



Philosophical Review

Insight and Solidarity. A Study in the Discourse Ethics of Jurgen Habermas. by William Rehg

Review by: Seyla Benhabib

The Philosophical Review, Vol. 105, No. 4 (Oct., 1996), pp. 547-550

Published by: [Duke University Press](#) on behalf of [Philosophical Review](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2998431>

Accessed: 30/11/2011 17:45

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Duke University Press and *Philosophical Review* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Philosophical Review*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

is s' , for $s \in R_1$, just the truth conditions presumed already given for 'the ratio of the magnitudes m_1 and m_2 is r ', where $r = g^{-1}(s)$. Furthermore, suppose that the general principle concerning applications that, on the Fregean procedure, governs our understanding of statements about real numbers should prove inadequate; applications arise that are not covered by the principle. By virtue of what are these applications of *the real numbers*? I do not see any answer to this question other than that the mathematical structure involved is that of the real numbers.

This is a rich book. Many interesting discussions both of Frege and of the substantive issues have not even been touched on in this review. It is far from uncritical of Frege, at times even severe in its judgments. Nonetheless it is animated throughout by the author's conviction of Frege's originality and importance. Dummett ends the book with the statement that "for all his mistakes and omissions, he [Frege] was the greatest philosopher of mathematics yet to have written" (321). Many will reject that estimation, and it seems to me that it sometimes leads Dummett to see Frege's own contemporaries too much through Fregean spectacles. But anyone who knows Dummett's body of work on Frege and the philosophical profit he has derived from it would have to agree that the conviction behind it has been a fruitful one. *Frege: Philosophy of Mathematics*, in particular, is (along with the collection edited by Demopoulos; see note 4) the indispensable introduction to contemporary work on its subject.

CHARLES PARSONS

Harvard University

The Philosophical Review, Vol. 105, No. 4 (October 1996)

INSIGHT AND SOLIDARITY. A STUDY IN THE DISCOURSE ETHICS OF JÜRGEN HABERMAS. By WILLIAM REHG. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994. Pp. 273.

Despite the foment of the last two decades, philosophical ethics has fallen on hard times. While an increasing number of universalistic moral theories in the Kantian tradition limit themselves to questions of social and political justice (John Rawls, Onora O'Neill), neo-Aristotelian theories of the good, like that of Bernard Williams, question the very possibility and desirability of a philosophical ethics. Viewed against this landscape, the program of discourse or communicative ethics, initiated by Karl Otto-Apel and then developed by Jürgen Habermas, is marked by its optimism. Although sharing a great deal with the Rawlsian tradition, discourse ethicists insist that justice is not "the chief virtue of social institutions" alone, but the privileged domain of the moral as such. And although agreeing with neo-Ar-

BOOK REVIEWS

istotelians' skepticism—later repeated by Hegel against Kant—about decontextualized ethical theory, discourse ethicists nonetheless believe that an abstract formulation of the moral point of view that would be context-sensitive is still possible.

William Rehg's book is the most comprehensive and judicious exposition of discourse ethics available in English—and, I would add, in German. It is a careful analysis of this program, revealing not only the interdependence of insight and solidarity (the book's title) but of insight and illusion in discourse ethics. Rehg's concern is to address three kinds of issues: (1) that a noncircular, non-question-begging derivation of U, the principle of universalizability, is possible; (2) that discourse ethics, although a deontological theory, entails not only a conception of the right but a constitutive vision of the good of rational or autonomous cooperation, as well; (3) that despite its decontextualized—some would add “transcendental”—justification strategies, discourse ethics can be made compatible with context-sensitive moral reasoning and a degree of institutional realism.

For Rehg, the object domain of discourse ethics is neither moral character nor moral emotion, neither conceptions of the good nor the virtues. Rather, discourse ethics is about rational conflict resolution, not in the narrow sense of conflicts arising over, say, the distribution of scarce resources, but in the broader sense of mutual cooperation and coming to an agreement with one another among social beings when and if fundamental disagreements about general norms that regulate their life together occur. The content of discourse ethics is not dictated by the theorist but provided by the conflicts and controversies of the social life-world.

A community of individuals is then confronted with the question of which norms—generally binding rules of social action—it should adopt. According to the principle of discourse ethics, D, “only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity *as participants in a real discourse*” (Rehg, 30, quoting Habermas). But are there such norms? Why not view the moral rules that minimally govern life in most societies that are halfway in order—like not to kill, lie, cheat, or steal, harm the weak, accuse the innocent—as products of sophisticated compromises, interest negotiations, and maybe even psychological rationalizations through which one group controls and dominates another? What distinguishes discourse ethics from other theories of social action based either on the ubiquity of rational self-interest or on the propinquity of social deception is the following claim: the special rules we call moral norms oblige us because and insofar as they are rationally valid. We can know them to be such if and only if they pass the test of universalizability. Rehg's reformulation of U is the following: “A norm is reached on the basis of good reasons, and a rational consensus thereby attained, if and only if, a. each of those affected can convince the others, in terms

they hold appropriate for the perception of both their own and others' interests, that the constraints and impacts of a norm's general observance are acceptable for all; and b. each can be convinced by all, in terms he or she considers appropriate, that the constraints and impacts of a norm's general observance are acceptable for all." (75)

Rehg is very much aware of the problems that afflict both the derivation and the viability of U. He agrees with critics of a strong justification program of U, including myself, that only a weak deduction is possible (62–69). More telling, however, are his concerns that U is still marred by the “vestiges of subject-centered reason,” in that it seems to presuppose a condition of intersubjective and personal transparency according to which each knows of the conviction of the other in terms that the other considers appropriate for moral discourse and vice versa. Regh names this conviction a “reflexive insight” (87, 157–58), and notes, with good grounds: “if real discourses can at best only approximate idealizations, one may ask whether morality stands on too high a pedestal” (231). Regh’s concern is not the old one expressed in the maxim “this may be true in theory but not in practice.” Rather, he is worried that the condition of universalizability is formulated in such rigid, counterfactual terms that we can have no reasonable basis in everyday interactions to know whether U has been fulfilled, whether a discourse has been ended at the right time and with good reasons, whether no one has any more questions and contentions about the terms of moral evaluation, and most fundamentally, whether in view of the fact that “everyone cannot speak to everyone in a dispute of any scope” (235) we have not been unfair, excluding relevant others.

Rehg’s attempted solution to these problems, which have led others like Albrecht Wellmer for example, more or less to abandon the program of discourse ethics, are important. First, discourse ethics is fundamentally fallibilistic and open to criticism: the terms of moral agreement can always be challenged by those who question their validity or appropriateness, the correctness of the decision procedures, and the like. Second, conceding the ground to critics of strict proceduralism like Charles Taylor, Regh agrees that there are “generalized or abstract basic values” (105) in any society against the background of which practical discourse occurs. These values enable us to accept the “moral shortcuts” that any implementation of U must entail. One such generalized value, which actually is also a social attitude, is that of trust. If the rational insight required by U “resides in no single individual,” and “is essentially constituted in a cooperative social network” (249), then moral insight presupposes or is coextensive with concrete rational solidarity. One may wonder whether, having conceded this much, Regh is not more of a communitarian than a discourse ethicist. In the final analysis, how different is this concept of solidarity from the views of Alasdair MacIntyre or Michael Sandel? Has the distinction between mor-

BOOK REVIEWS

al discourse concerned with justice and ethical discourse concerned with the good life, so central to Habermas's own securing of his position against the communitarians, not been thereby undermined? Rehg's answer is that trust, solidarity, and other generalized moral values are essential presuppositions, even social resources, that enable discourse ethics to become a shared practice but that the test of moral validity remains the rational and autonomous insight of individuals. Whereas communitarians treat group identities as justificatory frameworks for moral values, Rehg insists that in secular, pluralistic societies "as soon as such identities—at a sufficient depth—encounter each other in the plural, the power any particular behavior expectation might have enjoyed is relativized by the awareness of different expectations (for the issue at hand) existing within other groups" (98). Despite its illusions, and precisely because of its central insight that rational autonomous social cooperation is only possible on the basis of networks of decentered solidarity that spread across institutions and social practices, discourse ethics remains a compelling account of the moral point of view in complex, pluralist societies. William Rehg's book makes an admirably lucid case for this claim.

SEYLA BENHABIB

Harvard University

The Philosophical Review, Vol. 105, No. 4 (October 1996)

PRACTICAL GUILT: MORAL DILEMMAS, EMOTIONS, AND SOCIAL NORMS. By P. S. GREENSPAN. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. Pp. xii, 246.

This book brings together and develops Patricia Greenspan's thoughts on moral dilemmas and the role of emotions (guilt in particular) in moral judgment. Her main focus is on metaethics and moral psychology, and she discusses moral dilemmas primarily as a concrete way of introducing these issues.

Moral dilemmas are typically thought of as cases of conflicting obligations, but (developing a point from a 1983 article) Greenspan insightfully points out that this is not the only way of thinking of dilemmas. Another way is as cases where all alternatives are prohibited. If ought implies may (as surely it does on its most normal construal), then such cases are not cases of conflicting obligations, since nothing is obligatory. Nonetheless, there is a genuine moral dilemma, since no matter what the agent does, he/she will do something wrong.

I have argued elsewhere that sound principles of deontic logic rule out the possibility of conflicting all-things considered obligations, but not the