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The Meanings of a Publication in the Humanities. Meaning, text, and authorship in critical perspective

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Abstract: A publication is meaningful in different ways. It is more than objective materiality. A writer sees in a book a great achievement within a tradition of thinking. The corresponding reader finds in the same publication a hermeneutic device. For public discourse, the latest bestselling crossover book provides handy information to special interest readers. To philistine management, a publication is formal authorship in a research assessment exercise. And to varying degrees, all four such personas come together in the ordinary scholar, making the different types of meaning an imbricated whole. In this article, I provide a language for this meaningfulness. I make use of the structural hermeneutics of cultural sociology to demonstrate four key notions of meaning. This language helps to understand the way humanities scholars and other actors in contemporary academia deal with publications. I further illustrate what these abstract notions mean in practice with the recent monograph *Also a history in philosophy* by Jürgen Habermas.

Keywords: publication, humanities, formal authorship, hermeneutic device, scholarly tradition, democracy, cultural meaning

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Reading the Meaning of a Publication

What does a publication mean? Depending on whom you ask, each publication can mean something different. Like all materiality, a publication embodies meanings that are revealed in everyday conversations. Take food or cars: for some they are pure utility, for others an aesthetic luxury, for still others a means of showing off. And this is how they are treated. Material investments, building a community, time spent—it all depends on what the thing

in question means to the actor and their community. Meaningfulness is the great advertising machine with which the thing in itself continually works on its appeal. While this *it itself* remains closed, all actors are under the spell of this appeal. What this means in the case of a publication in the humanities is the task of this article.

On the surface, each publication appears to be text, perhaps enriched with data, graphs, or images. This surface is the closed aesthetic of a publication. And this closed aesthetic symbolizes meaningful depth that frames how actors think about and deal with the publication. Meaning motivates action: to write, publish, retrieve, download, cite, or read all depend on a symbolic representation of what this publication *is*. All action draw on the deeper structures of meaning toward which discourse is geared. So, to understand why scholars publish, read, etc, we need to understand and appreciate different notions of meaning.

Asking for this meaning is like asking: what does a publication represent? This is not a question of materiality or what the scholarship within a publication says. It is not a technical issue as might be seen from a mechanistic perspective that treats a publication as a closed package of semantic structures. Rather, it is a question of how it is coded within the relatively stable cultural grid of actors (Alexander, 2003). In short, the answers can be: For the writer, this book represents an achievement—it included them in this great tradition of thinking. For a university manager, those articles might represent instances of formal authorship—they can be accounted for. For public discourse, the latest bestselling crossover book is an accessible pool of knowledge—it provides handy information to special interest readers. And for the circle of deep readers, scholars and armchair philosophers, the latest tome represents a hermeneutic device—it enables them to *re*-think the thought of a colleague. To some degree, these different notions are imbricated; they form layers within every scholar, since any scholar is writer, reader, member of the public sphere, and accountant of their scholarly labour at the same time. To what degree one layer is foregrounded depends on culture structures.

To identify such structures, we can "account for surface variation" in order to decipher the "deeper generative principles" (Alexander and Smith, 2001: 135). Following the traditions of Lévi-Strauss and Geertz, these deeper generative principles are structures of meaning that are stable and relatively independent of the materiality at hand. Relevant background knowledge is cultivated in a community, crystallizes in culture structures, and foregrounds specific meaning. Imagine the difference between reading for the argument we really need to understand and consulting that single paragraph in order to quickly cite it. Similarly,

consider the author reference we really need to include in our literature review because of the tradition it represents and the formulaic accounting of authorship during a departmental annual review of productivity. All such notions make us think of a respective publication abstractly, above the level what is being said internally. And at this abstract level, we can capture the meaning of a publication alongside two binaries: an *orientation* toward content or reference, and an *emphasis* on abstraction and autarchy on the one hand, and substance and contextuality on the other. In this article, I will provide a language for the meaningfulness that comes to the fore through this matrix.

I draw on half a decade of research and teaching. I conducted both qualitative and quantitative field work with scholars in the humanities (and social sciences) for my PhD research at University College London. This work was published in a short monograph as well as articles dedicated to specific topics such as open humanities or the narrative of publish or perish (2019, 2021, 2023a, 2024b). This was followed by postdoctoral work at the German Center for Higher Education and Science Studies (DZHW Berlin), focussed on publishing, authorship, and editorship across fields (Knöchelmann, 2023b; Knöchelmann and Schendzielorz, 2023). In addition, there were teaching positions such as a TA at University College London and workshops at the Dahlem Research School, Freie Universität Berlin.[1] Because of this context, I talk primarily about academia in the UK and Germany. As a disclaimer, extrapolation to other regions must be cautioned as the UK and Germany have very specific academic systems with unique career paths and (publishing) incentive structures (Knöchelmann, 2023a). During all these activities I got into close contact with a variety of scholars, from aspiring PhD students and Postdocs to eminent seniors, thus capturing a broad range of how scholarship and the means to it are understood *on the ground*. In a way, this experience represents deep exposure in an ethnographic sense.

All this experience flows into structural hermeneutics: an interpretative reconstruction of structural meaning (Reed, 2017). This implies taking empirical discourse—what scholars say—seriously. It means interpreting the manifold of discourse to determine its structural codes that allow actors to speak meaningfully in the first place. In other words, the way an actor uses language to refer to entities and actions shows the way in which something is coded, weighted, and narrated, and, thus, embedded in culture structures (Alexander, 1998). Studying discourse can never be encyclopaedic, and so the notions of meaning that I

[1] For instance: https://www.drs.fu-berlin.de/en/node/97307

discuss below are only an approximation to the wealth of meaningfulness out there. Nuances and additions exist in all sorts of guises. Further, this article does not distinguish between different types of publications (whether article or book, original research monograph or essay collection, etc.). The different levels of meaning apply to all these material existences, which is the very essence of symbolic meaning.
We will first briefly draw boundaries: What are we talking about when we talk about the humanities and authorship? Secondly, we go into the details of the four notions of meaning. This includes discussions of relevant literature. Thirdly, I apply this fourfold layer to an illustrative example. This includes generalizations that show how this fourfold layer helps understand the empirical reality of the humanities and potential shifts in the balances of meaningfulness in contemporary academia.

Boundaries: The Humanities and Authorship

What do I mean by the humanities (in the UK and Germany)? The pragmatic answer finds that the "humanities disciplines are the disciplines that are taught and studied at humanities faculties" (Bod, 2013: 2). But this will not get us any further in Germany, where there are often no unified (arts and) humanities faculties. Widening the semantics to *geisteswissenschaftliche*, *philologische*, *philosophische*, *historische*, etc. *Fakultäten* or *Seminare* only sets us back to square one, since we have to decide which to in- or exclude. The most liberal way is that of self-identification (Knöchelmann, 2023a: 17): if you consider it meaningful to categorise your work as humanities, then name it in this way. Of course, this does not get us any further in the debate of where to locate the Digital, Medical, or Public Humanities. If we let a digital algorithm count and plot the use of certain word types in a Melville novel, is this still what the humanities are supposed to be? Traditionalists may disagree.
Ultimately, there will be no objective basis for determining what the humanities are. Much rather, we need to account for the fact that disciplines are

> reflexive categories, principles of classification, normative rules, institutionalized types: they […] are facts of discourse that deserve to be analysed beside others; […] they are not intrinsic, autochthonous, and universally recognizable characteristics. (Foucault, 2007: 22)

In other words, disciplinary categorization is only another form of meaning-making. And when new approaches are added to the traditional corpus of the humanities, this merely shows that the meaning of the cipher humanities has changed. When talking about the meaning of publications, no strict limits can be set for categorizing the whole. With this in

mind, the following discussion itself will offer some approximations to what the humanities are, based on historical and comparative considerations.

What—instead of who—is an author? Again, from a cultural perspective, the author is the cipher that governs the ground in between writer and reader. As far as the attribution of meaning is concerned, the writer is not the author. The writer is the person who writes; the author is what is constructed once a text is *out there*, or even before that in case a publication of an established author is anticipated. This distinction is not evaluative; neither writer nor author is superior. It is necessary, however, to distinguish analytically between the two so as not to confuse who we imply if we point to a publication.

Authorship relates to authority. This is an ethical connection of aesthetic surface and meaningful depth. The author of a publication tends to be regarded as the one responsible for what is being claimed. If we cite an author—and cited are primarily authorial names, not titles—it is for the reason that the citing scholar assumes agency and someone to argue with. If we find a seminal publication, there is reason to believe its author has substantial authority to change something in the world by means of what is said. Nevertheless, these are cases of construction, as we do not have access to the writer via the publication.[2]

This constructedness of authorship makes the author all the more important. The author functions like a sign. By pointing to a publication, the author's name acts as the signifier. The four levels of meaning of a publication are the signified. This connection may appear arbitrary. Nevertheless, it is rooted in our structural understanding of what is meant. This is most obvious in our everyday language. To ask: 'Do you know the latest Habermas?' of course, does not refer to a new fellow Habermas. It introduces the multi-layered possibility of meaning of the latest Habermas publication.[3] We will now turn to what these possibilities are.

Four Notions of Meaning of a Publication

The four notions of meaning of a publication are represented in figure 1. They are based on a matrix of two binaries that we have already encountered above: an *orientation* toward

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[2] In the (natural) sciences this is even more obvious, for here (all) the authors named are almost never the writers, and the names listed on a publication often do not represent a list of individuals who can all take equal responsibility (Knöchelmann and Schendzielorz, 2023).

[3] The negative confirms this. 'Do you know the new Yickson?' — 'The new *who*?' With newcomers and obscure authors, the cipher doesn't work, or only in a small circle of insiders. No structural connection is established and it takes the publication to point to itself.

content or reference, and an *emphasis* on abstraction and autarchy on the one hand, and substance and contextuality on the other.

Figure 1: Four notions of meaning of a publication.

Publication as a Hermeneutic Device

Texts can be given orally or in written form. The lecture or seminar is important for the former; a manuscript or publication occupies the central role for the latter. They transport text and, thus, transfer an instance of hermeneutic possibility in the sense of: I, the reader, get in the position to understand a colleague's thought. This is the idea of communicating understanding and reasoning in a way that enables others to follow it on their own. A publication is no agglomeration of facts in this perspective; the writer does not tell the reader *what* to think; they show by reconstruction, analogy, or epistemic narration. The publication here is an offer of *reflection*; instances of information, such as propositions, structure *how* to re-think.

Consider Wittgenstein's ladder as an illustration. Wittgenstein claims that "anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them [the propositions he sets forth in his publication] as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb beyond them" (Wittgenstein, 2001: 89/6.54). Two aspects of this deserve to be emphasized. The publication serves as a guide for one's own thinking; it does not teach what to think, but how. And the guide itself becomes useless afterward; the reader has acquired, to a degree, a new way of thinking. The reader's hermeneutic competence has been empowered. While this notion of meaning places content above formality, the content serves as a means to form: what you think (as you read) shapes the way you think.

Why hermeneutics? Are all humanities reduced to the banner of interpretivism here? Not at all. The notion of the hermeneutic device signifies an essense of the (traditional) humanities as a continuous, subjective learning process as conceptualized by the German historical school. Hermeneutics is employed in a strong sense here; it does not imply that the humanities are not exact. Its comprehensive meaning was conceptualised by Schleiermacher who tied hermeneutics closely to the matter and potential of critique in the *Geisteswissenschaften*. This resulted the Diltheyian distinction of *erklären* and *verstehen*. The latter, understanding, is bound to the actor in their historical specificity. Understanding is always particular and never results in universal laws, it is *idiographic* and not *nomothetic*. Hermeneutics, thus, points to both crafting and receiving. Meaningful engagement is never abstract objectification but geared to the actor as originator and receiver, author and reader, initiator and redeemer. In reception, the reader's horizon of understanding shifts; their position in discourse changes; they become a possibility of furthered thinking which might be activated in their own writing, the lecture, or the seminar room.
This meaningfulness maintains that what the text says takes place in between reader and text; it is a Gadamerian play of questioning and answering that depends on the hermeneutic competences of both writer and reader. The publication makes a difference in a way that, after meaningful engagement, you can do away with the materiality and the change is still present. It leaves a mark on the reader's mind that cannot be captured in a directive or perhaps more easily accessible, reductive form. It requires reflection of the whole and its context. This is therefore both the strongest and the most elusive notion of the four meanings. There is nothing to gain easily from a publication if we emphasize the core of a hermeneutic device. The humanities are, in such a perspective, not for material profit (Nussbaum, 2010): there is no surplus of directive information.

Publication as Information

You cannot hold on to what a humanities publication says, in its qualitative depth, in the form of a +1 of information. Nevertheless, every publication is also meaningful as this: a source of reductive information. This is already visible in the way publications are handled in everyday discourse. Any abstract or blurb is an informative reference to the substance of the publication. It is a shortcut, and quite meaningful in this role. In an era of time constraints (Rosa, 2013) and digital ontological ordering of content (search engines of all kinds), shortcuts are necessary devices. A conversation in libraries or book stores identifies publications through an essentialising abstraction, too. The bookseller synthezises what a

book says in an ad hoc pitch. Further, abstracting references are not self-referential. They represent the publication, which makes them meaningful in the first place. Selection in the context of information retrieval requires meaningful shortcuts, which in turn are characterised by a shortcutting practice: abstracting and indexing (Warner, 2010). Information can be offered in lieu of a publication—abstracting from its full length and form—or as representative information—a quotation that stands reductively as a part for the whole. This is necessarily instrumental; it ceases to be an offer to reflect, as it aims to be directive. A good illustration of the difference between directivity and reflectivity is the review article, which continues to be a key genre in the humanities (Fritz, 2019: 298–301; Hyland, 2004: 42–44). The review lives on as context that qualitatively accompanies the tradition of the original text, and allows an active dialogue between (constructed) authors. The way it does so can roughly be found in two qualitatively different forms: the abstracting review and the reflective essay. The former is shorter. It administers in an abbreviated form what the work is about, runs the reader through the chapters of the reviewed book, and concludes with a subjective note in the form of: 'This is a fine book for all pragmatist philosophers/medieval historians/Eliot scholars.' The reflective essay tends to be much longer. It provides quick access to the content merely to get started, and it does not walk through the linearity of the text. As the category of the essay indicates, the review essay combines two things: actor and text, reviewer and and reviewed substance. The review essay in this sense represents how the reviewer thought in relation to what the text says, and how some of that thinking changed in the course of reading. In short, the review essay is an open, hermeneutic account that invites reflection; the abstracting essay is an accounting of information.

The publication-as-information is strongly connected to an assumption of autarchy: Does an actor consider a publication to be rather autarch? On the one hand, autarchy here means that the publication is seen as relatively independent from other publications. The actor considers what a publication says out of context and drawn away from the shoulders it stands upon. But there is another aspect, less intuitive but more profound. It is a relative independency of a publication from agencies—agencies in the plural since it concerns both writer and reader. The publication is but an individualized information if it is no longer tied to the subjective practices of writing and receiving, the hermeneutics accounted for above. The writer and their entire social and political situatedness weigh in on the writing. And likewise, the reader reads in a certain way. All writers and readers are cultural intermediaries (Knöchelmann, 2024a). This is true not just in the context of, say, literary fiction. It is

always the case, and particularly so where the competence to understand is strongly bound to all prior reading. A reader cannot just pick up the *Phenomenology of Spirit* without prior philosophical experience and believe that they have got Hegel. Similarly, a reader cannot simply pick up Edward Said and believe that they understand the ontological reality of his message.

This can be abstractly opposed by the (natural) sciences. They necessarily objectify and try to draw the subject(ive writer) out of the text (Hyland, 2004). Reception is similarly dominated by a search for directive information. The publication represents much more an instance of positivism than a hermeneutic device here; it is seen in the light of definitive statements that can be built upon or refuted.[4] The meaning of a scientific text cannot be that of an indefinite resource without the form of direct utility. This is how science progresses. Accumulating data, bringing them into formation, building blocks of information to eventually discover new knowledge. Newness is indeed a sort of progressiveness as described by Kuhn (1996): development takes place within normal science, the historical period of a particular explanation of nature. That period will eventually be overcome. Discursive moves of legitimising, refuting, and discarding what has been legitimately known will lead to a crumbling of the network of information that carried knowledge this far. Revolution takes it apart; scientists have to take a step back from normal science, discard a good amount of their informative building blocks, and work on a new support system (theory) for their data (to come). This law of motion is inherently bound up with the meaning of a publication. It demands that relevant publications are cutting edge. They can be accounted for in distinct form. This meaning of a publication is directive; it means that readers who access a publication gain a surplus of information.

The discourse of *impact and knowledge transfer* similarly feeds into this (for instance: National Science Foundation, 2024; Watermeyer and Hedgecoe, 2016). Publications are synomous for individualized knowledge here, and their impact is accounted for in quantitative metrics. Knowledge is being transferred: you have it at your fingertips, and you can use it in the sense of adding this information to another information. A book or article is a +1, and the quality of the engagment with scholarly substance, the inherent ambiguity that it might fail, and the history of its own formation are irrelevant residues for an informative +1.[5] In its opposition lives the meaning of traditon.

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[4] Note that this does not imply that respective propositions cannot be criticised. They can be rejected for whatever reason the scientist may find. But it cannot be left in an ambiguous state of learning.

[5] This, of course, does not mean that the history of science is irrelevant. But it does mean that the history is primarily relevant to the historians of science and not so much to the scientists themselves.

Publication as Tradition

If, as above, we consider a publication to be meaningful as an addition of information, we abstract from its depth toward autarchy. If we see a publication as a tradition instead, we abstract from concrete content toward context. Referentiality itself has meaning here. Tradition represents a qualitative, contextual aspect of the authorship reference. Nevertheless, it can never be reduced to authorship in a narrow or even formal sense (see next section). Tradition is authorship writ large: the genesis and formation of the interweaving of certain forms, matters, and contexts that form a branch of thinking. Tradition is a cypher for this branch, and a publication attains meaning as a concretization of this tradition-cum-branch of thinking.

Much more than other academic clusters, the humanities are fundamentally representable through their discourse. There are often hardly laboratories, tissues, or equipement. There is neither nature to be discovered, nor society to be categorized. There is primarily *spirit* in all its forms and incarnations. Its material carriers—historical artifacts, works of art, inscriptions on the walls of ancient caves—are secondary. This is no reduction but an opening: the humanities scholar can study anything so long as the study is concerned with the thing's quality as an expression of the human mind (Bod, 2013; Garland, 2012). Because of this ephemeral notion, discourse always feeds on itself and, at the same time, forms its own archive. This recursion is what keeps a branch of thinking alive: its styles, methodologies, paradigms, and actors matter. The publication meaningfully points to the great context it stands in and this context needs this individual contribution in order to survive. The notion of discourse communities manifests this.

A discourse community is formed by their shared epistemological concern and practices, and constituted by specific communicative loci and publishing programs (Vanderstraeten, 2010). They need to be seen "as real, relatively stable groups whose members subscribe, at least to some extent, to a consensus on certain ways of doing things and using language" (Hyland, 2009: 49). The community here is defined by the meaning of their combined contributions—rendering in turn each publication meaningful to the community. It is a shared practice of writing, reading, and citing: "a principled way of understanding how meaning is produced *in interaction* and [which] proves useful in identifying how writers' rhetorical choices depend on purposes, setting and audience" (Hyland, 2009: 66; emphasis in original).

Tradition in this sense is significant as an alternative to the Kuhnian progress that we have encountered above for the sciences. The humanities largely defy this grounding in progress. Its knowledges follow reform rather than revolution; they constantly evolve by circling back on themselve, by follwoing "altogether more reiterative and recursive routes as writers retrace others' steps and revisit previously explored features" (Hyland, 1999: 353). Instead of delivering progress, that which is new differentiates the existing body of knowledge recursively. New cultural and societal settings or developed language environments change only the existence of a problem, not its essence (Rorty, 1979). In return, every answer—every publication—remains relevant—or has the potential to become revived—as an historical relict in the continuing conversation to which the newer contribution adds difference rather than substitution. Humanities scholars write *in the tradition of*, and even study the artefacts and paradigm shifts present in any contribution to discourse throughout history. The publication reflects this: where the sciences emphasize information, the humanities are drawn toward tradition.

The subjectivity of reflection in the humanities is always earmarked by its tradition. The genealogy of a particular way of thinking echoes in every argument. Each publication is a chapter toward the constant realization of its meaningfulness. This is visible materially where each monograph in a publisher's series continues a tradition and renews it. The significance of community ideals inherent in such a realization—truthfulness, openness to otherness, qualitative contextuality—are pertinent to the discussion of democracy and the place the humanities occupy within it. In formal authorship we find a thinning of these ideals.

Publication as Formal Authorship

Whereas tradition requires qualitative contextuality, formal authorship cuts it off. It is the de-contextualized, flat paratext of a publication that is coded as output. Though tradition is an abstraction, it derives meaning from its referential quality. This quality is unwieldy and cannot be pinned down to easily accessible markers. Formal authorship is meaningful precisely because it is not unwieldy, but makes an easily accessible reference possible. Where tradition is a complex 17th Century painting (think Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*, where much ambiguity lies in the shadows), formal authorship is a sticker with a stick figure on it. Displaying the former—both physically and figuratively—requires a considerable investment; the latter can easily be applied at will.

Formal authorship is the compression of the cipher of the author to a flat, directive means, one that can be easily counted and accounted for. Formal authorship is in this sense a symbol of trust, credibility and productivity, for it immediately indicates that this there is a *genuine* publication in a traditional sense. Think of attributes such as fixed author name(s), DOI, publication date, the name of an established journal, a definition (monograph, research article, review, opinion piece), peer review stamp, inclusion in indices, and others. It is such attributes that draw the subtle but significant line between manuscript and *real* publication, between working script and definitive account, between something you dwell on privately and the public symbol you can put on your CV.

Can we think of *in*formal authorship? Materially, we can. Informal authorship refers to all those instance of authorial reference that remain elusive. This ranges from the lecture and the working paper to the myriad of ways text can be informally published today (blog posts, social media, email networks). The practice of preprinting is a particularly convincing case since it provides many of the attributes of formal authorship. It even grants readership since cohorts follow focused preprint repositories and can search for content in external indices. Still, the preprint lacks the official quality that characterizes the traditional publication: the name of the venue and its suggested editorial practice, foremost the security of peer review. Without these attributes, the scholar can often not account for their thinking—the labour that went into the manuscript—in the terms the modern academy subscribes to. But they can do so qualitatively among their peers; think of the blog post that makes a splash, but that cannot be used for promotion. Thus, looking at cultural meaning and not the material, we cannot think of informal authorship. Every material publication has its formal authorship. But the way it is made to count—the way it becomes meaningful in discourse—decides whether it is available as an accountable publication.

The narrative of publish or perish seems to demand such a formalizaton of thinking within an abstract symbol (Knöchelmann, 2024b). These formalities secure the meaningful depth of trust since they signify known practices such as editorial management and peer review, tied to the branded name of the venue. The implication of the fine line between formal and informal authorship must not be underestimated. We can find funding requirements that separate official from unofficial publications on the basis of this line (DFG, 2022). Journal editors steer their venues in relation to this discourse: they implement what is necessary to make their publications count toward formal authorship (Knöchelmann, 2023b). The journal impact factor—although less dominant so far, it is also on the rise in the humanities—is essentializing in just this way. A scholar can account for such quantifiable

impact only if they have formal authorship. Competition on the job market partly depends on it (Niles et al., 2020). This competition is one that is being performed on abstract publication lists also in the humanities. Admission to shortlists (for interviews) depends on the screening of formal authorship instead of on judging text qualitatively (Knöchelmann, 2023a). Formal authorship makes the respective scholar *REFable*. The number, quality, and progression of a scholar's publications matter in such crucial moments of career advancement, first and foremost, in symbolic form. That is, the publication is meaningful here in the most abstract, formal representation as an autarch entity.

Meaning in Practice: 'I disagree, but I've learned something!'

After the abstract presentation of four notions of meaning, an exemplary case is needed to illustrate them. I will use a prominent publication for this: Habermas' recent genealogy of postmetaphysical thinking (Habermas, 2022).[6] It is useful to have a single example to show the subtle differences and emphases of meaning, of how a single publication can be meaningful in different contexts. The chosen book lends itself because the author is well known, it appears to be situated in the discourse of traditional humanities disciplines, and it even has been taken up as a contemporary bestseller in public discourse internationally. Figure 2 provides an overview of how this book is meaningful in the two binary contexts we have encountered above.

Figure 2: Habermas' Also a history of philosophy as a meaningful entity in four contexts.

[6] This is a original research monograph. As mentioned above, this illustration would also work with different types of publications: articles, essay collections, or others.

The Hermeneutic Device: Enabling Reflection on Rational Freedom

In what sense is this book a hermeneutical device? Some may realise that it is a history, a historiography in the context of philosophy. In the end, the publication's title is *Also a* ***history*** *of philosophy*. A history might be seen as a narration of facts, such as: In the work *De libero arbitrio*, written in 388 in Rome, Augustine asserts that reason can overcome its tendency toward evil; in the following years (388-395) he weakens this position by recourse to the case of Adam (Habermas, 2022: I, 567). But facticity is merely the surface of the text. Humanities scholarship goes beyond this surface. Its depth is found in what it means that Augustine reversed his position, how this figures in the larger genealogy of postmetaphysical thinking, and, ultimately, how readers who engage with this work are offered to think differently of the connections of believing and reasoning, of religion and philosophy.

Historical accounts in the humanities are not narrated lists of facts. The facticitiy of what is being said represents only a step toward reflection. We can revise what this monograph means respectively. Habermas' putative history is a narration of stepping stones toward reflecting the formation of rational freedom from the Axial Age up to German Idealism. The historical account serves a systemic purpose: it teaches the prowess to interpret and understand a past to keep origins alive and, through this, make critical examinations of present and futures possible. This is what the humanities do. Taking the substance of *Also a history of philosophy* seriously in this sense means considering how it helps readers to reshape their thinking. By following Habermas' understanding of the past, I reconfigure my thinking within present-day discourse.

The symbolic representation of this book as an instance of information suggests, as we will see below, that there is a simple addition of knowledge, a new way of thinking that replaces an older one. The meaningfulness of the publication as a hermeneutic device opposes this. Seeing the publication in this way evokes the sense of differentation instead of substitution. Habermas' reflections may provoke immediate counter-accounts—opposing reflections on the history of philosophy and metaphysical thinking (Vieweg, 2023). Such opposing publications are not meaningful in a competition of replacement. Despite their opposition, there is no zero-sum game, but rather a cooperative win-win situation. *Materially*, Habermas' reflection is a *new* addition as well as one that is immediately refuted by another new one. The material publication is in struggle here, but this is its practical essence. That is, in *scholarly practice* it is a variant that remains relevant next to previous understandings and

those to come. You still have to read Kant; without having read Kant's texts on morality, Habermas' publication will make sense only conditionally. On one hand, this shows the importance of tradition for hermeneutics. On the other, this illustrates how thinking of publications as hermeneutic devices denies a historical linearity—such as toward an exhaustive theory of nature—and it explains why a wealth of books and their hosts—libraries, most of all—remain relevant.

The Information: Selling Rational Freedom in a Nutshell

Nonetheless, *Also a history of philosophy* is also meaningful in its essentialist abridgement. We certainly have the blurb. A wealth of reviews was also published in various contexts. But even review essays that exemplify an offer to reflect cannot avoid providing an abstraction of what is at the core to be reflected upon. For the present case this might well be the idea "of reconstructing the genesis of and criticizing one-sided forms of rationality that lead to positivism, scientism, and other reductionist accounts of morality and social life" (Forst, 2021: 17).

Such directive information can be put at work in conversations to signify the *latest Habermas* as a talking point; it can also function as a starting point to reflect more comprehensively about the depth of this representative information. To be sure, we cannot each time we wish to talk *about* Habermas sit down and collectively follow his thinking. Reading quickly exhausts itself in the public sphere where talk of what and how something has been read gains frontal stage; this is where humanities discourse and larger society meet.[7] As Habermas himself reflects, the quality of the nexus of private *and* public deliberation is decisive for our stabilization as a democratic society. We cannot rest at the exchange of mere directive information; democratic citizenship requires arriving at reflective interaction—at communicative rationality (Habermas, 1981, 1990).

Nevertheless, the publication-as-information matters to pave the way toward this reflection: to induce a larger issue into public discourse, to get an exchange of reasons going, or, in a capitalist society, to advertise a treatise—all this requires replacing the unwieldy with the shortcut. We need to endure that reductive references in place of comprehensive texts abound in discourse. They are meaningful in their own way. But there

[7] The relation of the humanities to democratic society, and the dependency of one on the other (usually the latter on the former) is regularly called upon (Nussbaum, 2010; Small, 2013; UCL Grand Challenges, 2024). Habermas social theory of reasonable discourse still provides the most comprehensive system to reflect on this relation.

is also a certain trust required that this shortcut stays true to the original text, and that the cipher of the author is not made a scapegoat—or set up as strawman. To the degree that informative abstraction reduces complexity, contextuality, and difficulty, it risks becoming unfaithful to the discourse of the humanities. We can chat about the latest Habermas in all kinds of situations—having the heavy tome in mind, it is meaningful in this abstraction. But in the end we have to sit down and work through 1,700 pages of administrative philosophy. Scholarship exists at the interplay of such different guises of meaning.

The Tradition: Concretizing Critical Theory

A different kind of abstraction is found in the publication as tradition. *Also a history of philosophy* is exemplarily meaningful in this respect. Its critical business appears to show the author's inclusion within the Frankfurt School. This may be so even though it is difficult to place Habermas, the historical person, within this tradition (Müller-Doohm, 2014). We could seek instead the less focussed symbol of Critical Theory (Später, 2024). This is a tradition that is embodied in a lively discourse community in its fourth generation today, and Habermas is a venerated member so that his latest philosophical musings inevitably become part of the this branch of thinking, dialectically writing it forth. This publication, thus, is meaningful in and for this canon. Already the publishing program it is included in, both in the original and in translations, indicates this sense.

Traditions are perpetuated through their reception and the meaningfulness discourse communities construct around probable additions. If you wish to find out what the position of Critical Theory is today, *Also a history of philosophy* is a towering symbol that cannot be avoided. Author, publication, and tradition live and breath co-dependently through this constructed connection. Without this breathing, indeed *inspiring* contextuality, the publication would loose considerable potential in its reception. This is—at least and perhaps in the most material sense—the case in terms of the communities that form in the name of this tradition: conferences, special issues, reading groups, seminars. Secondary literature emerges from tradition and presents itself as meaningful incarnation (Müller-Doohm et al., 2024). Their dialogue both perpetuates and criticizes what Habermas was reflecting on. There may be confusion and dissenting in the form of: 'I disagree, but I've learned something!' But this makes this type of community of dissensus essentially humanistic in learning—opening up the possibility of democratic constitutionality (Readings, 1999).

The Formal Authorship: Formal Fixation of Materiality and Reward

The original formal authorship of *Also a history of philosophy* is its coded paratext:

> Habermas, Jürgen: *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*. Band 1: Die okzidentale Konstellation von Glauben und Wissen. Band 2: Vernünftige Freiheit. Spuren des Diskurses über Glauben und Wissen. 1775 Seiten. Ersterscheinungstermin: 11.11.2019. ISBN: 9783518587348. Berlin, Suhrkamp Verlag. www.suhrkamp.de/buch/juergen-habermas-auch-eine-geschichte-der-philosophie-t-9783518587348.

This can be repeated for its many translations. These seemingly bureaucratic references are the stable certifiers of the decade long labour that went into the work. They turn text and thought into referencable entity, and bring the writer *in formation* for the body of knowledge (Knöchelmann, 2025). Appreciation and material rewards, in the form of prizes and, quite simply, remuneration, are concentrated around these referring entities. They are the most basic and, because of this, the universally accountable references available. And as such they are crucial to the modern academy.

To the degree that bureaucracy and its formal and flat rule-following is a development that is integral to modernity, the humanities, increasingly also dominated by such rule-following, must also deal with such formalization and flattening. Max Weber is our guide in this respect. For Weber, bureaucratic formalism means impersonal interaction, matter-of-factness, and treating decision-making based on rules. Note the sense of comparability that is characteristic to all these aspects. The development of such rules leads to a discouragement of regulating a "matter by individual commands given for each case, but only to regulate the matter abstractly" (Weber, 1978: 958). This is, in short, a drive from qualitative engagement and unwieldy tradition and its qualitative incarnations toward direct informativity and formal authorship. It implies shunning qualitative engagement for some time, which in our case suggests that tradition and learning matter only after formal accountability. With recourse to Walter Benjamin, we can find that "formal authorship evokes an appearance of equivalent nearness, however distant the content may be" (Knöchelmann, 2023a: 126).

And this is where the example of Habermas falls short. For if there is one thing that Habermas quite reasonable no longer needs, it is formal authorship. But at the opposite end of a career, for aspiring scholars, having such a referring entity on your CV—Suhrkamp most of all—it symbolizes the possibility of the most astonishing returns for career advances. Imagine we take the same text as an unpublished manuscript, published by a niche press, or published by a major press; all notions of meaning discussed above

depend on which of the cases applies. For an aspiring scholar, this is a liability: sure, you can be a great thinker, but how that thinking translates into a publication is fundamental to your future as this thinker. It is therefore important to keep all four notions in mind and to keep reminding ourselves that there is more to a publication than might intuitively appear. The writer shapes the text, authorship shapes the writer: the meaning of a publication shapes and is shaped by the material knowledge interest.

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