

## COMPLEXITY, SENSE AND RITUAL BEHAVIOR

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**Abstract:** *In this contribution we deal with the problem of the reduction of complexity from the point of view of social sciences and consequently the notion of “sense” for the human being who lives in a society that is developing faster and faster. Despite the growing social complexity, we see how the search for the sense of life remains strongly anchored to the religious dimension and in general to the rituals that are biologically part of the human being in social practices.*

**Keywords:** *Complexity, Lifeworld, Ordinary Communication, Extra-ordinary Communication, Rituals, Habitual Behavior*

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### Introduction

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From a classical philosophical perspective, the problem of the unity of what is complex has been addressed as the problem of the ever-real origin of God (principium) as demonstrated by the work of Nicola Cusano. What could be thought of as compound should also be conceived as decomposable and, therefore, as susceptible to being destroyed such as political units, cities and emperors [Luhmann, 1992]. In addition, it was possible to distinguish between compositions necessary for the stability of the world and contingent compositions, as well as between conceptual decomposition and material division. This conceptual plan constituted the device to distinguish the whole from its parts. A whole can be broken down into smaller and smaller partial integers until it reaches simple elements, which are not decomposable and therefore indestructible. The indestructibility of the elements, or of individuals,

was the threshold from which the worldly order referred to a permanently constituted nature or, in religious terms, to creation. Only religious powers, only God could arrange elements so that the world could be conceived as consisting of stable final components that also delimited their variability until the end of time. Transcendental philosophy conceived complexity as indeterminate, interpreting it at the temporal level as an open future, at the material level, as an infinite multiplicity of causal relationships and, at the social level, as the very quality of the subject that is proper to all human beings. The single has been reduced to a negative concept. Although rationally necessary, the articulation of indeterminate complexity according to the temporal/material/social scheme determines the basis of its reduction without indicating this process within the scheme itself. In this sense, the starting point is given by the limitation of the concept of individuality to human beings and the concept of subject to consciousness that is determinable through its self-reflection. The subjects are deprived of both their natural determination and the protection offered by religion so that they are directed towards the search for a common disposition. This result involves, from a semantic point of view, the renunciation of the immortality of the soul based on its indestructibility in favor of a philosophy of the subject, in which the concept of complexity has no relevance, because it has been replaced by a self-reference analysis. The natural sciences develop towards infinite possibilities of decomposition of their final elements with the consequence that we must abandon the representation of a perfect world that is replaced by the idea of a historically contingent reality produced by evolution and susceptible to destruction. In this context, it is important to emphasize that the construction of complexity always takes place selectively, that is, it is related to structures that have selective functions and give rise to "emerging properties". An important problem regarding complexity research in sociology is the determination of its supposed elementary unit. In the scientific discussion of the 1960s and 1970s, the concept of complexity was mainly used in technical and planning contexts. But, even in this case, the complexity was very difficult to grasp in its internal dynamics. The problem of complexity explores the possibilities of investigating microsystems and those based on statistical data.

These difficulties have allowed to grow alternative philosophical opinions such as hermeneutics, in which complexity is closely related to the notion of "sense" and its determined selectivity (Luhmann). Following the phenomenological analysis introduced by Husserl, sense could be understood as a series of references that start from a nucleus constituted by the actuality of intentional experience (*Erleben*) and lead to unattainable horizons, so that each experience must select which sense is intended. Hermeneutics has also discovered the recursive entanglement in the content of the text that mediates between it and the interpreter. But the difference between this thematization of the need for selection and that transmitted by the concept of complexity is demonstrated by the fact that the theory of meaning moves from actuality and possibility, where the theory of complexity is based on the distinction between elements and relations. With the recent developments of systems theory, on the one hand, and hermeneutics on the other, this difference is relativized if not totally canceled. We can plausibly say that the theory of sense is a peculiar version of the problem of complexity, an evolutionarily late and successful vision. In evolution we observe the development of systems that operate on the basis of sense, that recognize themselves and the world through the mediated "sense" and are therefore forced to carry out their operations selectively, starting from the actual temporality from time to time. We observe the growth of particular forms of sense that can connect the open possibilities, make it understandable and allow a sufficiently fast learning process. A promising philosophical vision is the theory of communicative action introduced by Jürgen Habermas. Like Luhmann, Habermas considers the notion of meaning as primitive compared to the classical notion of "subject".

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### **1. Communication, Sense and Rituals**

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A theory of the constitution of the social world and the related problem of reducing complexity, which moves from the notion of action, must take into account three fundamental theoretical options [Habermas, 1981], [Giovagnoli 2000]. The first option concerns the notion of "sense", which is understood as

the meaning of a word or phrase. There is nothing like a pure or precategorical intention of the speaker. The sense always has a symbolic expression, that is to say intentions must always take a symbolic form to achieve clarity and be expressed. We can consider social action in its communicative form as the basic notion to clarify the constitution of the social world. In addition to this form of communication that characterizes interaction in everyday life,

Through the notion of communicative action Habermas overcomes systemic functionalism, idealism and historical materialism since he manages to grasp the interactive dynamics of the participants in a social practice. Communicative action implements a process of rationalization through language that has involved the different social spheres including religion, but that brings in itself the possibility of an immanent criticism and revision of the paradigms that succeed in social evolution. The reproduction of the lifeworld takes place through communicative action, but communicative action depends on the resources of the world of life that represents a cognitive and cultural background.

Communicative action is aimed at understanding and shows itself in the use of linguistic acts (Habermas rereads the theory of linguistic acts of Austin and Searle) from which results the possibility of isolating a formal normative structure that is based on claims of validity (truth, truthfulness and normative correctness) that direct action towards different worlds (objective, subjective and social) and therefore are satisfied in a corresponding way. Starting from the study of linguistic uses, the regions of the world of life and its reproduction are identified. With the term "culture" the agents have background interpretations that ensure consent but can be critically reviewed. "Society" as a component of the world of life represents the set of legitimate systems that regulate the life of groups and guarantee solidarity. "Personality" becomes an artificial word to describe the subject who has communicative competence; the socialized agent (able to speak and act) can participate in understanding processes in different contexts and affirm his identity in changing relationships of interaction. Habermas also proposes the idealized formal structure of rational discourse in

which questions of truth, morality and social justice are discussed. Theoretical, practical and political discourses present rational and ideal conditions with respect to their scope of action.

The "lifeworld" represents the transcendental horizon of human life, a horizon that is renewed through communicative action. To consider it in an ontological and epistemological sense means to consider human nature and its evolution in relation to the objective world and the social world. Post-metaphysical thought does not admit any dualism between the objective world and the mental world, nor even forms of scientific reductionism, but it concentrates on the structures of cognitive and moral development [Habermas, 1992].

The lifeworld is the horizon of perceptual and cultural experience or the background from which we can raise claims of validity and exchange reasons to know and act. It is revealed in dialogical situations where the pragmatic structure of communication acquires a fundamental role. Starting from the normativity of this structure, participants can take a position for or against the validity claims available to them. The lifeworld acquires an ontological and epistemological primacy that emerges in communication and therefore represents the background of research processes in the natural and social sciences. In this way, even showing the great contribution that Husserl proposed to hinder the mathematization of nature, communication replaces the philosophy of consciousness as well as the metaphysics that founds religious interpretations. Habermas proposes a third solution: the transcendental spontaneity of the Kantian Ego manifests itself in those practices in which the reproduction of the world of life is internally connected with intramondan learning processes. These learning processes are possible by virtue of an interactive exchange between intentional relationship with the world, mutual assumption of perspectives, use of differentiated language in a propositional sense, instrumental reasoning and cooperation. The combined game of these interactions makes it possible to enhance the surprising results of the biological, psychological and cultural sciences in support of the structure of communicative action, which has a weaker normativity than the strong one connoting traditions, religion and moral norms. The world of life is also understood as a "space of

reasons" to use Sellars' metaphor [Habermas, 2009]. In this space we see that the participants are able to cooperate in a different way compared to the primates as shown by Tomasello's research. Cooperation is therefore described by Habermas as characterized by a typically human double normativity: the weak normativity of linguistic conventions and the strong one of traditions and moral values.

Religion finds its place in the extra-daily communication represented in rituals, because symbolization goes beyond the incarnation of semantic content to show the binding role of tradition, norms and institutions. Rituals have the function of making it possible to share individual motivations and to resolve the conflict between individual self-affirmation and community. Even gestural communication, a fundamental part of rituals, represents from the point of view of social pragmatics, a form of intelligent and useful cooperation [Habermas, 2012], [Giovagnoli 2021]. In fact, as Durkheim reminds us, rituals reveal their function in the regeneration of solidarity as in the self-thematization of community identity. Religious traditions through rituals are the source of social solidarity. According to Habermas, social rationalization cannot dissolve the sacral complex; religious traditions, in symbiosis with community worship, continue to be sources of values and meaning:

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## **2. Modernity, God and Rites**

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In the interview with Eduardo Mendieta *A Conversation about God and the World* [Habermas, 2002] Habermas answers the question about the role of religion as a precursor or even a condition of possibility of both modernization and globalization. From a sociological point of view, the modern forms of consciousness that show themselves in abstract law, modern science and autonomous art, could not have developed without the forms of organization of Hellenized Christianity and the Roman Catholic Church - without their universities, monasteries and cathedrals. Unlike mythical narratives, the idea of God as unique and invisible, Creator and Redeemer meant, according to

Habermas, a break towards a completely new perspective. Through this idea of God, the finite spirit has acquired a point of view that transcends worldliness. But only with the transition to modernity does the knowing and morally judgmental subject appropriate the divine point of view, to the extent that he assumes two highly significant forms of idealization: the possibility of objectifying external nature as a totality of states of affairs and events that are connected by uniform laws and the possibility of assuming a neutral moral point of view in the social world.

Christianity is not only a precursor or a catalyst for modernity. Universalistic equalitarianism, from which the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of consciousness, human rights and democracy start, is the direct legacy of the Jewish ethics of justice and the Christian ethics of love. This legacy, which has remained substantially identical, has been the subject of continuous inheritance and critical reinterpretation but, according to Habermas, we have no alternative to it and, given the challenges of post-national society, we can only draw substance from it so as not to fall back into an "empty postmodern discourse". Today we are faced with a transnational economic regime that continues to operate with the principles of modernization; at the same time, however, the intensification and expansion of communication and trade show a new infrastructure. However, these processes do not propose a new orientation or new forms of consciousness. Christianity suffers and is challenged by the unforeseen consequences of this new infrastructure. The Christian Churches should face the challenges of modernization and globalization by appropriating their own regulatory potential more radically. Habermas goes beyond the ecumenical sense that presents paternalistic claims. The Church is becoming world and polycentric; a theme that Habermas discusses with his friend Johannes Baptist Metz. Every religious doctrine today meets the pluralism of different forms of religious truth as well as the skepticism of secularized scientific knowledge that is based on fallibilism and long-term revision. Religious dogmas and the attitude of faith must harmonize the illocutive meaning of religious language - the claim of truth of a religious

affirmation - with these two facts. Every religious faith must build a relationship with the messages of other competing religions, just like the claims of science against a secularized common sense. Habermas quotes Aquinas as an example of a deep and authentic thought [Habermas 2002 p. 152]:

Reading Aquinas' *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I am struck by the complexity, the sheer degree of differentiation, the gravity and the stringency of a dialogical constructed argument. I am an admirer of Aquinas. He represents a form of spirit that is able to ground its authenticity from out of its own resources. It is also simply a fact that there is no longer this kind of firmament in the morass of contemporary religiosity. In a homogenizing media society, everything loses its gravity, perhaps even institutionalized Christianity itself.

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### 3. Extra-ordinary Communication and Rituals

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The extra-linguistic communication described in *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II*, which Habermas traces back to religious rituals, reveals the human need for relationship with the divine. The anthropological studies of Ernesto De Martino have shown that the experience of the precariousness of human life has a cognitive value as a source of reassuring patterns that are constituted in tradition. The sociologist Durkheim and the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski analyzed the function of rituals for the cohesion of communities. Differently, anthropologists Arnold van Gennep and Meyer Fortes consider the social and cultural role of the myth that extends to the religious sphere. Some contemporary studies focus on the dynamic component of the ritual. For example, Roy Rappaport studied the cybernetic dimension of the ritual and its implication for ecology and communication.

The philosophical debate on rituals is very lively and presents different perspectives [Schilbrack, 2004]. Along the lines of Habermas' suggestions to think of the rite as an expression of the genetic thread from the biological

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behavior anchored to the species to the symbolically mediated ritual, I believe that the analysis should start from the dimensions of the ritual behavior that concerns both the individual and social spheres. In the first place, we must consider what Habermas calls the "sacral complex", that is to say that link between myth and rite that has evolved in the process of social rationalization. We have at our disposal the anthropological tools that give us hypotheses about the life forms of the Neolithic and also back to the XI millennium BC. Remember that rock paintings were found in Australia in probable places of worship 50,000 years ago and the first testimony of a tomb due to homo sapiens dates back to no less than 100,000 years ago, a time in which even the oldest jewelry and jewels were found. But we could intuit that myths and rites could have been conveyed by non-materially transmissible media such as invocations, dances and singing and go back to a period ranging from 300,000 to 100,000 years ago, a period in which the Heidelbergensis man existed. The sacral complex is made of mythical tales and ritual practices that can occur in different places, times and even forms. Mythical stories can help us explain the meaning of ritual practices because they transfer the semantic contents of a more ancient gestural communication within a more evolved grammatical language. Habermas speaks of an "overlap" of more evolved communicative forms with more archaic communicative forms. Thus, if we think of the funeral ritual that tries to master the experience of human precariousness and the pain of the loss of loved ones, we see the intertwining of narratives about the otherworldly life and the rites that turn to the superhuman powers. The myth and rite syndrome provides stability and certainty to the collective identity that must be reassured of what is foreign or unknown. The performative aspect of the myth is not limited to explaining what exists in the world, but reflects the psychic dynamics aroused by the relative threats and dangers, constituting the bridge that leads us from the myth to the rite. The rite is a dimension of human behavior that is not necessarily linked to myth and reveals the original meaning of the sacred complex. The social function of rituals is plausibly clarified, according to Habermas, especially by Durkheim, by Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss who studied the rituals of gift and exchange. He refers also to Anrhold van Gennep

who analyzed the initiation rites that regulate the transition from one status to another through the caesures of birth, puberty, marriage and funeral that underlie the dimensions of the self-thematization of society and the creation of normative obligations.

By distinguishing three phases in the status change, Habermas highlights a further aspect of the "Sacred". The initiation, which for the person involved amounts to a profound change in identity, is staged as if it were a death and a social rebirth. Here the unprecedented moment is the passage through an intermediate stage of exile from society, that is to say through a phase in which the candidate's membership is, so to speak, temporarily suspended. His social existence "turns off" temporarily, until the moment he is recovered by society through the act of his acceptance of the new status. The intermediate phase - of isolation from society, of its exile in no man's land - renews the extreme experience of an unfounded existence, literally penning over nothing. The organism is rejected back to its total and isolated impotence, and individual existence becomes aware of its total dependence on society.

Following Wilhem Duprè, Habermas sees the rite as the original form of self-reflection of primitive societies. On the other hand, the sacral dimension also touches the task of verbalizing the existential foundations on which the new forms of life socialized through symbols rest. According to Habermas, it is necessary to find a language that thematizes the extreme: events and situations such as birth and death, uncertain coexistence, exhaustion of material and organic resources, vulnerability of the soul and body. The sacral complex derives from the way in which primates solved the problem of overcoming a fundamental evolutionary threshold represented by symbolic communication. We can observe that the evolution of the human species presents a caesura represented by the rise of language. So we can add to the primitive everyday language of gestures that extra-daily language of the rite that has specialized in invocations to otherworldly powers. We are faced with forms of mimetic conduct or iconic representation, which suggest that we compare the behavior of rituals with profane gestural communication. However, we must explain the division of labor between such different forms of communication: everyday language arises

from relations of cooperation, while ritual behavior falls outside the daily functions and gives meaning to cooperation. It is precisely the anthropological studies that allow us to formulate the hypothesis that the rite would be a response to the precariousness of the new form of communicative socialization passing through linguistic symbols.

In the rite hides the difficult cooperation between the individual and society where the collective must assert itself to establish the social order, but the individual consciousness cannot lose its autonomy that stands out in the interaction. Rituals have a stronger normative dimension than the normativity of linguistic conventions because they have to do with the regeneration of social solidarity and with the development of collective identity. The ritual represents the functional response to the crisis of knowledge expressed by the myth, a crisis generated by the confrontation with reality source of dissonant experiences: the rituals continue to ensure the identity of the collective against the pressures of the new explanations of the world. World religions have passed the axial age and have taken away its foundation from the myth, but they themselves have to face the challenges that come from scientific knowledge and secularized states. Despite this [Habermas 2002, p. 152]:

*The sacred complex has not dissolved; religious traditions, in symbiosis with community worship, have not lost vitality. Indeed, in carrying out their religious practices, members of religious communities can even arrogate to themselves the privilege of having access to that archaic experience - that source of solidarity - to which the unbeliever sons and daughters of modernity have long turned their backs.*

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## Conclusion

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In this contribution I introduced the concept of complexity in social sciences and pointed on the importance of rituals for the sense of human life. Habermas, through a critical analysis of classical philosophers, comes to describe the

concept of "communicative rationality" that represents the basis of the processes of social rationalization. I then showed how the analysis of social practice as a whole must include a double normativity: that of linguistic conventions and that of strong traditions and culture in general. Finally, I briefly outlined the link that Habermas sees between modernity and God as the result of the philosophy that has promoted rational ideals of truth and knowledge to the extent of the knowing subject. These ideals fail with respect to a social evolution that runs undisturbed and is unable to provide resources for the meaning of human life.

Habermas recognizes religion as a fundamental role also in the mediation between the individual and society; it must find authentic messages with respect to different religious visions to direct behaviors in the appropriate way. In *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II* Habermas sees in the rites the origin of human cooperation; institutions in general require a ritual practice to share symbols and promote social order. Undoubtedly, the religious rites that Habermas mainly considers have a fundamental part in human life marked by precariousness.

However, we can observe that rituals do not exclusively characterize the religious sphere, but have a fundamental role in social ontology and require an investigation into their nature that cannot be based solely on some anthropological visions regarding human cooperation [Giovagnoli 2020], [Giovagnoli 2023]. Habermas criticizes intentional models, because he believes that the description of the subjective processes of knowledge and action cannot provide the foundations of intersubjectivity that is instead based on the use of ordinary language. In my opinion, the study of the fundamentals of human cooperation cannot be separated from interdisciplinary research that also comes from the natural sciences.

The debate on collective intentionality (We-intentionality) - a fundamental part of social ontology - presents interesting studies on cooperation that go beyond the individualistic model (typical of game theory). The investigation that Searle conducted on the constitution of social reality clearly highlights the nature and role of rituals in social practices (the typical example proposed by Searle is marriage). Rituals are part of human nature (but animals also have their own

rituals) and require an investigation of supported by trans-disciplinary results. I therefore believe that the analysis must start from the "habitual behavior" that concerns the organization and reduction of the complexity of daily life in the private and social spheres. This requires that philosophical analysis be compared with the plausible results that have been achieved especially in social psychology and neuroscience.

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