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In Defense of Universalism — Yet Again!
A Response to Critics of Situating the Self

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I. Towards a Post-Metaphysical Universalism

Universalism has fallen on hard times. After nearly two decades of postmodernist, feminist, deconstructionist and other versions of contextualist criticism, universalist ideals in ethics and politics sound anachronistic and indefensible. Yet paradoxically, the political realities of our time — ranging from ethnic cleansing and mass rapes of Moslem women in Bosnia to the crushing of the democratic opposition in Tienanmen Square in China and to the defense of the civil and political rights of all minorities in the successor states of the former Soviet Union — have placed the necessity for universalist ideals on the global agenda. By universalism I mean the principle that all human beings, by virtue of their humanity, are entitled to moral respect from others, and that such universal moral respect minimally entails the entitlement of individuals to basic human, civil, and political rights. Since the Enlightenment, philosophers have been disputing the normative grounds upon which such universal moral respect can be rationally defended. The content and extent of minimal rights entailed by such moral respect are also the source of disagreement and contention. What has become increasingly difficult to defend in the last two decades is not so much the minimal content associated with these two principles of universal moral respect and human rights as the possibility of justifying them rationally. A number of theorists, from neo-pragmatists like Richard Rorty to democratic-contestation theorists like William Connolly, would concede that some version of these principles is both desirable
and necessary for life in a just and flourishing collectivity. They would contest, however, that a rational defense of these ideals, derivable from some core conception of human reason, is also possible.

The goal of the studies on contemporary ethics, collected in Situating the Self, was to articulate a post-metaphysical defense of moral and political universalism which would do justice to some of these contemporary criticisms. I argued that the crucial insights of the universalist tradition in practical philosophy could be reformulated today without committing oneself to the metaphysical illusions of the Enlightenment. These are the illusion of a self-transparent and self-grounding reason, the illusion of a disembodied and disembodied subject, and the illusion of having found an Archimedean moral standpoint, situated beyond historical and cultural contingency. The first step in the formulation of such a post-metaphysical universalist position is to rearticulate a discursive, communicative concept of rationality. In Situating the Self, I do not carry out the steps of this reformulation; instead, I build upon the transformations of philosophy undertaken by Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas in the last decade.

The second step of this project comes with the recognition that the subjects of reason are finite, embodied, and fragile creatures, not disembodied cogitos or abstract "unities of transcendental apperception." I argue that the human infant becomes a self, a being capable of speech and action, only by learning to interact in a human community. The identity of the self is constituted by a narrative unity which integrates what "I" can do, have done, and will accomplish with what you expect of "me," interpret my acts and intentions to mean, wish for me in the future. The human infant becomes a person through contingent processes of socialization, acquires language and reason, develops a sense of justice and autonomy, and becomes capable of projecting a narrative of which she is not only the author but the actor as well.

If reason is the contingent achievement of linguistically socialized creatures, then the moral point of view is not a timeless Archimedean center from which the philosopher can judge the world. Rather, the moral point of view articulates a certain stage in the development of linguistically socialized human beings who reason about their mutual existence from the standpoint of a hypothetical questioning: under what conditions can we say that these general rules of action are valid not

because it is what you and I have been brought up to believe in, or
because my tribe, my nation, my religion says that they are so, but
because they are fair, just, impartial, and in the mutual interests of all?

The nerve of my reformulation of the universalist tradition is the
reconstruction of the “moral point of view” along the model of a moral
cornerstone, subject to the principles of universal moral respect and
egalitarian reciprocity. The goal of such moral conversation is not con-
sensus or unanimity, but, in Hannah Arendt’s terms, “the anticipated
communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to
some agreement.”2 Departing from the strict consensual model of Hab-
ermas’s discourse ethics, I sought to stake a middle ground between an
a prioristic universalism and other more radical forms of contextualism.
Since my attempt to stake such a middle ground has been radically mis-
understood by some critics of my work like Peter Dews,3 I will briefly
repeat here my reasons for rejecting Habermas’s derivation of the uni-
versalizability principle, ‘U’.4 My reasons for rejecting Habermas’s ver-
sion of the principle of universalizability are that on the one hand the
derivation of ‘U’ within discourse ethics remains a problem, and on the
other hand the formulation of ‘U’ washes away the necessary distinc-
tions between a justice-oriented deontological theory like discourse eth-
ics and other versions of utilitarianism (34-38). A close look at the
formulation of ‘U’ may be appropriate:

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,
a norm of action could not be considered valid.5

From the beginning, the project of discourse ethics has been stymied by
the problems of circularity or inconsistency. The normative content of
the argumentation principles already seemed to presuppose the moral
theory which discourse ethics was supposed to ground; or, if one did

   105-10.
4. Jürgen Habermas, “Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Jus-
   43-116, here 86.
5. Habermas 86.
not impute a certain normative content to the principles of argumentation, then such a content was smuggled into the theory at a later stage via the strictly universalist interpretation of the conditions of reciprocity and symmetry. Since I have struggled to meet these objections and still hold on to the core ideas behind the program of a discourse ethic, in jetisoning ‘U’, I chose to admit the material normative content of the rules governing practical discourses. I wrote:

‘D’ [the central premise of discourse ethics], together with those rules of argument governing discourses, the normative content of which I summarized as the principles of universal moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity, are in my view quite adequate to serve as the only universalizability test. (37)

The gist of my reformulation of discourse ethics is, then, the admission that the two principles of universal moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity are always already implied by any formulation of practical discourses and hence cannot be said to be established only as their result.

This strategy leads to a certain circularity, but following some insights of hermeneutic philosophy, I suggest that this circularity is not vicious, but unavoidable. Within the hermeneutic horizon of the political and ethical legacy of modernity and as a result of endless political and ethical struggles, the norms of universal moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity, in however contested a fashion, become part of our moral-political universe. We contest them even when we take them for granted in some form or other, according to some interpretation or other. Although any specific interpretation of these norms is open to dispute in a discourse situation, the very step leading to a discursive moral argumentation presupposes some prior understanding [Vorverstündnis] of these norms.

At first sight this statement may seem not only naive, but simply false in the face of the many racisms, xenophobisms, and nationalisms produced by modernity since the seventeenth century. Moral optimism of progress is not part of my agenda. Rather, what I am suggesting here, and what needs further historical and cultural analysis in order to be substantiated, is a dialectic of universalism and discrimination, the simultaneous spread of the ideals of equality and the formation of prejudice towards “others.” Intergroup prejudice has always existed in human history. What needs to be investigated is how, after the spread
of the universalist ideals of the Enlightenment, social and political prejudice is caught up in a dialectic of justification which is wholly different than the systems of prejudice which dominated premodernity. In the latter, such difference among peoples, classes, genders, and races is thought to have a basis in nature, ontology, or theology. Modernity destroys these sources of justification — more or less; in doing so, it almost creates a heightened need for repression in order to reestablish difference and discrimination.7

This “hermeneutic universalism of modernity” may be what is most disturbing to Peter Dews, for it does mean a certain contextualism, but not of the sort which he imputes to me. I would never deny, as he seems to imply that I do, that the steps leading individuals from the moral struggles of everyday life to the “epoche” of practical discourses require strenuous levels of cognitive and psychological abstraction. Neither the motivational willingness nor the cognitive capacity to engage in discourses and to argue for the validity of controversial norms from the standpoint of all concerned falls from heaven. Such abilities and capacities are indeed contingent upon the cultural, institutional, and political resources and histories of collectivities; they also presuppose a certain level of cognitive and psychological development among individuals. In this sense, I am a “pragmatist,” as Dews observes, but one who believes not in “naturalizing reason,” but in discovering the historicity of its becoming.

Dews asks whether in my view “it is the acquiring of reason which is contingent, or whether reason, as something acquired, is contingent.”8 My position is that genesis and validity — the claim that certain theses are rationally justifiable, in whatever way they may be acquired — are distinct, and that validity cannot be reduced to genesis. Like Hegel, I

6. For example, as historians of anti-Semitism like Hannah Arendt, Jacob Katz, and George Mosse have investigated, modern anti-Semitism, which developed after the French Revolution, could no longer appeal to the theological tradition of Christian prejudice against the Jews as “killers of God’s son,” etc. Modern anti-Semitism had to ground itself differently: by appealing to cultural and racial theories of difference, for example. We may say that the Nazi theories of race and Jewish racial difference often exhibited the insane and extravagant characteristic that they did, precisely because they were so counterfactual to the moral everyday experience of so many Germans and Jews.

7. I am grateful to Paul Gilroy for his exploration and implementation of some of these ideas concerning my narrative of modernity in The Black Atlantic (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993).

believe that the self-reflection of reason upon the conditions of its own becoming is an aspect of any defensible concept of theoretical and practical rationality, but that such self-reflection, although necessary, is not sufficient by itself for the articulation of such a concept of rationality. In fact, I do accept the "context-bursting force" of validity claims," which Dews seems to suggest I do not. At several points in *Situating the Self* I make this clear: in discussing conceptions of the good life entertained by some religious communities, the content of which may clash with basic human, civil, and political rights, as anchored in various Bills of Rights and constitutions, I maintain that such rights "trump" over these conceptions of the good life in the event of a clash (44ff). I take up the problem of cultural relativism, very briefly and programmatically, in a lengthy footnote and suggest that both philosophical arguments about the unviability of radical views of incommensurability, and sociological facts about the development of modernity on a world scale since the sixteenth century would be part of my rejection of cultural relativism (62). Finally, in one of the central essays of the book, "Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism," I disagree explicitly and vehemently with a suggestion made by Linda Nicholson and Nancy Fraser that social criticism without philosophy is possible and I reject the strategy of solely situated, immanent criticism precisely because I believe that "context-transcending validity claims" are essential to the task of rigorous social critique (225ff).9

II. Discourse Ethics and Hypothetical Contractualism. A Response to James Sterba

In their generous and illuminating comments on *Situating the Self*, by contrast, James Sterba and Iris Young do not focus on what may be termed meta-ethical issues concerning the logic of normative justification, as Peter Dews has done. On the basis of broad agreement with a dialogically reformulated universalist ethics, they analyse the same central issue: my attempt to give a different account of the dialogue ethi-

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9. Nancy Fraser's subsequent answer to my objection has made it amply clear that for many feminist theorists I do precisely what Dews accuses me of not doing, namely I believe in the context-transcending force of certain normative claims. See Nancy Fraser, "False Anthitheses: A Response to Seyla Benhabib and Judith Butler," *Praxis International* 11.2 (July 1991); an expanded version of this response has appeared in a collectively authored book in German as *Der Streit um Differenz* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1993); English version to appear from Routledge, Kegan and Paul in December 1994.
cal standpoint from both Rawls's contractualism and Habermas's restrictive "ideal speech situation." Sterba as well as Young remark that the integration of the standpoints of the "generalized" and "concrete other" is central to this reformulation. According to the standpoint of the generalized other, each individual is a moral person endowed with the same moral rights as ourselves; s/he is capable of a sense of justice, of formulating a vision of the good, and of engaging in activity to pursue the latter. The standpoint of the concrete other, however, enjoins us to view every moral person as a unique individual, with a certain life history, disposition, and endowment, as well as needs and limitations. I envision the relationship of the standpoints of the generalized and the concrete other along the model of a continuum. In the first place, there is the universalist commitment to considering every human individual as a being worthy of moral respect. This norm is institutionalized in a democratic polity through the recognition of civil, legal, and political rights. The standpoint of the concrete other, by contrast, is implicit in those ethical relationships in which we are always already immersed in the lifeworld. To stand in such an ethical relationship as a parent, sister, brother, or spouse means that as concrete individuals we know what is expected of us by virtue of the kinds of social bonds which tie us to the other.

Although Sterba and Young focus on my construction of the dialogical ethical situation and the way in which the perspectives of the generalized and the concrete other can be integrated within such dialogue, their comments also pull in different directions: whereas, on the basis of deep agreement with a Rawlsian framework, James Sterba insists on the need for hypothetical moral reasoning from the standpoint of generalized others, Iris Young is suspicious of hypothetical moral arguments in general on the grounds that we can never really assume the standpoint of the concrete other in moral dialogue. Furthermore, she suspects that the assumption that we can take the standpoint of the other and reverse perspectives in moral dialogue results in bad politics and objectionable morality. I find their comments most illuminating, but I am not ready to grant all their objections.

James Sterba claims that various readings of Rawls's construction of the "original position" behind a "veil of ignorance" are possible, and that upon one of these readings, my critique of the Rawlsian construction becomes moot. Sterba maintains that the veil of ignorance condition can be interpreted not as ruling out knowledge of concrete selves
altogether, but simply as ruling out knowledge of which concrete self one happens to be oneself. This is not all though. Sterba also thinks that persons in the original position “would have all knowledge of general and concrete others, except that knowledge that would lead to biased choices or stand in the way of unanimous agreement.” I think that the first reading is actually compatible with Rawls’s construction of the “original position,” while the second is not. Nonetheless, both interpretations show the correctness of my original criticism rather than refuting it.

The standpoint of the ‘concrete other’ describes an open-ended phenomenological perspective, and hence can never be adequately captured by or stated from the standpoint of the theoretical observer, but always requires the articulation of the standpoint of the participants in social situations. The standpoint of the concrete other is situational and situated knowledge; it is narratively constructed, open-ended and always revisable. Sterba interprets the standpoint of the concrete other along different lines: for him, to think from the standpoint of the concrete other means to think along those characteristics of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, language, sexual preference, or bodily and mental abilities, on the basis of which it would be wrong to discriminate against individuals. Sterba has not provided a list of which cultural, historical, or biological characteristics he considers irrelevant to moral argumentation. Both he and Rawls appear to think of these characteristics along the lines defined in the various anti-discrimination clauses of the Amendments to the Bill of Rights — such as race, creed, gender, ethnic, national, religious and linguistic origin, bodily and mental ability, and sexual preference.

I certainly completely subscribe to this principle of political, legal, and civic equality and justice. Only, I think that it is inappropriate to think of the standpoint of the “concrete other” in terms of criteria of anti-discrimination alone. It is only in the course of the moral conversation that we can learn those aspects of the otherness of the other which the other wants us to respect and/or to take into account in our deliberations. The concreteness of the concrete other is established through first person self-descriptions. It is in this sense epistemologically indeterminate. Sterba therefore is too quick to assume that we can set aside all

knowledge of general and concrete others, “except that knowledge which would lead to biased choices or stand in the way of an unanimous agreement.” What knowledge is this, and how does the theorist know which knowledge would stand in the way of unanimous agreement? No one knows; it is only in the course of the moral conversation that we can discover those points of contention about our identities, interests, conceptions of the good and the like which may not lead to agreement.

Does this admission not make my interpretation of the dialogic situation vulnerable to total perspectivism? How can any norms on which we can all agree result from such a dialogue if the standpoint of the concrete other is so situationally contingent and interpretively indeterminate?

In retrospect, and as a result of further reflection on these matters, it would have been desirable for me to have distinguished more clearly between the moral standpoint and the standpoint of justice. The perspective of institutional justice, as embodied in the macro institutions of our societies, as John Rawls rightly points out, articulates rules of collective coexistence in the face of continuing and permanent disagreement about our conceptions of the good and different ways of life which we choose to pursue and cherish. Rules of justice articulate principles upon which we can agree when we know we cannot agree about our ethical conceptions concerning, for example, identity or the good life. Unfortunately, the program of discourse ethics has always been ambiguously situated between articulating a position of justice on the one hand and a moral standpoint on the other. This conflation was repeated in Situating the Self; in an attempt to distinguish between a universalist moral standpoint and the narrow standpoint of institutional justice, I did not articulate clearly enough the distinction between the standpoint of justice and that of ethical-moral dialogue. Sterba is wrong in insisting that the “original position” can accommodate the standpoint of the concrete other; but, following Rawls, he is right to insist that some distinction between the standpoint of institutional justice, which is always articulated from the standpoint of the generalized other, and the perspective of morality, which must also take the standpoint of the concrete other into account, is crucial.

James Sterba’s second objection pertains to “object domain” issues in ethical theory. It goes as follows: why is it relevant to take the standpoint of the concrete other into account in all cases of ethical import — what about the determination of basic rights? Why do we have to consider such differences in this area? I appreciate and share some of the
concerns behind this objection; that is why I think the standpoint of the "generalized other" is indispensable. Yet, are there differences among persons such as should be considered at the level of the determination of basic rights as well? Interestingly enough, Iris Young here holds a different position than Sterba and answers this question affirmatively. My own position is to defend a "constitutional universalism," which nonetheless can be "difference sensitive." I am convinced that only a universalist legal and ethical tradition can accommodate the demands of difference; for differences cannot be universalized. To give an example: if I am a French-speaking Canadian, and want to preserve my language and cultural rights as articulated in a collective way of life, I cannot simply impose my will on Anglophone Canadians or Native American Indians also residing in the province of Quebec. I have to respect some norms of universalizable civic, legal, and political rights for all linguistic and ethnic communities. Let us say that through a hypothetical secession Quebec leaves the Union. What happens at that point to the rights of the Anglophone minority in Quebec?\(^{11}\) I think that they should be guaranteed the full scope of civil and political rights also to be enjoyed by the majority of the French speaking citizens, even though now they have to accept living as a national minority in a Francophone as opposed to an Anglophone collectivity. What the Canadian example has made amply clear in recent discussions is the necessity to reflect upon what William Kymlicka has called "group-differentiated citizenship rights."\(^{12}\) So far, the dominant theories of liberalism, like John Rawls's, have proceeded from models of universal citizenship, and have not considered the constitutional relevance of the standpoint of generalized concrete others, like members of a linguistic community, who may want to preserve their way of life.

Strict universalist liberals like John Rawls and James Sterba may have another riposte at this point: as Sterba argues, taking only the standpoint of the "generalized other" into account may be more appropriate at the justificatory level, whereas that of the "concrete other"


may be more relevant at the level of application of moral principles. Thus, a possible and plausible Rawlsian response to the Canadian example discussed above may be that forms of group-differentiated citizenship and other aspects of constitutional design emerge at second and third stages of the theory, when we are concerned with applying principles of justice to design institutional frameworks compatible with them. I would agree with this distinction between contexts of justification and contexts of application. In fact, without some such distinction, one could not defend coherently the rights of minorities who live in ethnically, linguistically mixed communities. Whence then the continuing disagreement with the Rawlsian, hypothetical contractualist?

Let me put the point paradoxically: the Rawlsian construction of an "original position" behind a "veil of ignorance" cannot serve as an adequate articulation of a dialogical moral point of view, precisely because it interprets the generalized other too much along the model of a specific concrete other. It has now been established in the literature that those choosing behind a veil of ignorance are sociologically envisioned as male heads of household. As Susan Okin has pointed out, the basic structure of the family is not subject to the norms of justice. Furthermore, assumptions about limited altruism, "not to take an interest in each others' interests, etc.," or the imputation of narrow models of economic rationality as motivational forces driving agents, suggest that the philosophical anthropology behind the "original position" does privilege a subject of rights who is a professional or upwardly mobile, male head of household. Now, I think that this anthropological model of the agents behind the Rawlsian veil of ignorance does not discredit the contents at least of the first principle of justice. What this means is that one has to distinguish even more carefully between a concept of the moral person on the one hand, and a certain anthropological, psychological, sociological model presupposed by such a concept on the other.

Precisely because I do not define the standpoint of the "concrete

14. I add the qualification of "at least the first principle of justice," for I think that the second principle of distributive justice is dependent both in content and in terms of the logic of justification upon a set of psychological and cultural, and perhaps biased, assumptions about the desirability of certain ways of life. Is it the case that no matter what else we want, we always want more of those primary goods like money, wealth, power, influence, and the basis of self-respect? See my discussion of this issue and of how we can identify the "least advantaged individual" in Situating the Self 168ff.
other" theoretically and leave this open to situational specification, my model can accommodate more psychological and sociological diversity than can Rawls's construction. The paradox here is that the more abstract the "generalized other" is, the more concrete the concrete other can get. The less we as theorists smuggle certain identity definitions into the construction of the moral point of view, the more open and diversified will this construction be and the more capable of accommodating difference.

A related point, also raised by Sterba, concerns the possibility of "hypothetical moral reasoning"; Sterba seeks to defend such reasoning against charges of what I would call "substitutionalism," i.e., putting one's own point of view in the place of the moral needs and perspective of the other. Whereas Iris Young thinks that all moral reasoning can be suspected of "substitutionalism," I actually agree with Sterba that hypothetical reasoning is both inevitable and necessary. Here my language of "reversibility of perspectives" and "taking the standpoint of all involved into account" comes in. I think the political concerns voiced by Allison Jaggar and Iris Young about the dangers of "substitutionalism" inherent in this procedure are real enough, but so are the concerns raised by Sterba that a lot of the time we face situations of moral conflict or choice in which we cannot resort to a real dialogue, but must act, take a stance here and now. We must engage then in a hypothetical moral conversation with others whom our actions and positions will affect. Dialogical ethics urges us, whenever and however possible, to seek the dialogue with the other who will be affected by my actions and choices, but there are circumstances when I must be able to choose and to act even without such dialogue. I would say that this is more frequently the case in situations of personal and informal contexts of interpersonal morality — in family life, in friendships, in love relations. Norms of justice for the collectivity can only be established through the widest possible participation of all involved and concerned. Here dialogic participation is a precondition of legitimacy; in personal and interpersonal contexts, hypothetical moral reasoning from the standpoint of all involved is a precondition of the moral value of our principles and actions.

The final objection raised by James Sterba concerns the neglect of issues of animal rights and environmental justice in both Rawlsian and in discourse ethics. I think it would be important here to distinguish between two sets of concerns: it is true that these issues have not been at
the center of neo-Kantian theories of justice or of ethics. Does this neglect imply, however, a need for an ontological overhaul of universalistic theories? In order to accommodate concerns with animal rights and environmental justice, must we abandon the philosophical premise that all valid and just norms have to be open to validation through processes of collective choice or dialogue, variously defined? Because neither animals nor trees can participate in such collective choices or conversation, does this mean that we must develop an ethic that is “in tune with nature,” or grounded upon nature? I do not think so, and although I cannot argue for this point here, I would say that an ethic founded upon nature would be most inappropriate to preserve justice, autonomy, and inequality in complex modern societies. Sterba himself does not go this route. Instead, he would like to have some mechanisms in discourses and other hypothetical choice situations through which the interests of all should be represented, “and so nonhumans will require human advocates acting reasonably on their behalf.” Since the entitlement of these nonhumans to act in this way as well as the content of their recommendations as “representing” the interests of non-human nature can themselves be subject to discursive or contractual validation, it follows that discourse and contract models can accommodate concern with such issues without having to alter the basic philosophical and meta-ethical premises on which they rest. Trees do not speak to us: it is always some of us who try to sensitize others to notice certain things about non-human nature and to convince them that we must coexist within nature with other non-human beings in a certain way for the sake of our own future collective well-being. A universalistic ethics and an ethic of planetary responsibility can go together very well.15

III. The Impossibility of Moral Symmetry and Iris Young’s Objections

Iris Young’s comments on Situating the Self are formulated against the background of mutual learning and collaborative argument over many years. At stake here is an issue with which we have been struggling for a long time: namely Iris Young’s suspicion that the project of communicative ethics, both in Habermas’s and in my version, perpetrates the illusions of the Enlightenment in still defending a transparency of

15. Karl-Otto Apel has been concerned with issues of ecological ethics and planetary responsibility insofar as these could be dealt with within the framework of a discourse ethic, see his collection of essays: Diskurs und Verantwortung (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1990).
consciousness. Young is more sympathetic to traditions of French post-structuralist thought which claim that no such transparency is possible. Her principal objection is to my formulation that the idea of "moral respect in dialogue involves reversing perspectives with others and taking their standpoint." In her view, there are both logical and normative problems with this idea.

Young's 'logical' objections to the idea of reversibility of perspectives partially derive from my use of the term "symmetry". This is interpreted by Iris Young to mean "images of mirror sameness." But this is not a fair extrapolation. I distinguish explicitly among "formal" and "complementary" norms of reciprocity and equality (158ff). Symmetry, understood as formal equality, is restricted to the standpoint of the generalized other, and does not imply "images of mirror sameness" of concrete individuals — obviously an absurd proposition, since what is concrete is concrete because it can be differentiated from its other. Symmetry refers to the equality of subject positions. Following Hegel in particular, I have used the term "symmetry" somewhat broadly to designate the symmetry of subject positions.

As will be recalled, in Hegel's construction, the struggle for recognition begins with a radical denial of symmetry, i.e., with the denial of recognition on the part of each self vis à vis the other that the other is also a self, i.e., that although it is an other to me, this being, like me, is aware of its own selfhood. Each not only knows itself to be an other in the eyes of the other, but also knows that the other is aware of this its otherness in my own eyes. This is why the process is "doubled." For Hegel, to become a self means learning to reconcile the perspectives I have of myself with the perspective that the other has of me; it means negotiating a viable self-conception between the perspective I have of myself and that you have of me. Self-consciousness is always ex-centric; it is always for another.

Thinkers like George Herbert Mead have articulated this thesis in terms of social role theory: to become a person in the social world, let us say, to become a teacher, means to learn to reverse perspectives and consider the standpoint of the "student." A teacher, to be able to teach, must know or at least have some idea of what the other does not know, must be able to anticipate what would appear to a student ignorant of

this particular subject-matter as a problem and as a puzzle. Furthermore, a good teacher would have some sense of her authority and image in the eyes of the students and how this requires or does not require a certain class-room behavior, mode of self-presentation, pedagogical style. And certainly we have all had teachers and professors who, fully aware of all perspectives involved, would also create situations of cognitive dissonance by surprising expectations, tearing down prejudices, rattling our images of ourselves, and the like. Social roles imply symmetry in the sense that they imply an ability to see and to interpret the world from the standpoint of others to whom I stand in certain relations.

If “symmetry” is understood as the formal equality of subject positions, which precisely as concrete subjects are not at all “mirror images of sameness,” and if “reversibility of perspectives” is understood to entail not symmetry of concrete selves but the capacity to look at the world from others’ points of view, then both symmetry and reversibility of perspectives are fundamental features of all social life and of all identity-formation. Reversing perspectives does not mean “getting inside the head of the other,” so to speak. It means anticipating more or less, understanding more or less what the other is likely to do, how she feels on a certain issue, or what her reactions are likely to be. We do this all the time; no social world would be possible without such anticipatory knowledge and judgment. Why does Iris Young find this almost banal fact of social world-constitution so problematic?

Iris Young suspects that the Hegelian model of co-constitution of subjectivity is a reconciliationist model, implying a harmonistic meeting of minds, a transparency of consciousness to itself and among selves. Although at the end of the Phenomenology of Spirit Hegel posited a reconciliation of struggling consciousness and a moment of moral forgiveness, I think that his theory of intersubjectivity can be extricated from the clutches of a rationalistic teleology. Ironically, Iris Young applies to me a criticism which I have made of Habermas: namely the need to interpret communicative ethics without the illusion of a rationalist consensus; instead of rational consensus, I emphasize contingent processes of rationally justifiable agreement [Verständigung]. Such processes are revisable if they are convincingly shown to be untenable.

At a more theoretical level, one has to consider whether a position like Young’s which would deny the possibility of reversing perspectives
does not fall into an extreme nominalism. In fact, all selves are constituted by complex and multiple narrations and perspectives. The perspectives of constitutive others are fundamental to my own self-narration. In telling my story, I am always also hearing the voices of others who have told my story, or who would tell it form a certain perspective. More often than not, as this unique individual I am constantly struggling against these voices and the perspectives of the others within me. If the other is already within me, why should it be so difficult for me to recognize the other outside me? Intersubjectivity implies the complex coexistence of self and other in intrapsychic as well as in interpsychic space. Precisely because the individual comes to be a self by learning to reverse perspectives in moral and social space, it can also always more or less take the standpoint of the other into account and consider the world as it appears from that perspective.

Iris Young is concerned with this point because she thinks that too hasty an admission of the symmetry of subject positions would not allow us to deal with and to reflect upon those political differences which really divide us. She believes that it is problematic to enjoin social agents to adopt the standpoint of others across relations of privilege and oppression. I agree with Young that “substitutionalist universalism” in moral and political theory has served to occlude the standpoint of others by not allowing for the theoretical space within which such others can articulate their own self-understandings. The whole point of discourse ethics is, in fact, to promote participatory political structures, which would eliminate substitutionalism and augment public chances for articulating one’s standpoint as one sees it and in one’s own language.

Whence the disagreement? Iris Young thinks that it is ontologically and fundamentally impossible for social groups to think, to see, to understand the standpoint of other social groups. Her example of the Hill-Thomas debates suggests this. I think this is wrong. She falls again into the danger of essentializing group identities and not taking into account the contested and fragile construction of “group standpoints”. Groups, no less than individuals, in fact more so, are composed of different, competing, clashing voices, perspectives, and narratives. Since there is no unitary group perspective, but always a more or less coherent construction of group identity, the perspectives of those outside a group may very well be part of the narrative of that group about its own identity. Intergroup dialogue very often takes the form of each
group articulating the perspective it has of the other for itself, and groups contest these perspectives of each other, which very often harbor prejudice, denigrations and/or phantasmagoric idealizations of each other. If anything, the Thomas-Hill debates revealed the fragile, multiple, and essentially contestable aspects of group identity. Who, for example, was supposed to define what it was to be an “African-American woman”? African-American males, whose own perspectives ranged all over the spectrum; African-American females, who were equally divided, or white feminists, who were themselves at loggerheads over their support for Anita Hill? The conclusion I draw from this event is quite the opposite of Iris Young’s: it seems to me that the Hill-Thomas struggle proved for the first time that a significant coalition around the language of feminism, which would cut across racial divides had become possible.

The political and ethical project, which Young and I share, is to increase everyone’s capacity to articulate in public their standpoint as they see fit; yet such articulation prompts learning and transformation in others. Precisely because reversibility of perspectives is possible, social learning around issues like sexism, racism, and ethnic discrimination is possible. Moral change and political transformation can only take place through learning to take the standpoint of the other into account. This, like psychoanalysis, is an interminable process; for social life generates conflicts and distortions of perspectives, idealizations and mythologizations as well as demonizations of others. Social reconciliation is a utopian wish. All we can hope for is a society in which all groups and individuals can live in dignity and justice without having to suffer mythologization or demonization in the eyes of others. And all we can expect of a universalist ethical theory is to articulate the minimum principles of moral and political life such as to guide our intuitions as we navigate the waters of moral choice, conflict, and indeterminacy.

Iris Young suggests that communicative ethics needs to distinguish between “taking the standpoint of the other person, reversing perspectives with others, and taking the perspective of others into account in making moral and political judgments.” This is a plausible request, and as long as it does not commit us to an individualistic nominalism or group essentialism, I am willing to heed it.