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The Inauthenticity of Memory Manipulation and the Ethics of Vulnerable Communication

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ABSTRACT

Concurrent with an expanding medical science around the possibility of modifying and/or erasing memories has been philosophical questions concerning the ethicality of doing so, especially for trauma survivors and victims of PTSD. In this paper, I look to argue against such pharmacological methods as being inauthentic in a Sartrean sense. Following from this formulation, I turn to the work of Jürgen Habermas and synthesize it with the work of Jean Paul Sartre to discuss a possibility of using communicative rationality and an attention to authenticity as a means of mediating trauma in a more constructive way than memory manipulation. As a way of discussing the application of such an ethics, I discuss two disparate fields in which it could be applied: social media and food, drink, and the table.

KEYWORDS

Authenticity, Communication, Trauma, Memory Erasure

I. INTRODUCTION

Recent developments in medical science conjoined with an elevation of awareness around memory related illnesses such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder have brought the possibility of memory manipulation, including erasure, to the forefront. There are debates concerning the ethicality of erasing or manipulating one's memories, even if those memories cause harm. However, before getting into these debates, it seems prudent to define what is meant by memory manipulation and erasure in reference to medical science's current and prospective ability to do so, as well as the nature of this manipulation, and what kinds of memories are in question.

Alexandre Erler presented a suitable understanding of memory manipulation as "all methods of modifying memory in a desirable way that do not involve enhancing it—at least not directly" (Erler 2010, 240). This understanding is inclusive of erasure of memories. It also heads toward what kind of memories are in question, that is traumatic or otherwise troublesome memories. The manipulation of trivial or happy memories will not be discussed, as it seems unlikely that people would pursue that, nor does it seem that a critical understanding of the manipulation of those memories would produce a different analysis of the ethicality of memory manipulation. As far as the medical science for memory manipulation goes, there is propranolol treatment in which someone could take that beta blocker shortly after experiencing a traumatic or troublesome event, numbing the emotional impact of the memory (Erler 2010, 240). There has also been research into memory manipulation via HDAC inhibitors by MIT neuroscientist Li-Huei Tsai in which that drug was used to "help mice extinguish a fearful memory of a traumatic event that took place in the distant past" (Johnson 2014). Although this drug has not been tested on human subjects, the possibility of such a thing is possible in the not so distant future.

As the medical science continues to develop, there has been a rising philosophical literature on the topic. One important work in the field was Alexandre Erler's article "Does Memory Modification Threaten our Authenticity?" in which he argues that it necessarily does threaten authenticity when it involves memory editing, but enhancement—something that will not be discussed here—does not necessarily threaten it (Erler 2010, 235). Another seminal work in the field of the ethics of memory manipulation is "The Normativity of Memory Modification" by

S. Matthew Liao and Anders Sandberg, in which they come to the conclusion that “it is up to individuals to determine the permissibility of particular uses of MMTs” provided that they “do not harm themselves or others... and there is no *prima facie* duty to retain particular memories” (Liao and Sandberg 2008, 96).

A third influential article in the field is Elisa A. Hurley’s “Combat Trauma and the Moral Risks of Memory Manipulating Drugs.” Hurley argues that the use of memory manipulating drugs may prevent the subject of combat trauma from understanding their role as perpetrators of violence in war, a term she refers to as the “state of grace.” This preemption of the state of grace, “underwrites successful gestures of reparation toward those harmed by their actions” (Hurley 2010, 35). Hurley’s position is made clearer in her article, “The Moral Costs of Prophylactic Propanolol.” She states,

prophylactic intervention that works by interfering with the laying down of trauma memories, propranolol threatens to permanently cut off access to the emotions experienced at the time of trauma, access that might be important for holding oneself and others accountable for moral wrongdoing (Hurley 2007, 35).

It seems that this line of thinking on accountability for moral wrongdoing also applies in reference to a narrative sense of identity as well. Also, in this there is a clear sense of responsibility for one’s actions that will be discussed at length in relation to Sartrean authenticity.

Another important article in the literature of memory modification is Adam Kolber’s “Therapeutic Forgetting: The Legal and Ethical Implications of Memory Dampening.” In this article, Kolber argues that “memory dampening has the potential someday to ease the suffering of millions of people and that heavy-handed government restriction of memory dampening is inappropriate, it follows that we should have some limited right to therapeutically forget.” He points towards a “freedom of memory,” that people should have autonomy over what is and is not in their memory (Kolber 2006, 1567). While the proliferation of this research shouldn’t be hampered, it does seem imprudent to approach memory from the perspective that its manipulation or erasure would not have an impact on others, something that Kolber’s “freedom of memory” seems to do.

Memory manipulation and erasure is problematic for a few reasons. One reason is that it promotes an inauthentic form of being. Memory manipulation

is an act in bad faith, denying the authenticity of one's own lived experience, in favor of a presumably easier path forward through an event. Although, following from the honesty that authenticity should foster, a more compassionate form of resilience can be developed on the basis of vulnerable communication between empathetic subjects.

II. THE INAUTHENTICITY OF MEMORY MANIPULATION

In order to understand why memory manipulation is inauthentic, a conception of what it means inauthentic needs to be developed. Generally speaking, this conception of authenticity runs along existentialist lines, relying on Sartrean notions of it. This will not be a complete explication of the concept of authenticity, but a development of the relevant ideas contained in the concept, namely honesty and responsibility. For Sartre, the negation of authenticity is bad faith, which is "a lie to oneself within the unity of a single consciousness" (Sartre 1972, 800). From this definition of bad faith, a sense of an obligation of honesty towards every being can be implicitly understood. There is an *a priori* and universal obligation of authenticity. We owe it to each other to be the best selves we can be. People are constitutive of the human species and therefore equal architects of the human condition. By living authentically, which means to bear the responsibility of all actions and to face them honestly, one can fulfill this obligation and be the best person one can be.

Sartre describes this radical responsibility as a result of one's radical freedom, stating "man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being" (Sartre 1972, 707). Since, for Sartre, we are the makers of our own reality, we have only ourselves to blame for when things go wrong. This means not running away from the hard things of life, for example trauma. Taking responsibility for one's actions—even what may happen to someone as a matter of contingency, which to some extent trauma may be—is an important part of Sartrean authenticity.

Not only must this duty of responsibility and radical honesty be upheld for others, but for oneself as well. This radical honesty towards self involves a critique of one's own actions and understanding if they truly reflect the best person one could be. Although this may seem harsh, and *prima facie*, it certainly is, there is a way a more compassionate system of vulnerable communication following

from this radical responsibility and honesty could be developed. This idea will be explicated in the next section of this paper. However, to be authentic, trauma survivors must confront their traumas as a means of reasserting control over their narrative, instead of running away from them with the use of pharmacological methods.

The inauthenticity of memory manipulation is clear from this understanding of responsibility. If one were to manipulate their traumatic and/or troublesome memories, they would be shirking the responsibility of confronting them, and processing them. The act of taking propranolol is one of bad faith because it rejects true experience for a dampened one. Those who choose propranolol over being-in-itself choose to delude themselves and others concerning one of the most constitutive parts of who one is, memory. The prescription of memory manipulation seems to sell people's control over their own lives short. Using memory manipulation as a means of dealing with traumatic memories undercuts people's ability to overcome the worst situations, and still come out the other side. On the other hand, facing the terrifying responsibility of having one's own memories, and working through them by various forms of therapy, seems to be a more constructive way of going about processing trauma than forcing oneself to forget about it through medical means. Communicative methods of overcoming trauma such as therapy confront the trauma directly by making it have less control over one's being, whereas memory manipulation accomplishes that through a delusion of the self.

Even if the authenticity problem were not an issue, there would still be the issue of other people holding the narrative of the traumatic event in memory. It seems to be the ultimate shirking of responsibility in the sense that it offloads the emotional weight of trauma off of the victim and onto the others around them, while having nothing productive for spirit that a vulnerable communication could provide. This seems to be a great disservice and dishonesty towards one's fellow person. This is well illustrated in a scene of the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* in which the two main characters Joel (Jim Carey) and Clementine (Kate Winslet) have an interaction after Clementine has the memory of their relationship erased. Joel approaches Clementine at her job and is racked with anxiety and emotional pain when it becomes clear she has no recollection of who he is, despite being in a loving relationship just recently (Gondry 2004). By erasing her memory of the

relationship, Clementine leaves Joel to hold the memory of their love in isolation, shirking her responsibility of radical honesty and responsibility towards others.

The notion of responsibility is expressed well in Hurley's conception of the state of grace. In retaining the traumatic memory of combat in war, perpetrators of violence are forced to confront the role they had in the violence they did, even if they are not directly responsible for the situation they are in. Although a Sartrean would not say that they are not directly responsible for being in a war situation, as they did choose to join the military or to not dodge the draft, the point concerning responsibility still shines through. Hurley is keen to point out that by embracing their responsibility for the situation they in part caused, perpetrators of violence in war are doing something constructive by enabling the possibility of making moral reparations to the ones that they wronged.

It is this obligation of responsibility and honesty that seems to be rejected by Liao and Sandberg's approval of MMTs on a case by case basis. We owe it to one another, assuming everyone is striving towards authenticity, to experience reality honestly, and express that experience truthfully, or at least to the best of one's ability. Liao and Sandberg's approval of MMTs on a case by case basis is only acceptable if one permits inauthenticity as a possibility of ethical living. Although, their approval of MMTs as a means of release from traumatic memory should be seen as compassionate, it is at the cost of honesty, responsibility, and authenticity, all of which potential MMT patients must be made aware of prior to the memory modification. However, from the honesty that authenticity necessitates, one can develop an equally compassionate way of coping with trauma, a form of resilience based in vulnerable communication facilitated by radical honesty and responsibility.

III. THE ETHICS OF VULNERABLE COMMUNICATION

At first glance, preventing people from modifying traumatic memories seems to lack compassion for trauma victims. It forces them to relive the trauma and hold it memory when this is painful. This is at the cost of honesty, responsibility, and authenticity, all of which potential MMT patients must be made aware of prior to a memory modification. This is the tension between the duty of authentic being and the duty of compassion. It seems that communication could mediate them. With

the honesty that authenticity necessitates, one can develop a compassionate form of resilience based in the vulnerability contained in radical honesty.

This kind of resilience is a communicative one. Through the communication of trauma to empathetic others, one can re-assert control over one's narrative, owning the trauma and forcing it to relinquish its hold over the victim. This is the argument Susan Brison makes in the preface of her book *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. She states,

The communicative act of bearing witness to traumatic events not only transforms traumatic memories into narratives that can then be integrated into the survivors' sense of self and view of the world, but it also reintegrates the survivor into a community, reestablishing bonds of trust and faith in others (Brison 2002, xi).

The kind of empathetic listening that is needed to bear witness to trauma involves vulnerability that should follow from the radical honesty that authenticity demands. If one lives authentically, then they are radically honest about their way of being, understanding their responsibility as human beings as determinates of the human condition as well as the individual's. This radical honesty means having the emotional fortitude to be vulnerable in the face of the worst possible events, i.e. trauma. It seems that this idea of empathetic listening is a more specific form of the loving perception that María Lugones discusses in "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception." She argues that "travelling to each other's 'worlds' would enable us to *be* through *loving* each other" (Lugones 1987, 8). It seems that this world traveling is facilitated by that radical honesty and vulnerability located in authenticity.

In being radically honest with one another, one teaches the other about their world, so that the other can travel to it, and lovingly perceive. However, the loving perceiver doesn't proclaim to know the world or to feel it in its full effects. Instead, the loving perceiver, who is an empathetic listener, simply states "You are heard." From this loving perception, the other(s) can help the traumatized in loosening the grip the trauma has on the traumatized person, freeing them from the trauma in a more authentic way than memory modification. These situations of vulnerable communication facilitated by radical honesty seem much more productive than simply eliminating the problem like memory manipulation would. In fact, it seems that using memory manipulation would be a way of arrogantly perceiving, seeing

the traumatized person's world as something that is not worth travelling to and understanding. Instead of understanding the world of their trauma, they brush it aside and eliminate it. This empathetic listening and loving perception of the trauma narrative is only possible in a situation in which the listeners and speakers are radically honest with one another, something that MMT users would never have the opportunity to do. The question now becomes how can radical honesty and authenticity among all people be facilitated.

To be able to answer this pressing question, the ideas of communicative reason and action must be developed. This idea is central to the work of 20th century German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. In disambiguating instrumental reason from a communicative one, his ideas are able to be used effectively in trauma theory. Habermas also offers useful insights in terms of trauma theory as a result of his historical situation. The entry on Habermas in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy states "The Nuremberg Trials were a key formative moment that brought home to him the depth of Germany's moral and political failure under National Socialism" (Bohman and Rehg 2014). Witnessing this public exposition of the trauma of the Holocaust assuredly influenced his philosophy of communicative action.

After the Second World War, Habermas' mentor Theodor Adorno said "Hitler imposes a new categorical imperative on human beings in their condition of unfreedom; to arrange their thought and action that Auschwitz would not repeat itself" (Jeffries 2017, 747-748). In reference to this quote Stuart Jeffries, author of *Grand Hotel Abyss*, states "It is this thought, and this moral duty, that has impelled Habermas to work to ensure that human beings never stoop to such barbarism again" (Jeffries 2017, 747-748). This idea of a communicative rationality that can save human beings from the abyss of reason that Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer pointed out in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is productive of an ethics that prevents this barbarism, an ethics of listening and being heard, of loving perception of the other, what Habermas calls the Theory of Communicative Action (TCA). Not only does it seem that his ethics can rescue reason from its barbarism, but it can also aid trauma survivors in overcoming trauma, or as Brison put it "reestablishing bonds of trust and faith in others" (Brison 2002, xi). The connection between Brison and Habermas' ethics is made clearer with Jeffries' description of the TCA as a situation "whereby participants in argument learn from others and from themselves and question suppositions taken for granted" and "like an

ongoing South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission" (Jeffries 2017, 774-775). In both their ethics, the importance of the speech act and communicating, which involves listening and being heard, has a great importance.

Many trauma theorists have pointed out that an approach towards trauma on the basis of rationality falls flat. However, this conception of rationality is only that in its instrumental sense. Instrumental reason is like that of Kant's. It is monological and isolated, based in a singular autonomous subject working through things according to universal laws. Habermas' reason, a communicative one, is dialogical. It is based in consensus that is brought about through communication and/or discourse (Jeffries 2017, 745-746). Where Kant's reason is subjective, but also universalizable, Habermas' is intersubjective. Of course an instrumental reason is incapable of working through trauma for victims, for there are no rules or laws that can make sense of trauma. Trauma is a suspension of those ethical rules and laws as an objectification of the other, rather than equally recognizing the other as equally human, at least in person to person trauma. But a communicative reason is capable of mediating trauma because it is based in consensus that many people coming together form. This consensus is not an *a priori* and universal one, as a Kantian instrumental reason would be productive of, but it is arrived at universally by many subjectivities working in cooperation and solidarity. Habermas states this clearly states his Discourse Principle, "(D) Only those norms can claim validity that could meet with the acceptance of all concerned in practical discourse" (Habermas 1998, 41). It is not our duty to be communicatively rational, but it is to be authentic. Communicative rationality seems to facilitate this authenticity. Habermas articulates this facilitation well when he states "Discourse ethics defends a morality of equal respect and solidaristic responsibility for everybody" (Habermas 1998, 39). This is seemingly very analogous with the Sartrean conception of what is necessitated for action by authenticity, especially if one is willing to equate "equal respect" with a kind of radical honesty and responsibility.

Also, trauma theorists have pointed towards an unspeakable nature of trauma. Many cite the work of Jacques Derrida on the concept of hauntology in reference to this. For example, Justina Dillon and Michael O'Loughlin's "Questions Unasked: The Legacy of Childhood Trauma in the Life Narrative of a Lithuanian Woman Survivor of the 1941 Soviet Deportations" frame their understanding of trauma in reference to Derrida's hauntology. They state "we frame this work as an inquiry into hauntology, or the presence of ghosts or spectral presences that

while hidden from view, make their presence felt both in individual lives and in the collective psyche of a group or nation" (Dillon and O'Loughlin 2015, 175). This conception of trauma seems to point towards it being not really there, but a haunting presence, one that is unspeakable. However, it seems that through the power of communicative rationality, these specters of trauma could be exorcised, made real, and speakable.¹

Habermas argued that communicative rationality was at its peak in the bourgeois public sphere of the Enlightenment, of which he identified a few constitutive institutions: the salon, the cafés, and table societies. (Habermas 1989, 30). Of course this was not limited to those institutions, but those institutions were certainly constitutive of some of the bourgeois public sphere in the Enlightenment. But, as Habermas argues, through the commodification of discourse through mass media, these sites of what he calls "ideal speech situations" throughout his works withered away, leaving us with little sense of communicative rationality. The unfinished project of modernity, which is another one of Habermas' major themes, it seems is to recover it as a way to reach consensus for society, i.e. build democracy into social relations (Bohman and Rehg 2014). To return to the discussion of mediating trauma, an ideal speech situation for that seems to be one in which the actors are able to be authentic, that is radically honest and vulnerable.

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas outlines three parameters for the existence of a public sphere in which communicative reason can thrive. The first criterion is a sense of equality among its members. Habermas writes, "They preserved a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether. The tendency replaced the celebration of rank with a tact befitting equals" (Habermas 1989, 36). This is the idea of equal recognition of the other's subjectivity, whose dialectic has its historical-philosophical basis in Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic. The second is that "the discourses of these institutions were not the interpretations of the courts or church, but their own" (Habermas 1989, 36-37). This points towards an idea of autonomy and full ownership of the ideas that one is espousing, which seems to be analogous to the understanding of radical honesty presented. Lastly, the

1. It is interesting that Derridean and Habermasian conceptions of dealing with trauma come into conflict considering their feud concerning Habermas' reading of Derrida in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.

third criterion is that institutions of a public sphere must never become entirely exclusive. He states "However exclusive the public might be in any give instance, it could never close itself off entirely and become consolidated as a clique" (Habermas 1989, 36-37).

These criteria are then universalized in *The Inclusion of the Other* with his four part statement concerning the features of argumentation. This reproduction of the criteria of the public sphere has added to it a greater sense of the lack of coercion and the "equal opportunity to make contributions" (Habermas 1998, 44). From this it is clear that subjects in a communicatively rational ideal speech situation must be active and empathetic listeners, as referenced in the first criteria, and radically honest, as referenced in the second. The third criterion seems to point towards a radical responsibility in the sense that each person owes it to the other and the self to maximize the perspective from which one hears from. This universalization of perspectives looks to understand the full effects of one's actions, and to communicate the effects of other's actions to them, allowing one to be better responsible for action, and thus more authentic.

Now, I would like to offer two novel sites of potential trauma mediation. The first is social media. Certainly, social media as it exists now does not exist as a public sphere of communicative rationality. Although it is nearly universally inclusive, and people do generally espouse their own ideas on the Internet, it is very clear that users of social media lack the equal recognition of others in their communications online. This is evidenced by the proliferation of cyber-bullying and misleading others on the basis of the internet's anonymity. Although such corners of the Internet could and do exist, it is very clear that this is not the dominant way of using the most radical means of communication ever developed in human history. It is important to remember that in the public sphere of the Enlightenment communicative rationality did not operate all the time and at all levels. The café was not always a site for rational debate, but oftentimes "these discussions would devolve into 'idle gossip'" (Robiquet 1965, 41). Just because particular portions of an institution negate its character as a public sphere, this does not universalize this quality. Nonetheless, communicative reason has a meager existence online currently.

An idealized social media would be good for facilitating communicative reason, and working through trauma. By not being bound by geographic space, the Internet allows for people to make connections, and communicate, across

great distance. Also, subjects in the trauma sharing situation are able to put more thought and time into what is being said. This is as a result of the lack of geographic and spatial bonds. Since one would not be in the same room with the other one is communicating with, there would not be an awkwardness in the silence while someone thinks of a cogent response. This would aid trauma sharing in the sense that responses could become more empathetic and clearer with this increased time. Not only this, but on the Internet, people can search out empathetic listeners that are ready and willing to hear one's trauma. Furthermore, the depersonalized aspect of the internet, that in some sense is the cause of the lack of equal recognition between subjects may also be its saving power for communicating trauma, as the victim doesn't have to feel the anxiety of being physically present with others while bearing one's trauma.

Interestingly, the advent of call-out culture in some sense offers a strong sense of the responsibility and honesty that would be contained in a vulnerable speech situation. People online who "call-out" others for their problematic behavior are holding the other responsible for their problematicism. This is despite the fact that this act of calling someone out, especially when that person is someone who holds some power, is difficult. This is exemplary of the emotional fortitude needed in radical honesty. This is not to hold call out culture as a prime example of mediating trauma but to point towards the possibility of using social media as means of exposing/naming trauma, holding people accountable for their actions (radical responsibility), and speaking using radically honest speech. What is lacking in it being helpful more mediating the named trauma, is that oftentimes is actual ramifications for the person called out, and/or a lack of recognition by the person called out of their wrong doing.

The second site of potential trauma mediation concerns food, drink, and the table. Food and drink have a remarkable way of bringing people together. So much of sociability is based around food and drink. It seems the necessary fact of maintaining existence by eating and drinking has resulted in food becoming a social fact. Food and drink were instrumental in the establishment of the bourgeois public sphere that Habermas discusses, an argument I've made more robustly in other work. More contemporarily, food and drink is constantly used to frame social activities such as lunch dates, business dinners, catching up with an old friend over a beer, etc. In its power of bringing people together, and being

conducive to conviviality, food and drink can be used as a way to organize the mediation of trauma with receptive and empathetic others.

One of the oldest symbols for making peace with another is breaking bread. This act of taking in a meal carries great symbolic weight, predicated on notions of shared trust and social bonds, oftentimes resembling that of family. In a rather animalistic, yet also beautifully human way, by choosing to break bread with someone, one places their trust in the other that each won't hurt the other in some way when they are vulnerable. It is this kind of thinking I wish to apply to trauma mediation at the table. By opening oneself up to taking a meal with someone, one chooses to share something with the other and this establishes a bond with the other. Even Habermas and Derrida could heal the wounds of their feud over a meal. Derrida's biographer Benoît Peeters states, "During a friendly lunch, Habermas did all in his power to 'wipe out the traces of the previous polemic, with an exemplary probity' for which Derrida would always be grateful" (Peeters 2013, 501). This bond can be used to facilitate vulnerable speech not only among sparring philosophers but even among the worst of enemies, for example, a rape survivor and her attacker. This certainly takes emotional fortitude on the part of the victim, but this kind of radical honesty towards what happened to oneself will exorcise the trauma, and direct this pain towards the attacker, forcing him to recognize the evil of what was done, holding him responsible.

In some sense, the use of food and drink to mediate trauma is already underway in present society. People, oftentimes women, gather together and drink wine and discuss their lives, oftentimes the troublesome aspects of it. In this case, food and drink loosens the tension and anxiety of trauma sharing, making it easier to speak of it. This also applies to more masculine dominated settings, albeit with considerably less vulnerability and actual communication involved.

IV. CONCLUSION

Memory manipulation is inauthentic. But survivors are not stuck in dealing with their trauma. In being authentic and taking responsibility for what happens in one's life, one has to be radically honest with themselves and others about what happened to them. This is true for all people, not just trauma survivors. This radical honesty is productive of vulnerable speech situations in which trauma can be mediated with empathetic and receptive others. This situation seems to point

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towards a public sphere of trauma mediation that uses communicative reason to reclaim control over one's narrative with the presence and help of empathetic and receptive others.

Not only does this ethics seem to point towards an empathetic way of confronting trauma, and mediating it for the betterment of a fractured self, but also a way to prevent trauma from occurring. If discourse ethics conjoined by a Sartrean conception of authenticity is universally strived for, trauma situations seem as if they would be less likely to occur on the basis of equal recognition of individual's subjectivity. Trauma is the objectification of the other's subjectivity and the suspension of ethics, so if that tendency for man to objectify the other is transcended, it seems that a more ethical world can be developed for humanity by humanity on the basis of authenticity and communicative rationality.

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