Dissertation Title: Habermas' Discourse Ethics: A Critical Study

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Abstract

The emerging global order would appear to be accompanied by an emerging chaos of dehumanization, misunderstanding, violence, and terrorism. This chaos can be understood as a moral crisis manifesting the absence of any coherent, universally accepted ethic. For example, the ethic of the corporation tends to deny the humanity of workers and consumers; the American ethic seems to require imposing American political and economic systems where they are not wanted. However, the difficulties of constructing a universal ethic, and having it accepted, are formidable. For example, any *proposal* of an ethic can only appear to others as an attempt to *impose*, as a salvo in the war of whose ethic is best. The focus of the present study is the search for a universal ethic. Habermas' *discourse ethics* is seen, not indeed as providing a universal ethic, but as the best means of searching for one.

The search for a universal ethic is situated among the issues of modernity/postmodernity. The benefits of modernity appear to have brought the Enlightenment project of emancipation through reason close to full realization. Advances in industrial, medical, and communications technology, for example, have made the world wealthier, healthier, and smaller. At the same time a multitude of critics argue, often convincingly, that these triumphs of reason have led instead to a whirlpool of dehumanization and even enslavement. At the same time, the shrinking

of the world has forced multiple, often incommensurable cultures, into dependence upon one another, with the consequent potential for conflict that too often becomes actual, violent, and lethal. Both of these unanticipated outcomes of modernity may be blamed in part on the structures of capitalism that, for example, make commodities of human beings. Those consequences may also be blamed in part on the absence of a universal ethic, that is, the lack of shared normative standards. Such standards, it is to be hoped, would restrain the dehumanizing effects of capitalism, on the one hand, and mediate conflicts between incommensurable cultures on the other.

Dehumanization, cross-cultural conflict, and the lack of a universal ethic, in turn, has been blamed on the dominance of *instrumental rationality*, that is, reasoning that seeks only the best means to arbitrary ends, consequently understanding actual human beings only in terms of means. Such critiques have led thinkers such as Horkheimer and Adorno (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*) and Lyotard (*The Postmodern Condition*) to declare the failure of modernity and to a rejection of reason itself.

While accepting much of the critique of modernity, Jürgen Habermas, rather than condemning reason, notes that instrumental rationality is not the only kind of reason. There is also, and more fundamentally, he argues, *communicative reason*, whose purpose is not primarily to achieve goals, but mutual understanding. While agreeing that modernity has overthrown *conventional* ethics, he argues that communicative reason is capable of legitimating universal *post-conventional* moral norms. The process of legitimating such norms he calls *discourse ethics*. Discourse ethics would formalize communicative practices already used by human beings, in order to propose and validate norms that would be accepted by, and in the interests of, all. That is to say, discourse would lead to *consensus* on specific norms. Such

consensus, in turn, would serve for both legitimation of the norms and motivation for observing them. By basing discourse on communicative practices that Habermas can argue are necessary to language use and hence universal among human beings, Habermas can claim that discourse ethics is culturally neutral. Ideally, everyone from every culture participates freely in the discourse, and proposed norms are accepted only when all affected freely agree that the norm is in their interest.

The present study evaluate the possibility that discourse ethics provides a workable means of constructing a universal ethic that would serve *both* to counter the dehumanizing effects of global capitalism *and* to mediate conflicts between the multiple cultures. I find, in agreement with some of Habermas' critics, that discourse ethics is laden with Western and modern values and assumptions, and that it is therefore not as culturally neutral as Habermas would wish. Nevertheless, by relaxing some of Habermas' requirements (for example, by allowing overlapping consensus), I argue, discourse ethics may be applicable cross-culturally.

In answer to critics that challenge the need and desirability of consensus, I show that the search for consensus is inescapable. Moreover, while consensus can be irrational and enslaving, Habermas shows how it can also be rational and emancipating. The charge that the search for consensus reduces the other to sameness is shown to be invalid inasmuch as discourse ethics is structured specifically to allow each to achieve his own distinctive voice in making evaluations and justifications of norms. Norms would be accepted only when all concerned could freely accept them as valid and binding. In short, discourse ethics is found to be a workable approach, and perhaps the only workable approach, to establishing universal norms.