler's racism, blocking the road of inquiry is an excellent thing to do. Sometimes, as in the case of Darwin's theory, it is a bad thing to do. Sometimes, as in the case of James' pragmatism, we may be genuinely perplexed about whether we are dealing with a moral abomination, a well-meant but misguided suggestion, or a helpful proposal about how to free ourselves from obsolete ways of thinking.

A lot of powerful philosophical considerations can be brought to bear on such perplexity, and this exchange between Habermas and myself has
rehearsed a number of them. But if the pragmatists are right, philosophical reflection will not adjudicate the issue, for such reflections can do little more than rearrange previously existent intuitions, rather than creating new ones or erasing old ones. But erasure is what pragmatists are asking for. Only experiment--trying out intellectual and moral life as it would be lived without the familiar Platonic/Kantian intuitions--will decide the matter.

In a world which had no more urgent tasks than to stage social experiments in order to adjudicate philosophical disagreements, the decision between Habermas’ quasi-Kantian way of looking at rationality and morality and my quasi-Humean way would be made after seeing the result of experiments in training a large sample of the rising generation to think in exclusively Humean terms. My prediction is that these experimental subjects would be just as decent people as the control group—the ones who were brought up to understand the term “universal validity”.