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Apel and Lessing—or: the Ethics of Communication and the Strategies of Comedy

Mark W. Roche

For Edson M. Chick on
his seventieth birthday

I

Transcendental pragmatics is the attempt to make transcendental reflections—reflections on the condition of the possibility of objectively valid knowledge—productive for the present by extending them beyond the subjective sphere of Kant and to the sphere of intersubjectivity and communication and ultimately to a dialogically developed normative ethics. Unlike Kant, Apel does not underestimate the role of language or dialogue within the sphere of transcendental questions, the role of intersubjective subject-subject or I-thou relations (as opposed to subject-object relations). According to Apel, there is no position from which discourse can be relativized or meaningfully called into question; to do so would be to fall into a pragmatic contradiction: one cannot argue against argumentation without presupposing the validity of argumentation. Our entry into dialogue already presupposes certain absolutely binding norms, for example, that we not act blindly, but rather seek via rational argumentation the correct alternative of action, that we do so by presenting our views honestly and by listening, fairly, to alternative positions, and that we attempt to reach a consensus on norms.

Apel's essay "Das Apriori der Kommunikationsgesellschaft und die Grundlagen der Ethik" offers an interesting modernization of Kant's categorical imperative (*Transformation der Philosophie 2*: 358–435). Drawing on the transcendental conditions of discourse, Apel sketches a twofold imperative: first, that we not destroy our *real* community of discourse, that is, that we work for the preservation of humankind (by not eliminating humanity through nuclear war, environmental destruction, or philosophical-political disintegration); second, that we enrich the community of rational beings by projecting the goal of an *ideal* community of discourse and that we work to realize this goal. The first imperative is the necessary condition of the second, which in turn gives meaning to the first, a meaning that is counter-factually anticipated in every dialogue. The ideal community of discourse is presupposed but not fully actual-