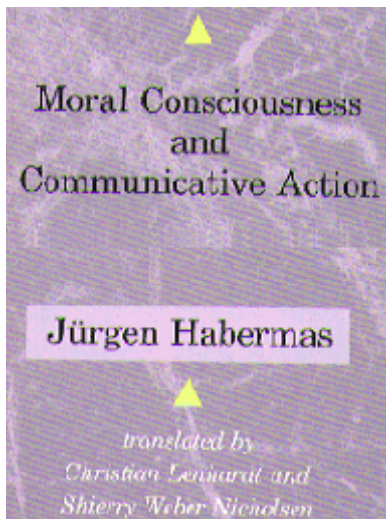


# Introduction to Habermas's Discourse Ethics

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Habermas situates the moral point of view within the communication framework of a community of selves. He moves Kant's categorical imperative beyond its 'monological' reflection by demanding that we emphatically take into consideration the viewpoints of all who would be affected by the adoption of a certain moral action or normative claim. In a similar vein, he 'lifts' Rawls' veil of ignorance and demands that we participate in a discourse where all are fully aware of the other's perspectives and interpretations.

This move toward a 'dialogical form of practical reason' is incumbent upon 'post modern societies' where an irreducible plurality of 'goods' conditions and limits the horizon for moral conversation. Morality comes to represent duties and obligations within a just society -- a society in which 'rights' trump competing 'goods' in circumstances of conflict. (r.c.)

In addition to the following, see "[The Discourse Ethics of Jürgen Habermas](#)" by Antje Gimmler.)

[Note: portions of the following are from "The Political Computer: Democracy, CMC, and Habermas," in Ess, ed. *Philosophical Perspectives on Computer -Mediated Communication*, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996), 197-230.]

Habermas's discourse ethics emerge as part of a larger project to sustain, in at least a reconstructed (Habermas's term) form, the Enlightenment project of political emancipation and democracy.

## Enlightenment Democracy, Relativism, and the Threat of Authoritarian Politics

A central issue in Habermas's effort to sustain the Enlightenment project is the problem of **relativism**. This problem underlies several postmodern critiques of modernity, the Enlightenment, and Habermas, and is thus a useful first path into Habermas's thought.

The Enlightenment project of justifying democratic polity (and thus justifying emancipation from non-democratic polities - e.g., the prevailing monarchies of the time) rests on these key conceptions:

- 1) however diverse cultures and individuals may vary from one another in terms of religious convictions, traditions, sentiments, etc. - **reason** (at least in potential - a potential that must be developed by education) stands as a universally shared capacity of humanity;
- 2) such reason is characterized first of all as an **autonomy** or **freedom** - a freedom which, for such central figures as Locke and Kant, is capable of giving itself its own **law**;
- 3) just as this reason seems capable of discerning **universal laws** in the domain of mathematics and the natural sciences (witness the success of the Copernican Revolution and Newton) - so reason, it is hoped, is capable of discerning **universal laws and norms** in the moral and political domains.

As an example of such a universal norm: if I am to exercise my freedom by choosing my own goals and projects - this freedom requires that others **respect** these choices by **not** attempting to override them and make use of me for their own purposes. (In Kantian terms, others must never treat me simply as a means, but always as an end.)

But if I logically require others to respect my freedom as an autonomous rationality, then insofar as I acknowledge others as autonomous rationalities - reciprocity demands that I respect others' freedom as well.

This norm of respect then issues in the **political** demand for democracy: only democracies, as resting on the [free and rational] **consent** of the governed, thereby respect and preserve the fundamental humanity of its citizens ( i.e., precisely their central character as rational freedoms). [This argument, initially launched by [John Locke](#), finds its way into Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence*, and from there into the arguments for women's emancipation in writers such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and the arguments for civil rights as articulated by [Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), in his *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*.]

Over against the **universalism** associated with reason and its norms in such Enlightenment thought, however, **relativism** argues that no such universal human characteristics and norms exist. Lyotard, as but one example of postmodernist thought, strenuously objects to such universalism as an element of what he characterizes as the "metanarrative" of the Enlightenment, a metanarrative he seeks to overcome in favor of localized narratives and traditions.

For Habermas, however, stripping the Enlightenment project of its universalist intention suspends its emancipatory dimension: if the conception of human beings as rational autonomies and the correlative requirement of **consent** can **not** be defended as universal in some strong fashion, then we paralyze our capacity to be critical of norms and politics which contradict this conception of human being and the democratic polities this free humanity requires. In short, the

loss of the universalist claims of the Enlightenment to postmodern (and other sorts of) relativism opens the door to authoritarian politics in all its forms.

For Habermas, the threat of authoritarianism is an especially forceful reality: as a young man, he witnessed the brutality of the Nazi regime. In order to save human autonomy and modern democracy from the very real threats of fascism, Habermas seeks to reconstruct the Enlightenment arguments for reason and universalism in several ways - for example, by developing a richer conception of reason in the light of empirically-oriented research in sociology, psychology, speech-act analysis, etc.

### **Discourse Ethics: grounded in tacit assumptions of universal validity**

In particular, Habermas seeks to ground a discourse ethics in the what he takes to be a fundamental assumption of conversation or discourse: especially when we make statements such as "you ought not to be a racist," "it is just to reward people according to their labor," etc. - our "ought" here is intended to signify that these moral norms (avoiding racism, providing just rewards) are **not** valid solely for the individual who happens to accept them. Rather, especially if we **argue**, if we seek to bring others to accept our views on fundamental issues - we tacitly assume that these norms are valid for all people: our arguments are designed to persuade others that they should agree with us regarding these norms.

This usually tacit assumption of the universal validity of our claims is fundamental to what Habermas calls communicative action, the process of giving and criticizing reasons for holding or rejecting particular claims - a process apparent especially in the natural sciences, law, and criticism. Insofar as one grants that such argumentation leads to universally valid claims - an admission one is most likely to make with regard to the sciences - one then concedes Habermas's central point: communicative action defines a rationality capable, through discourse, of arriving at universal norms.

### **Discourse Ethics: the conditions for developing universal norms**

Once relativism is overcome in this way (as well as others), Habermas then concerns himself with the **conditions** under which universally valid claims might be expected to emerge.

The first of these is the original **freedom** of all members of a community. Echoing the classical Enlightenment argument requiring the consent of humans as freedom, this freedom means: in a discourse in which a community seeks to establish a norm or procedure - acceptance of proposed norms and procedures must be rationally motivated, i.e., free and uncoerced (Habermas, ["Justice and Solidarity,"](#) 6).

A related condition is **equality**. Equality means, in part, that all participants have an equal voice in the discussion regarding proposed norms and procedures. In particular, **consensus** emerges here as a requirement - i.e., the uncoerced agreement of all who are affected by a proposed norm or procedure.

### **Discourse Ethics: Three Principles**

These conditions are stated more formally by Habermas in the form of three principles:

**Principle 1:** a principle of universalization, one that intends to set the conditions for impartial judgment insofar as it "constrains all affected to adopt the perspectives of all others in the balancing of interests" ("[Discourse Ethics](#)," 65). The principle of universalization itself states:

All affected can accept the consequences and the side effects [that] its [a proposed moral norm's] general observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of everyone's interests (and these consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities for regulation). (ibid, 65)

**Principle 2:** "Only those [moral] norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in a practical discourse " (ibid, 66).

In short, the conditions for the practical discourse out of which universally valid norms may emerge include the participation and acceptance of all who are affected by such norms, as such norms meet their interests.

**Principle 3:** Consensus can be achieved only if all participants participate freely : we cannot expect the consent of all participants to follow "unless all affected can freely accept the consequences and the side effects that the general observance of a controversial norm can be expected to have for the satisfaction of the interests of each individual" (ibid, 93).

### **Discourse Ethics: the Rules of Reason**

To circumscribe such discourse more carefully, Habermas takes up rules first proposed by [Robert Alexy](#) as "the Rules of Reason" (1990, 165-167). In Habermas's formulation in "Discourse Ethics," these are:

1. Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse. 2a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.
- 2b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.
- 2c. Everyone is allowed to express his attitudes, desires, and needs.
3. No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (1) and (2). (86)

Such rules are seen to circumscribe the ideal speech situation, one which stresses equality and freedom for each participant - especially

**freedom to** participate in the discourse in critical ways so as to express one's own attitudes, desires, and needs, and

**freedom from** coercion of several sorts.

As David Ingram puts it, community members' participation in discourse will be "unobstructed by ideological prejudices, temporal limitations, and external domination - be it cultural, social, political, or economic" (Ingram, 1990, 148).

### **Discourse Ethics and Solidarity**

Finally, Habermas acknowledges that these procedural rules must further be complemented by a sense of **solidarity** between participants. Such solidarity involves concern for the well-being of both one's fellow human beings and of the community at large. As Habermas has put it recently,

Under the pragmatic presuppositions of an inclusive and noncoercive rational discourse among free and equal participants, everyone is required to take the perspective of everyone else, and thus project herself into the understandings of self and world of all others; from this interlocking of perspectives there emerges an ideally extended we-perspective from which all can test in common whether they wish to make a controversial norm the basis of their shared practice; and this should include mutual criticism of the appropriateness of the languages in terms of which situations and needs are interpreted. In the course of successfully taken abstractions, the core of generalizable interests can then emerge step by step.

("Reconciliation through the Public Use of Reason: Remarks on John Rawls's Political Liberalism," *Journal of Philosophy* (XCII:3 [March, 1995] 117-8)

(see also Antje Gimmler's comments on [solidarity in Habermas](#))

### **Discourse Ethics and Democracy**

For Habermas, the general conditions of the ideal speech situation and the rules of reason, especially as coupled with this sense of solidarity, describe the necessary conditions of **democratic polity**. (That is, at this point Habermas reaches his intention of justifying democratic polity over alternative forms - especially as those forms are supported, however inadvertently, by relativism.)

At the same time, these conditions and rules establish the legitimacy of **pluralism**. That is, a diversity of communities and participants, while following the same set of rules regarding discourse, may establish diverse sets of norms as legitimate for a given, but not all, communities. (This pluralism offsets especially postmodern critiques of modern rationality and technology as "totalizing" and thus totalitarian.)

Finally, the rules of reason offer specific guidelines for a discourse community as it seeks to resolve difficult ethical issues - such as the issues of pornography and free speech.

Additional reading:

[Thomas McCarthy on Habermas and Rawls](#)

Cavalier's unit on "rules of discourse" for the Dialogue

References:

Robert Alexy, A Theory of Practical Discourse, Trans. David Frisby. In *The Communicative Ethics Controversy*, Seyla Benhabib and Fred Dallmayr, eds., 151-190. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Juergen Habermas, Justice and Solidarity: On the Discussion Concerning Stage 6. *Philosophical Forum* 21, no. 12 (Fall/Winter): 32-52.

\_\_\_\_\_, Discourse Ethics,: Notes on Philosophical Justification. In *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, 43-115. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990.

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