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## Introduction

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In his approach to moral theory Habermas is closest to the Kantian tradition.<sup>1</sup> Like Kant, he distinguishes the types of practical reasoning and corresponding types of “ought” proper to questions about what is practically expedient, ethically prudent, and morally right.<sup>2</sup> Calculations of rational choice generate recommendations relevant to the pursuit of contingent purposes in the light of given preferences. When serious questions of value arise, deliberation on who one is, and who one wants to be, yields ethical advice concerning the good life. If questions of justice are involved, fair and impartial consideration of conflicting interests results in judgments concerning what is right or just. And like Kant, Habermas regards questions of the last type, rather than specifically ethical matters, to be the proper domain of moral theory. This is not to say that ethical deliberation is irrational or exhibits no general structures of its own.<sup>3</sup> But it is to say that the disappearance of value-imbued cosmologies and the disintegration of sacred canopies have opened the question “How should I (or one, or we) live?” to the irreducible pluralism of modern life. To suppose that all of the questions of the good life dealt with under the rubric of classical ethics—questions of happiness and virtue, character and ethos, community and tradition—could be answered once and for all, and by philosophers, is no longer plausible. Matters of individual or group self-understanding and self-realization, rooted as they are in particular life histories and traditions, do not admit of general theory; and pru-

dential deliberation on the good life, moving as it does within the horizons of particular lifeworlds and forms of life, does not yield universal prescriptions. In fact, without its metaphysical underpinnings, *pronesis* can be difficult to distinguish from the commonsense of a given way of life—with its built-in bias for the way things are and distrust of individuals who morally criticize the accepted way of doing things.<sup>4</sup>

If taking modern pluralism seriously means giving up the idea that philosophy can single out a privileged way of life, or provide an answer to the question “How should I (we) live?” that is valid for everyone, it does not, in Habermas’s view, preclude a general theory of a much narrower sort, namely a theory of justice. The aim of the latter is to reconstruct the moral point of view as the perspective from which competing normative claims can be fairly and impartially adjudicated. Like Kant, Habermas understands this type of practical reasoning as universal in import: it is geared to what everyone could rationally will to be a norm binding on everyone alike. His “discourse ethics,” however, replaces Kant’s categorical imperative with a procedure of moral argumentation: normative justification is tied to reasoned agreement among those subject to the norm in question.<sup>5</sup> The central principle is that for a norm to be valid, its consequences for the satisfaction of everyone’s interests must be acceptable to all as participants in a practical discourse. This shifts the frame of reference from Kant’s solitary, reflecting moral consciousness to the community of moral subjects in dialogue. Whether a norm is justifiable cannot be determined monologically, but only through discursively testing its claim to fairness. Unlike Rawls’s original position, however, practical discourse does not feature rational egoists prudently contracting behind a veil of ignorance<sup>6</sup>—a procedure that can itself be carried out monologically—but moral agents trying to put themselves in each other’s shoes. While models of ideal role-taking do, then, capture an aspect of Kant’s fundamental intuition usually neglected in contract models, they tend to be insufficiently cognitive. Habermas’s discourse model, by requiring that perspective-taking be general and reciprocal, builds the moment of empathy *into* the procedure of coming to a reasoned agreement: each must put him-

or herself into the place of everyone else in discussing whether a proposed norm is fair to all. And this must be done publicly; arguments played out in the individual consciousness or in the theoretician’s mind are no substitute for real discourse.<sup>7</sup>

While these remarks may serve roughly to locate Habermas on the map of contemporary moral philosophy, they do not reflect the breadth of the project outlined in this volume. Persistent misinterpretations to the contrary notwithstanding, Habermas is not trying to renew transcendental philosophy.<sup>8</sup> In fact, there are few moral philosophers writing today who take as seriously the relation of conceptual issues to empirical research. The form this takes in the present work is an attempt to connect discourse ethics to the theory of social action via an examination of research in the social psychology of moral and interpersonal development. Starting with Kohlberg’s account of the development of moral judgment, Habermas argues that the model of natural stages is plausible up to the point of the postconventional break at which the social world loses its quasi-natural validity. From that point we are dealing with stages of reflection, which have to be assessed and ordered primarily on the basis of moral-philosophical, rather than empirical-psychological, considerations. Focusing then on the pre-conventional and conventional stages of moral judgment whose psychological “reality” is supported by the available evidence, Habermas attempts to anchor them in his theory of communicative action.<sup>9</sup> The connecting links are provided by Selman’s account of sociocognitive development in relation to stages of social perspective taking, which Habermas reformulates in terms of structures of social interaction. The point of this chain of argument is to connect structures of moral judgment to structures of social interaction in such a way that their developmental-logical features stand out more clearly.<sup>10</sup>

As the trajectory of argument around Rawls’s notion of reflective equilibrium illustrates, the burden of proof on any moral theorist who hopes to ground a conception of justice in anything more universal than the “settled convictions” of our political cultures is enormous.<sup>11</sup> Because Habermas wants to do just that, the links he forges to action theory are crucial; they are meant to show that our basic moral intuitions spring

from something deeper and more universal than contingent features of our tradition. In his view, the task of moral theory is reflectively to articulate, refine, and elaborate the intuitive grasp of the normative presuppositions of social interaction that belongs to the repertoire of competent social actors in any society. The basic moral intuitions the theorist reconstructs are, as Aristotle noted, acquired in the process of socialization, but they include an “abstract core” that is more than culture-specific. Members of our species become individuals in and through being socialized into networks of reciprocal social relations, so that personal identity is from the start interwoven with relations of mutual recognition. This interdependence brings with it a reciprocal vulnerability that calls for guarantees of mutual consideration to preserve both the integrity of individuals and the web of interpersonal relations in which they form and maintain their identities. Both of these concerns—with the inviolability of the person and the welfare of the community—have been at the heart of traditional moralities.

In the Kantian tradition, respect for the integrity and dignity of the individual has been tied to the freedom of moral subjects to act upon norms they themselves accept as binding on the basis of their own insight, and concern for the common good has been linked to the impartiality of laws that can be accepted by everyone on that basis. In Habermas’s discourse ethics, which bases the justification of norms on the uncoerced, rational agreement of those subject to them, equal respect for individuals is reflected in the right of each participant to respond with a “yes” or “no” to the reasons offered by way of justification. Concern for the common good is reflected in the requirement of general and reciprocal perspective taking: in seeking mutual agreement, each attempts to get beyond an egocentric viewpoint by taking into account the interests of others and giving them equal weight to his or her own.<sup>12</sup> It is true that *general* norms, justified from the standpoint of impartiality, will of necessity abstract from the specific circumstances of concrete cases. They are not meant to answer questions of the type “What should I do here and now?” But, Habermas argues, this does not result in the yawning gap between form and content that neo-Aristotelians rush to fill

with phronesis. For the moral point of view in the form of considerations of impartiality and fairness can guide the context-sensitive application of general norms as well. And this will require at least a partial reversal of the abstractions required in justifying them—for example, through attention to all of the relevant features of a case when determining which general norm is appropriate to it.<sup>13</sup>

This does not mean that Habermas ignores the neo-Aristotelian challenges to Kantian reconstructivism, the objections that have been raised against the abstraction it fosters from everything that gives content to our ethical life. These objections confront us with the choice of either returning to some version of Aristotelianism or modifying the Kantian approach so as to give them, as far as possible, their due. Discourse ethics takes the latter tack. On the one hand, in contrast to ethics of the good life, it confines itself to the limited task of reconstructing the moral point of view, leaving *all* concrete moral and ethical judgments to participants themselves.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, locating the common core of morality in the normative presuppositions of communicative interaction, it develops a thoroughly intersubjectivist interpretation of the moral point of view: practical discourse as a reflective continuation of communicative interaction preserves that common core. Rather than contractual agreements among “unencumbered” individuals with arbitrarily chosen ends, it involves processes of reflective argumentation among previously socialized subjects whose needs and interests are themselves open to discussion and transformation. The egocentric perspective is treated not as primary but as derivative; autonomy is conceptualized in relation to embeddedness in shared forms of life. In this way, practical discourse presupposes and draws upon the normative structures of social interaction; it does not cut the bonds of social integration as do social contract models.

On the strength of this reconceptualization of what is involved in coming to a reasoned agreement about moral issues, communicative ethics, though Kantian in inspiration, attempts to capture at least the structural aspects of the common good. In Habermas’s account, solidarity is the other side of justice, a complementary perspective to that of equal treatment. But this

is not the notion of solidarity that figures in traditionalistic models: "As a component of universalistic morality, solidarity loses its merely particular meaning, in which it is limited to the internal relationships of a collectivity ethnocentrically isolated from other groups—the character of forced willingness to sacrifice oneself for a collective system that is always present in premodern forms of solidarity . . . [where] fellowship is entwined with followership. . . . Justice conceived in postconventional terms can converge with solidarity, as its other side, only when solidarity has been transformed in the light of the idea of a general, discursive formation of will."<sup>15</sup>

## Notes

1. In addition to the essays collected in this volume, relevant materials include "Wahrheitstheorien," in J. Habermas, *Vorstudien und Ergänzungen zur Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Frankfurt, 1984), pp. 127–183; "Moral Development and Ego-Identity," in J. Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (Boston, 1979), pp. 69–94; "Justice and Solidarity: On the Discussion Concerning Stage 6," in T. Wren, ed., *The Moral Domain* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989); "Law and Morality," in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, vol. 8 (Salt Lake City and Cambridge, 1988), pp. 217–279; "Kohlberg and Neo-Aristotelianism," paper read at the Commemorative Symposium in Honor of Lawrence Kohlberg, Harvard University, spring 1988; "Individual Will-Formation in Terms of What Is Expedient, What Is Good, and What Is Just," paper read at Northwestern University, fall 1988; "Erläuterungen zur Diskursethik," unpublished manuscript.

2. See the paper "Individual Will-Formation," cited in n. 1.

3. Nor is it to say that it is any less central to practical reasoning in everyday life, which is normally concerned much more with questions of expediency and prudence than with issues of justice. Furthermore, the same action situation may be considered from more than one of these perspectives.

4. See "Kohlberg and Neo-Aristotelianism," cited in n. 1, pp. 14ff. On p. 17 Habermas writes, "Recent neo-Aristotelian approaches play quite a different role in the German and American contexts. But the conservative bias they have always had in Germany since the time of Hegel is by no means accidental."

5. In this respect, his approach is similar to that of T. M. Scanlon in "Contractualism and Utilitarianism," in A. Sen and B. Williams, eds., *Utilitarianism and Beyond* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 103–128, but he distances himself from Scanlon's contractualist understanding of this procedure. See his remarks on this in "Justice and Solidarity," cited in n. 1.

6. Of course, Rawls's original position is intended to be a "device of [indirect] representation" and not a direct depiction of the moral reasoning of agents who have themselves adopted the moral point of view. It is precisely the latter that Habermas is after, hence his reservations regarding Rawls's approach.

7. From this standpoint, Habermas's farflung writings can be viewed as a sustained reflection on the historical, psychological, social, and cultural preconditions of institutionalizing moral-political discourse. See especially *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989).

8. These misrepresentations often involve confusing universal claims with transcendental claims, forgetting that the latter aspire to necessity as well as universality. A glance at the natural sciences serves as a reminder that universal claims need not be based on a priori reasoning or pretend to infallibility. The shoe is actually on the other foot: on what grounds do antiuniversalists claim to know—a priori—that there are and can be no universals of language, culture, cognition, morality, and the like? There is no obvious reason why this shouldn't be treated as an empirical-theoretical question that will have to be answered, as such questions usually are, with reference to the fate of various research programs in the human sciences. This is, at any rate, Habermas's approach.

9. The rudiments of that theory are sketched in this volume. For a fuller discussion, see J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vols. 1 and 2 (Boston, 1984, 1987), especially chapters 1, 3, 5, and 6.

10. That is, Habermas wants to argue that we can and do learn to deal more adequately with moral problems, and that these learning processes can be described in genetic-structural terms.

11. See especially John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14 (1985): 223–251. To see how readily this approach lends itself to anti-Kantian interpretation, see Richard Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," in M. D. Peterson and R. C. Vaughan, eds., *The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 257–282, especially pp. 261ff.

12. Postmodernist critiques of moral universalism too often simply ignore the fact that it is precisely notions of fairness, impartiality, respect for the integrity and dignity of the individual, and the like that undergird respectful tolerance of difference by placing limits on egocentrism. Typically, such notions are simply taken for granted in anti-universalist invocations of otherness and difference—which are, it evidently goes without saying, to be respected, not obliterated.

13. For a detailed discussion of the application of general norms from a moral point of view, see Klaus Günther, *Der Sinn für Angemessenheit: Anwendungsdiskurse in Moral und Recht* (Frankfurt, 1988).

14. Thus Habermas is critical of Rawls's derivation of two substantive principles of justice from the original position.

15. "Justice and Solidarity."