

Discourse Ethics and Moral Education

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DISCOURSE ETHICS AS CRITICAL THEORY

To understand the import of discourse ethics for philosophy of education generally, and for moral education in particular, I find it necessary to situate it in the larger context of Jürgen Habermas's intellectual/political project. Since the 1960s, Habermas has been building a comprehensive (some would say all-too-encompassing and accommodating)¹ critical social theory. Rooted in the early Frankfurt School's criticism of modernity and Enlightenment reason, Habermas's work for the past thirty years has, among other things, sought to describe and explain the sources of and potential for domination and emancipation in modern society.

Many of us "grew up" on his influential text, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, with its typology of "knowledge-constitutive interests."² I, for one, as a budding critical educational theorist, used the insights of that epistemological framework to understand the "technical," "practical," and "emancipatory" dimensions of knowledge and reason, and the potential for "undistorted communication" within "ideal speech situations." With my feet planted firmly in a critical, modernist framework, I believed, as did Habermas, that it was possible and necessary to "rehabilitate the Enlightenment belief in reason as a means to freedom," and to figure out a "rational basis for collective life."³

As a German who inherited and claimed the personal responsibility to prevent any resurgence of fascism, Habermas was sensitive to the power of demagoguery and feared the "irrational" and arbitrary use of power in politics. At the same time, he supported the democratic impulses of his generation, and the social movements they spawned. Consequently, Habermas put his faith *both* in (critical) reason *and* in the possibility of/for (democratic) freedom through "undistorted" communication — for communication free of ideological manipulation, coercion, or force. In doing so, he insisted on "the principle that the validity of every norm of political consequence be made dependent on a consensus arrived at in communication free from domination."⁴ No small order.

Habermas's social theory rests on "the thesis that action oriented toward reaching understanding is the fundamental type of social action."⁵ In order to develop fully his notion of communicative competence, however, Habermas needed to go beyond the analytic framework in *Knowledge and Human Interests* and make the "linguistic turn" (*CCH*, 6-7). *The Theory of Communicative Action* not only makes this turn through "its communicative approach to action and reason;" it does so in the context of a new perspective on "how we should understand modernity" (*CCH*, 8). By introducing us to a "rationalized lifeworld" and the potential of its "colonization," his critique of modernity remains a powerful one (*CCH*, 8-9). A flourishing society, for Habermas is a "picture of a social order as a network of relationships of mutual recognition" that are necessarily cooperative and rational.⁶

This notion of society as a network of relationships of mutual recognition requires a “discursive, deliberative model” of democracy, a democratic model that Habermas argues should be the core of any modern civil society (*CCH*, 13). For this democratic process to obtain, a society needs “morally mature” citizens. It needs socialization and education to this end. With this larger critical-political project in mind, I now turn to Okshevsky’s discussion of discourse ethics and its relevance to our work as philosophers of education living in a postmodern, pluralized, global context.

IMPLICATIONS OF DISCOURSE ETHICS FOR MORAL EDUCATION AND
PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Through his overview, Walter Okshevsky shows us the importance Habermas places on *justifying* one’s reasons for belief and action, *within a community of speakers and hearers*. As Seyla Benhabib reminds us, “Communicative ethics is first and foremost a theory of moral justification....Moral justification [that] amounts to a form of moral argumentation.”⁷⁷ This process of justification, Okshevsky tells us, is an appeal to a “*procedural* form of discourse as a practice aimed at impartial justification and conflict resolution, rather than to any *substantive* moral or political content.” For Habermas, the substantive content amounts to “the complete internalization of a few highly abstract and universal principles...that follow logically from the procedure of norm justification.” We, as “competent speakers,” within a community of speakers and hearers, must be able to give and assess reasons for our moral claims. But, as Okshevsky points out, Habermas also insists that our claims must obtain “*universality*, universal applicability to relevantly similar circumstances and similarly situated persons.” For discourse ethics, “there is no such thing as ‘private justification’ — justification able to provide good or sufficient warrant just for me or my tribe.”

Habermas formulates this demand for universality in “dialogical” not “monological” terms. This requires “‘a form of deliberation in which each participant is compelled to adopt the perspective of all others in order to examine whether a norm [or judgment] could be *willed from the perspective of each person*. This is the situation of *rational discourse* oriented to reaching understanding in which all those concerned participate”⁷⁸ It is this requirement for rational discourse — for dialogical communication — under specific conditions, that I and many others find particularly relevant to our work as philosophers of education. I think here, for example, of Nick Burbules’s fine study of *Dialogue In Teaching*. Burbules defends Habermas’s theory of discourse to the degree that it “resituates communication in a relational context.”⁷⁹ Burbules goes on to say that our norms are grounded “in conversational processes of persuasion and intersubjective exploration.”¹⁰

Although I agree with Burbules and Richard Bernstein that Habermas offers us a critical approach to dialogue, one that acknowledges “structural societal barriers that systematically distort such dialogue,”¹¹ I remain uneasy with Habermas’s demand for universality, for what Okshevsky calls “trans-subjective and trans-historical validity.” I find his understanding of universality both compelling and problematic: *compelling* for those of us in modern pluralist societies struggling to find common ground within our differences and to avoid radical forms of cultural

relativism; *problematic* for those of us in modern pluralist societies who are concerned with recognizing differences, particularly those differences suppressed by the generalized effects of sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism and ethnocentrism. Habermas has been criticized by many, and I think rightly so, for “exclud[ing] what postmodern theorists call discourse, which is a broader category than interpersonal communication. Although discourse can take place between two people, it also includes other cultural expressions.”¹² This broader, cultural understanding of discourses that can be seen as “contested sites of power,” is absent in Habermas’s analysis.¹³

To some critics, he has lost his critical edge (*CCH*, 9). At times, the ambitious theoretical reach of Habermas’s interdisciplinary project (critical philosophy, democratic theory, empirical social science, and cognitive-developmental psychology), with its necessary accommodations to liberal social and political theory, overshadow — maybe even undermine — his lifelong commitment as a public intellectual to sustaining democratic social practices and to supporting progressive political action. Yet as the deteriorating level of political and social discourse in the United States in particular threatens our democratic possibilities, Habermas’s elaborated theory may be our salvation. We in education will have to accept the “epistemic responsibility” Okshevsky speaks of and help students develop the “dialogical attunements and sensibilities” and the “dispositions of character” required of the discursive democracy we deserve.

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1. Ben Agger, *Critical Social Theories* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998), 98.
 2. Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).
 3. Wendy Kohli, “Educating for Emancipatory Rationality,” in *Critical Conversations in Philosophy of Education*, ed. Wendy Kohli (New York: Routledge, 1995), 105 and Stephen White, “Introduction” to *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas*, ed. Stephen White (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 6. This book will be cited as *CCH* in the text for all subsequent references.
 4. Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, 284.
 5. Maeve Cooke, “Introduction” to Jürgen Habermas, *On The Pragmatics of Communication*, ed. Maeve Cooke (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 2.
 6. *Ibid.*, 4.
 7. Seyla Benhabib, “Liberal Dialogue Versus Critical Theory of Discursive Legitimation,” in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. N.L. Rosenbaum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 150, quoted in Nicholas C. Burbules, *Dialogue in Teaching: Theory and Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), 13.
 8. Jürgen Habermas, “A Genealogical Analysis of the Cognitive Content of Morality,” in *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, trans. and ed. Ciaran Cronin and Pablo De Graff (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 16.
 9. Burbules, *Dialogue In Teaching*, 75.
 10. *Ibid.*, 76.
 11. Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 190, quoted in Burbules, *Dialogue In Teaching*, 146.
 12. Agger, *Critical Social Theories*, 96.
 13. *Ibid.*