An Examination of Habermas' Discourse Ethics and Kant's Categorical Imperatives

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Abstract

The subject matter of ethics is morality and principles that guard various aspects of moral phenomenon. There are different approaches to moral phenomenon. Hence, we have normative ethics that attempt to justify and formulate moral judgments themselves; we have descriptive ethics that do not make moral judgements, but merely describe morality and its manifestations in its various factettes. There is also metaethics that provides conceptual basis for the scientific examination of moral phenomenon. The different approaches to moral phenomenon are geared towards an end, which is realisable through the application of various principles or theories known as ethical theories. This essay explores the ethical principles of two philosophies to develop a comprehensive framework for ethical deliberation. These are discourse ethics of Habermas and Kant's categorical imperative. Habermas' discourse ethics lay emphasis on the role of communicative rationality and inclusive dialogue in ethical decision-making, and the ethical principle (categorical imperative) of Kant provides a universal sort of moral principles that has its foundation in rationality. Are these two ethical principles unifiable or are they quite parallelly distanced from each other? Is there any possibility of integrating their perspectives? In addressing these questions, the philosophical method of analytical synthesis, criticism and reflection are used. The essay aims at addressing contemporary ethical challenges and philosophical underpinnings of the two approaches in resolving ethical matters. It is discovered that Habermasian ethical perspectives and the Kantian synthesis allows for a more robust approach to ethical discourse that incorporates both universal moral principles and the social context in which ethical decisions are made. Synthesizing these moral principles will offer direction for ethical theory and practice.

Keywords: Discourse Ethics, Categorical Imperative, Communication, Universalization, Moral decision.

Introduction

The Discourse Ethics as developed by Jürgen Habermas is a continuation of dialogical monological ethics of Immanuel Kant formulated in the categorical imperative. Hence, Jürgen Habermas and Immanuel Kant are two influential figures in moral philosophy. They have made significant contributions to ethical theory. While they have distinct approaches in their moral discussions, there are some connections between Habermas's Discursive Ethics and Kant's Categorical Imperative that can be explored when it comes to resolving ethical conundrums. Habermas discourse ethics highlights the role of communicative interaction and inclusive dialogue. Kant's categorical imperative proposes moral principles that are universally applicable and grounded in rational autonomy. Discourse ethics and categorical imperative offer valuable insights into ethical deliberation and present distinct perspectives and approaches. This is because just like the categorical imperative of Kant, the principle of universalization of Habermas specifies rules for impartial testing of norms for their moral usefulness. In this work, using the method of analytical synthesis, criticism and reflection, the potential synergies between Habermasian discourse and Kantian imperative will be explored, aiming to develop a more comprehensive framework for ethical inquiry and decision-making.

Kant argues that moral actions must be guided by categorical, unconditional imperatives that apply to all rational beings equally. The categorical imperative consists of various formulations, including the principle of universalizability and the principle of humanity, which emphasize the importance of rational consistency and respect for human dignity. Comparatively, Jürgen Habermas's discourse ethics shifts the focus from abstract principles to communicative processes. Habermas contends that ethical norms should emerge through open and inclusive discourse among free and equal participants.

As stated earlier, in this work, the key principles of Habermasian discursive ethics and Kantian imperative will be examined. We will discuss their respective positions separately before examining their unifying elements that can help in solving ethical problems.

Habermas' Discourse Ethics

Jürgen Habermas is a German philosopher and a social theorist. He was born in Düsseldorf in 1929. He studied philosophy, history, psychology, German literature and economics in Germany and Switzerland. He lectured mainly in Universities of Heidelberg and Frankfurt am Main. He is regarded as the founder of discourse ethics (Kolmer, 167).

Habermas' discourse ethics is an attempt to develop a special theoretical form of cognitivism, which are norms with objective validity. He articulated in his *Discourse Ethics* (1983) how moral questions can be decided cognitively (58-64). An important condition for discourse ethics is theory of communicative action, which Jürgen

Habermas developed in 1981. It assumes that, despite man's ability to reason, he has not been able to develop a good life in a just society. For Habermas, the explanation for the inability does not lie with reason, but interpersonal communication. As a rule, everyone tries to assert their interests in communicative situations and to get the best for themselves. This also applies to social and ethical discourses. Habermas therefore proposes that the discourses should be free of domination. None of the participants can claim to be an incontrovertible authority. Rather, every participant should have the same opportunity in the discourse and equal right to problematize his or her theses. These are because everyone seeks truth by rational means. Consequently, discourse ethics is an ethical theory that deals with the prerequisites for resolving moral and normative conflicts through communicative action. It is ideal speech situation, a situation whereby all the individuals who are engaged in communication must be open and honest, without compulsion and force, so that moral principles are validated collectively. The ultimate aim is to reach consensus through rational discourse. Moral norms and principles are considered valid when they can be justified through open and inclusive communication. This is why Albrecht Wellmer claimed that in the thought of Habermas, moral validity points to an intersubjective structure linguistically mediated which frames the unconditional character of the moral ought, which eventually shapes the human identity (152).   Its objective is to have common rules of communication that promote mutual understanding and justify norms

and values reached through a consensus. This is to say that a controversial moral or socio-political problem is only considered solved when it receives the agreement of all those involved in the dialogical discussion. This means that discourse ethics is based on the concept of communicative reason that aims at creating normative foundations for moral judgments and ethical principles.

But it is not mere consensus that guarantees the validity of norms (after all, it is conceivable that people could agree on something that contradicts any understanding of morality). It is, rather, the validity of norms arising from certain idealizing assumptions that the participants must actually make in their argumentation practice. Habermas summarizes these conditions in the concept of the ideal speech situation. Accordingly, the major argumentation rule of discourse ethics is the universalisation principle (73) that states that every valid norm must satisfy the condition that the consequences and side effects that may result from its general compliance for the satisfaction of the interests of each individual can be accepted by all those affected (75). In addition to the universalization principle, Habermas develops a second, definitive moral principle, the discourse-ethical principle. The principle argues that a moral norm can only claim validity if all those potentially affected by it as participants reach consensus that the norm should hold (76). Its principle formulates correctness of moral norms; truth of propositions and truthfulness of utterances. Habermas presents the justification of the principles in his book *Moralbewußtsein und*

Kaommunikatives Handeln (Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action, 1983), in which he devoted much space to the justification of the principle of universalisation, at the end of which universalisation is derived from two premises (127). It is pertinent to note that the principle of discourse is a dialogical version of the idea of universalization in Kant. It means that "a norm is justified if and only if it can meet with the reasoned agreement of all those affected" (Audi, 359). The largest part of the argument, however, is devoted to the justification of the first of the two premises, namely the justification of certain rules of ideal discourse (88-94; 96-102). These rules include, among others, the following: everyone may participate in the discourse; everyone may make any assertion or express their wishes and no one may be prevented by coercion from exercising the rights set out in the first and second rules.

Kant's Categorical Imperative

Immanuel Kant, like Habermas, is a German philosopher born in the year 1724 in Königsberg in East Prussia (now Russian Republic). He studied, lectured, lived all his life and died in Königsberg in 1804. He gifted the intellectual world with monument of writings, among which are his three Critiques (Critique of Pure Reason, Critique Practical of Reason and Critique of Judgment) and Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Moral also known as Foundation of Metaphysics of Moral (1785), where he developed the categorical imperative. what is categorical imperative?

Categorical imperative can be said to be different formulations by Immanuel Kant that has to do with the principles of human moral conducts. It relates to all people and as such "commands an action as necessary of itself without reference to another end, that is, as objectively necessary" (Stumpf and Fieser, 298). It is that imperative that commands conduct, not as a means but "with the form and the principle from which it results" (Kant, 30). As a result, Stumpf and Fieser argue that categorical imperative does not offer any specific rule of conduct because it appears to be abstract formula, which Kant thought moral philosophy should be so as to provide guide to human behaviour (299). It relates to the "legality" of action, of "maxims" of action, of "being able to will" and of a "general law". It states thus: "Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you at the same time can will that it becomes a universal law" (Kant, 34). This formulation contains a number of expressions that is not quite clear what Kant wishes to associate with them. For instance, there is mention of maxim of action, of being able to will and of a general law. In order to understand the meaning of the entire expressions and thus the meaning of the entire sentence, one should equally understand Kant's thought flow that leads to the Categorical Imperative. It has to be noted that Kant developed his own terminology, which does not correspond with common usage.

In the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, he stated it thus: "Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you at the same time can will that it becomes a universal law" (34). This

means that the core principle of categorical imperative is that of universalizability.

Another principle of categorical imperative is the autonomy of the will, which entails acting out of duty and not out of inclination. Autonomy of the will, for Kant, is the supreme principle of morality. This principle should energize any human person "not to choose otherwise than so that the maxims of one's choice are at the same time understood with it in the same volition as universal law" (52). This means that moral human action should be of itself necessary without reference to another end, which is objectively necessary (Stumpf and Fieser, 298). It is also necessary to state that categorical imperative can be categorized as deontological ethics, ethics that evaluates the morality of an act on the act itself and not on the motive or intention.

In his theory of knowledge, Kant adopts the traditional threefold division of philosophy into physics, ethics and logic. Physics is the science of the laws of nature according to which everything happens. Ethics is the science of the moral laws according to which everything should happen, while logic is the canon of understanding (3). For Kant, there are two sources of knowledge: reason and experience. Experience refers to sensory perception, i.e. what one experiences through common senses. Through the use of reason, man recognizes ideas e.g. freedom, duty, law. With the help of reason, man forms concepts. Hence, the concept of duty immanent from the faculty of reason. Kant referred to knowledge attained independently of any

experience as metaphysics (4). Knowledge attained through pure reason without experience is known as *a priori*, (which is knowledge from the outset). Knowledge that involves experience is *a posteriori* (that is knowledge after the fact). The "Metaphysics of Morals" is therefore the cognition of moral laws independent of any prior experience, solely by means of human reason (5). This is why Kant claims in *The Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, that the "supreme principle of morality" (7) is the Categorical Imperative. It represents actions as objectively necessary for themselves, without reference to any other end (Kant, 28). This suggests that moral philosophy should be based on practical reason, because it is self-evident from the common idea of duty and moral laws (7).

Kant's argument is remarkable in that the moral laws are to be derived from the general concepts of a rational being as they apply to every rational agent (38). In contrast to things of nature, which are subject to natural laws, a rational being has the capacity to act according to the idea of laws, i.e. according to principles of categorical imperative, principles of moral actions (38). Reason recognizes principles of action as practically necessary as good (38). It is obvious in Kant's thought that reason is required to derive actions from laws; the will is then the faculty that can determine itself to action. It can be properly termed nothing practical reason (40). For Kant, man is a being whose will is not entirely in accordance with reason (38). Although, man can recognize what is morally good through the use of reason, the human will by its nature does not necessarily always obey

these precepts of reason; this is because the human will is influenced not only by the laws of reason but also by natural impulses, which Kant calls inclinations (38). Therefore, the laws of reason confront man as imperatives or commandments and are expressed through an ought. In perfect rational beings, the will is completely determined by reason, so that morality has no ought character for them. As Kant emphasizes, not every ought is a moral ought and not every imperative is a moral imperative. He distinguishes between hypothetical and categorical imperatives:

> Now if the action were good merely as a means to something else, then the imperative is hypothetical; if it is represented as good in itself, hence necessary, as the principle of the will, in a will that in itself accords with reason, then it is categorical (28).

Hypothetical imperatives include the imperatives of skilfulness (29) (like if you do not want the milk to burn when you cook it, you have to stir it), and the imperatives of wisdom (30) (if you want to be happy, you must not quarrel with your fate). For a hypothetical imperative to be valid for a certain person, it must be assumed that the person has a certain intention (like I do not want the milk to burn or I want to be happy). It only applies conditionally – only under an assumption or hypothesis that someone has an intention. A categorical imperative, on the other hand, is a direct command of behaviour without imposing any intention as a condition. It presents an action as objectively necessary for itself, without relating it to any other purpose. It does not concern itself, "but with the form and the principle from which it

results; and what is essentially good about it consists in the disposition, whatever the result may be" (30).

The argument of Kant suggests that commandments of morality are categorical imperatives. Demands of morality confront man as commandments. Commandments are laws that must be obeyed, even if this contradicts one's own inclinations. Only the law carries with it the concept of an unconditionality and indeed objective and therefore universally valid necessity (30). This legal character distinguishes morality, for instance, from advice on one's own well-being. The laws of morality cannot be hypothetical imperatives because what is necessary to do merely to achieve an arbitrary intention does not possess that necessity that is required of a law. Only a categorical imperative has this character of law. This is why the commandments of morality are categorical imperatives.

Points of Convergence and Divergence of Discourse Ethics and Categorical Imperative

Having presented the Discourse Ethics of Jurgen Habermas and Categorical Imperative of Immanuel Kant, there is need to attempt a short comparative analysis of the two ethical principles. The categorical imperative serves as the basis of morality because it commands necessity of action without reference to another end that is considered objectively necessary (Stumpf and Fieser, 298). For Kant morality has its foundation in rationality, objectivity and universality. Consequently, each individual human person should act

in such a way that their action can become a universal law without contradiction.

Habermas is of the conviction that there are norms with objective validity and that every valid norm must fulfil the condition that the consequences and effects of following it can be accepted by all those affected. This is clarified in a process of practical, real discourse between those affected. Compared to Kant's categorical imperative, the emphasis shifts from what the individual can accept as a general law without contradiction to what everyone can accept as a general law without compulsion. Discourse Ethics of Habermas is based on communicative action with emphasis on rational discourse and communication in forming moral decision. This means that moral principles are reached through rational dialogical argumentation.

The intersubjective character of the Discourse Ethics is manifested in the principle of universalization. This principle belongs to the Kantian deontologism but can be distinguished from categorical imperative. This is because categorical imperative is grounded on an understanding of practical reason that is founded on the philosophy of the subject and the principle of universalization of Habermas depends on his notion of communicative reason which is based on the philosophy of language. —

While discourse ethics and categorical imperative have different emphases and approaches, they share common themes of rationality, universality, and the pursuit of ethical principles. Habermas and Kant recognized the indispensability of rationality in the making of any

moral or ethical decision. Any moral decision reached must pass the test of universality. Habermas seeks consensus through rational discourse and Kant recognized that every personal maxim of acting agent must have the possibility of being applied to every other person without contradiction. He recognized that universalist morality has a cognitive and a practical side:

> Morality... consists in the reference of all action to that legislation through which alone a realm of ends is possible. But the legislation must be encountered in every rational being itself, and be able to arise from its will, whose principle therefore is: "Do no action in accordance with any other maxim, except one that could subsist with its being a universal law, and hence only so that the will could through its maxim at the same time consider itself as universally legislative." Now if the maxims are not through their nature already necessarily in harmony with this objective principle of the rational beings, as universally legislative, then the necessity of the action in accordance with that principle is called 'practical necessitation', i.e. duty. Duty does not apply to the supreme head in the realm of ends, but it does to every member, and specifically, to all in equal measure (46).

Moral judgment appears as a kind of justifiable knowledge and morality excludes problems of the good life and concentrates mainly on the deontic and generalizable aspects, so that only the just remains of the good (Kolmer, 178). The ethical principles that should be pursued must equally be accepted to all in the ideal speech situation. The discourse ethics is procedural, emphasizing collective justification through communication, while categorical imperative is more deontological and individualistic.

Discourse Ethics and Categorical Imperative: Implications for Ethical Reasoning and Deliberation

Discourse ethics and categorical imperative are pertinent frameworks in ethics that can be used to resolve philosophical problems. Discourse ethics lays emphasis on the role of rational discourse and communication in justifying moral principles and norms. It has implications for broader philosophical issues like democracy, legitimacy, and social justice. By prioritizing the importance of inclusive deliberation and rational argumentation, discourse ethics provides a basis for assessing the legitimacy of political institutions, policies, and practices. It encourages the participation of various individuals in public discourse and seeks to redress power imbalances that inhibit communal dialogue and consensus-building.

Discourse ethics through communicative action with emphasis on rational discourse provides theoretical frameworks for the attainment of conflict resolution. The aim of conflict resolution is to objectively and systematically address causes or reasons of conflicts, so as to create mutual understanding and to arrive at sensible consensus (Bradshaw, 116). Emphasising agreeable consensus in reaching for validity of moral norms means that discourse ethics abhors and opposes revolutionary violence as means of settling conflicts; it rather supports improved communication, manifested in fairness as sine qua non in any conflict resolution. Donald J. Moon succinctly stated it thus:

> Jürgen Habermas has presented one of the most
> powerful accounts of a discourse-based morality;

> it is grounded in an understanding of practical reason which explains how the validity of norms can be tested, thereby demonstrating their cognitive character. According to Habermas, valid norms can be freely accepted by all the individuals who are affected by them. Thus, a society whose institutions and practices were governed by valid norms would instantiate the ideal of a moral society (143).

It is the fairness of freely acceptance of the norm that makes its practicability possible.

Categorical Imperative, on the other hand, is a principle that guides moral reasoning by emphasizing importance of acting according to universalizable maxims. Kant's formulation "act only in accordance with that maxim through which you at the same time can will that it becomes a universal law" (34) can definitely relate in making moral decision, especially when one is in a moral dilemma. By applying the principle, one can assess the consistency and moral validity of human actions. For instance, if stealing is considered immoral, Kant would argue that it should be universally condemned because if everyone should steal whenever one is in need, contentment, steadfastness, truthfulness would become meaningless. It also avers that before any action is taken, one should consider whether the principle underlying such action can be consistently applied by everyone in similar situations without leading to logical absurdities.

Categorical imperative can be used as a foundation for human dignity and rights. Every individual has an intrinsic value and dignity

and so should be treated as an end itself, and not merely as means to another end. Every human person should be treated as a subject and not as an object. Kant succinctly states this as practical imperative in: "Act so that you use humanity, as much in your own person as in the person of everyone else, always at the same time as end and never merely as means" (42). This principle has profound implications for various philosophical issues, including the ethics of punishment, respect for human autonomy, right for self-determination of nations and the treatment of marginalized people or groups. By upholding the dignity of all human persons, the categorical imperative stands as bedrock for ethical judgments and for the attainment of social justice.

It has to be affirmed that Kant's categorical imperative left indelible mark on the field of moral philosophy. By rooting morality in duty and the capacity for rational thought, Kant provides a framework that seeks to transcend cultural and personal biases to establish universal ethical principles. While his approach has faced scrutiny and sparked debate, the quest to understand and apply Kantian ethics remains a testament to the enduring nature of his ideas.

In resolving philosophical conundrums, both the categorical imperative and discourse ethics offer valuable insights. By combining these approaches, one can engage in rigorous ethical reasoning that considers both the principles of moral duty and the process of ethical deliberation within a community or society.

Evaluation and Conclusion

So far in this discussion, it has been established that discourse ethics of Jürgen Habermas and categorical imperative of Immanuel Kant are two principles that can offer valuable insight in ethical matters. Both principles have their negative and positive effect in moral issues.

In discourse ethics, Habermas is convinced that every valid norm must fulfil the condition that the consequences and effects resulting from its observance can be accepted by all those affected. This is made understandable in a process of practical, real discourse between those affected. In comparing it to Kant's categorical imperative, the emphasis is shifted from what the individual can accept as a general law without contradiction to what everyone can accept as a general law without constraint. Discourse prevents a possible distortion of judgment by the other person due to their interests. This means that the success of the discourse depends on how the participants comply with certain rules of the discourse. This entails that discourse ethics promotes rational discourse as means of achieving ethical justification.

By engaging different people in the discourse, varieties of opinions and perspectives can be reached in ethical deliberation. This entails that discourse ethics values the good of inclusiveness and fosters pluralism in search of consensus in moral issues in a pluralistic society. It is then legitimate to argue that discourse ethics can really have a positive implication in the democratic principle, since it lays emphasis on the public reasoning in forming a legitimate moral norm.

Habermas's discourse ethics can be criticized for its idealistic assumption that rational discourse can automatically lead to a rational consensus. He actually underestimated the ambivalence of human interest, dynamism of power and the reality of communicative distortions. It is true that discourse ethics can offer a theoretical framework for ethical discussion, but this theoretical framework may be unable to provide any solution to any practical specific existential moral conflicts or dilemmas. This is to say that the practical application of discourse ethics in real-life situations will be practically challenging.

Categorical imperative in emphasizing universality of subjective maxims provides condition for evaluating the morality of human act. In asking every individual human person to always consider the possibility of universalising actions as a law, the categorical imperative offers a principled approach to moral rationality.

Also, Kant's emphasis on duty made him to give primacy to actions performed for the sake of duty rather than actions performed in accordance with duty. Actions performed in accordance with duty, according to Kant, has no moral value because they are performed out of inclination. But those actions which are performed for the sake of duty have moral value because they are performed out of sense of moral obligation (316). It is not overlabouring the obvious to say that categorical imperative provides a systematic straightforward means of evaluating the morality of human actions for individuals searching for moral guidance.

Despite the straightforwardness of categorical imperative, it can be criticized for being too rigid. It ignores complexities of human situation where moral principles may come in direct conflict with the real-life situations. Kant's recognition of only actions performed for the sake of duty as having moral value, while actions performed in accordance with duty lack moral value can only lead to ethical dilemmas. Again, Kant's overzealous emphasis on rationality as the foundation for moral agency actually excludes individual human persons that lack cognitive capabilities from moral consideration.

Conclusively, both discourse ethics and the categorical imperative offer valuable insights into ethical reasoning and deliberation, each with its advantages and disadvantages. While discourse ethics emphasizes the necessity of rational dialogue, inclusiveness, and democratic legitimacy in establishing ethical norms, the categorical imperative provides a systematic and universalizable approach to moral duty.

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