

Immanuel Kant as Mediator Between Objectivism and Contextualism in Critical Thinking? Jürgen Habermas on Kant's "Monologism"

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Christina Hendricks's essay is a very rich, interesting, and important one. I cannot hope to address the many issues and arguments it raises. In my response I will consider the extent to which Kant can successfully play the role of mediator between objectivists and contextualists by presenting a recent criticism of Kant developed by Jürgen Habermas.

Hendricks's hypothesis is that Kant's unabashed universalism may actually contribute to an alleviation of contextualists' suspicions regarding the occlusion of fallibility and dialogue originating within objectivist commitments to universality and objectivity in matters of truth and justification. Hendricks proposes that Kant's objectivism, along with milder versions proposed by Hatcher, Siegel, Scheffler, and Rescher, may profitably be read as issuing an invitation to others to engage in public discourse and dialogue. The objectivist claim to the possibility of universality is thus to be construed as an offer of communicative, intersubjective solidarity — an offer made precisely in a sincere recognition and acknowledgement of one's own and others' fallibility as the finite knowers and agents we all are. A truth or rightness claim proffered as a universally valid and applicable judgment here comprises a speech act carrying the sincerity claim "that one is trying to think in ways that are valid for others as well as oneself," as Hendricks renders it. In this way, we come to assuage contextualist worries over the morality of commitments to universality through an endorsement of dialogue characterized by reciprocal recognition and a mutual acknowledgement of fallibility. Indeed, I believe Hendricks goes a step further to claim that the social and public character of argumentation or discourse points to a "should" that is not only a moral good (obligation?), but also functions as a necessary epistemic condition of justification itself. As Hendricks writes, "Insofar as one refuses to subject one's commitments to suspicion through argumentation, the justification for those commitments is undermined."

To what extent can Kant really help in negotiating the sought after balance? That is, to what extent is the dialogical moment of inclusivity and publicity present in his theory of moral judgment and argumentation? The recent Kant scholarship mined by Hendricks does provide some cause for optimism. These interpretations stress Kant's commitment to dialectical rules exhorting that one think, not only as a rationally autonomous and consistent agent, but also as one who is willing to suspend judging on the contingent grounds of one's own present and particular interests, inclinations, and conceptions of the good, in an effort to think with and from the perspectives of all other rational agents. As Hendricks renders this reading: "reason is universal insofar as it allows us to put ourselves into a public sphere of discussion that is open to all rational beings." But there is cause for concern in light

of a different reading of Kant provided by Habermas in a number of his recent works on Discourse Ethics. Habermas argues there is a pervasive "monological" feature of Kant's moral theory that renders it incapable of identifying when we are but "universalizing our own particularities." If Habermas's critique is cogent, this would reinforce contextualist suspicions regarding objectivist commitments to universality and objectivity.

Habermas contends that Kant's moral theory as a whole, and the procedure of testing maxims for their universalizability in particular, ride on an erroneous conception of the character and conditions of legitimate universalization. This is expressed paradigmatically in the idea that each of us, as independent rational agents, bear within ourselves the necessary and sufficient resources to correctly judge the universalizability of any given maxim.¹ This latter claim certainly comprises a correct reading of Kant. For Kant, what is morally permissible or impermissible, obligatory or forbidden for us to will or do, is a matter each of us can rationally deliberate upon and correctly decide for and by ourselves. I believe this premise is at the heart of Kant's understanding of the human agent's powers of rational autonomy and the dignity of humanity as a form of life accepting no authority other than norms arising from its own legislation. Habermas maintains, however, that the very idea of a subject assessing maxims for their universalizability, their accordance with or contradiction of the Categorical Imperative, reveals the "monological" character of the conception of deliberation and justification under which Kant's ethics labors.² For Habermas, what Kant succeeds in articulating through this monologism is at bottom "the solipsistic character of an examination of norms undertaken 'in the privacy of individual reflection'" (*JA*, 51). What Kant purportedly fails to appreciate in his profferment of this "egocentrically conceived universalizability test" is that no norm, principle or maxim can be justified "privately in the solitary monologue of the soul with itself" (*JA*, 7, 64). An independent and discrete individual subject's reason has no ultimate epistemic authority in practical matters. The character and locus of cogent universalization of a moral norm or interest is inappropriately conceived once we posit the required cognitive and epistemic resources to rest sufficiently in "the isolated subject" (*JA*, 51).

"[D]iscourse Ethics rejects the monological approach of Kant, who assumed that the individual tests his maxims of action *foro interno* or, as Husserl puts it, in the loneliness of his soul."³ What Habermas critically targets here is actually an entire underlying metaphysical construct: practical subjectivity essentially possesses the same apriori nature and status across the diversity and particularity of its actual and possible phenomenal instantiations. In Habermas's rendering: "all subjects in the Kingdom of Ends share the same conception of themselves and the world" (*JA*, 51, 64). It is, of course, indeed the case for Kant that, in moral terms, we are all essentially equal and the same as noumenal members of the Kingdom of Ends. Practical reason comprises a universal, transcendental capacity we all share in common as rational agents and knowers. The form of law constitutes a "fact of reason" each of us finds within ourselves; it subsists across all phenomenal personal and cultural variation as a universally valid governing norm. Habermas contends

that we cannot validly conclude that a maxim I determine to be universalizable from my own point of view is epistemically or morally binding on others conceived as simply more phenomenal instantiations of a common and self-same form of life (*JA*, 7, 64). From a contextualist perspective, we will not be able to transcend egocentrism and monologism “as long as the isolated subject, in his role as custodian of the transcendental, arrogates to himself the authority to examine norms on behalf of all others” (*JA*, 51).

Habermas maintains that the only legitimate criterion of universalization as a test of moral norms must be a dialogical and intersubjective one. This criterion requires our judgments to be equally in the interests of all individuals involved (*JA*, 51).⁴ Only as such can the Categorical Imperative serve as an explication of impartial judgment from the moral point of view and as a means of conflict resolution in the common interest of all (*JA*, 6–7, 24, 118). A generalizable interest is not something an individual agent can determine on her own. The metaphysical construct of transcendental subjectivity is the wrong place to look for the epistemic resources required for the legitimate need to transcend non-generalizable norms and interests acquired through socialization into the traditions and values of culturally embedded forms of life. Others’ actual claims and interests comprise essential ingredients in the process of argumentation or discourse in which we are all engaged as interlocutors sharing the goal of determining policies in the equal interest of all and abiding by epistemic idealizations of reciprocity and symmetry. The justifiedness of a norm or policy depends upon the fulfillment of this epistemic task: “moral justifications are dependent on argumentation actually being carried out” (*MC*, 57).

If Habermas’s critique is correct, then the question arises as to the precise functions of that publicity and dialogue which Kant is seen to recommend along the lines of Hendricks’s hermeneutic. Are contextualist suspicions not still with us as we seek to transcend our “domestic gatherings” and “address a public in the truest sense of the word” as members of a cosmopolitan society?⁵

1. Jürgen Habermas, “A Genealogical Analysis of the Cognitive Content of Morality,” in *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, eds. Ciaran Cronin and Pablo De Greiff (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), 33.

2. Jürgen Habermas, *Justice and Application*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 51. This book will be cited as *JA* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 203. This work will be cited as *MC* in the text for all subsequent references.

4. Habermas, “A Genealogical Analysis,” 22.

5. Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’” trans. H.B. Nesbit, in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. H.S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 56–57.