Interactive Universalism, the Concrete Other, and Discourse Ethics: A Sociological Dialogue with Seyla Benhabib's Theories of Morality

Abstract

Noting that Benhabib's ethical theory has seldom been engaged with by sociologists of morality, this paper introduces and interrogates Benhabib's ethical theory from a sociological perspective. It is argued that Benhabib's critiques of Enlightenment conceptions of morality complement sociological theories of morality. Her concepts of the 'concrete' and 'generalized' other and 'interactive universalism' can potentially inform recurrent debates in the sociology of morality about the extent to which cultural plurality precludes the possibility of sociologists providing normative judgements, and the extent to which certain features of moral experiences can be taken to be universal. However, Benhabib's argument that discourse ethics can provide a procedural means to judge between competing moral claims leads her to prioritise the perspective of 'postconventional' Western modernism as the means to adjudicate between the moral tolerability of cultural beliefs and practices. This leads her to characterise 'conventional' moral systems as subordinate, which succumbs to postcolonial critiques of the role of processes of domination in organising the validity of moral claims.

Keywords: Seyla Benhabib; Sociology of Morality; Universalism; Discourse Ethics; Postcolonialism

Introduction

Seyla Benhabib is one of the most highly regarded social and political philosophers working today. Her work has made considerable contributions to feminist theory (Benhabib *et al.*, 1995), and her powerful writings on human rights, citizenship, refugees, borders, and democracy have been rightly acclaimed. Yet, despite Benhabib (2002:7) professing to assume a 'sociological constructivism' perspective in her theories, her work remains only partially known in sociology. While her work is referenced often in sociological writings (e.g. Delanty, 2011; Ahmed, 2000; Smart and Neale, 1999), little sociological writing engages systematically with Benhabib's thought (Hutchings, 1997; McNay, 2003; Wright, 2004; Lucas, 2018 provide exceptions). Especially conspicuous in its lack of engagement with Benhabib's thought is sociological research into morality. This is despite Benhabib's work

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being integral to the advancement of conceptions of care ethics, from which much of contemporary sociological thought on morality has taken its impetus (Abbott, 2020), and despite Benhabib's work providing some of the most robust critiques of Enlightenment, post-Enlightenment, and post-modernist moral thought available.

A notable contribution of Benhabib's work lies in her attempts to conjoin an ethics of care that is sensitive to the particular with a discourse ethics that is universalist in its concern for rights. In this respect, Benhabib's work is evocative of a revived issue in the sociology of morality. Renewed interest in sociological approaches to morality has largely been characterised by the position that morality refers to 'understandings of good and bad, right and wrong, worthy and unworthy that vary between persons and between social groups' (Hitlin and Vaisey, 2013:55), and most sociologists take it to be 'a simple and uncontroversial observation' that 'morality varies a lot across time, place, and a host of social variables' (Abend, 2013:566-7). However, a number of sociologists argue that this does not imply that moral judgements are equally valid, that moral assertions cannot be judged to be true or false, nor that certain features of moral experiences and rights of people cannot be taken to be universal (e.g. Abend, 2013; Lukes, 2009; Gorski, 2019). This same tension pervades Benhabib's work, and the sociological viability of her attempts to provide a post-metaphysical (though contextually conscious) egress to this impasse via discourse ethics will be the main subject of this article.

Benhabib (2011:2) deploys several concepts to conjoin the 'field of unresolved contrasts […] between particularist attachments and universalist aspirations'. The first that will be considered here is her concept of 'interactive universalism', which 'acknowledges the plurality of modes of being human, and differences among humans, without endorsing all these pluralities and differences as universally valid' (Benhabib, 1992:152). This is articulated in relation to her concepts of the 'generalized' and 'concrete other' (Benhabib, 1994:179). These concepts are intended to establish a conception of universalism that is considerably broader and more attune to particularity, embedded identity, and social context than Enlightenment conceptions of universalism, while still maintaining basic universal standards of what the moral point of view entails. Benhabib's reworked version of discourse (or communicative) ethics[1] is then the medium through which she seeks to establish a universalist moral proceduralism that is sensitive to particularity.

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This article explores these conceptualisations and how they stand up to, and contribute to, sociological investigations into morality. It is argued that Benhabib's generalized and concrete other have the potential to provide a conceptual means for sociologists to move between thinking about morality on an 'everyday' level and the level of complex ethical matters that sociologists often deal with, such as human rights. However, while the concepts that Benhabib employs are potentially useful for formulating a sociological argument for maintaining some degree of moral universalism, Benhabib's work 'grounds its own normative perspective in what it takes to be the principal achievement of European modernity', namely postconventional reflexive secularism (Allen, 2013:269). In tandem with her arguments of how discourse ethics adjudicates between competing moral claims, this leads her to prioritise the universalising postconventional 'moral system' of Western modernism, thus subordinating moral contexts that do not meet these criteria (Benhabib, 1992:42). The themes that Benhabib covers, and her attempt to do so in a way that is sensitive to context and particularity, means that she provides a sounding board for sociological engagement with questions of moral subjectivity, universalism, discourse ethics, and subsequent questions of cultural and moral plurality that these engender. While much of the discussion of Benhabib's work in what follows will be undertaken as critique, this article also intends to introduce Benhabib's work to sociologists of morality, to illuminate the contribution that many aspects of her work are able to make to the field, and to implore engagement with her largely outstanding body of work.

From 'Substitutionalist' to 'Interactive' Universalism

We begin with Benhabib's post-metaphysical critique of Western Enlightenment conceptions of universalism. Benhabib (1994:173) argues that Enlightenment universalism 'has fallen on hard times'. After sustained philosophic, feminist, and deconstructionist critiques, alongside sociological evidence of cultural and situational contextualism, the claims of 'universalist ideals in ethics and politics sound anachronistic and indefensible' (ibid). What such critiques have brought to the fore are the 'metaphysical illusions of the Enlightenment', which Benhabib (1994:174) argues include 'the illusion of a self-transparent and self-grounding reason, the illusion of a disembedded and disembodied subject, and the illusion of having found an Archimedean moral standpoint, situated beyond historical and cultural

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contingency'. Benhabib (1992:50) is especially critical of the Enlightenment view of the subject, which neglects to recognise

> that the moral self is not a moral geometrician but an embodied, finite, suffering and emotive being. We are not born rational but we acquire rationality through contingent processes of socialization and identity formation[…:] we are children before we are adults,[…] as human children we can only survive and develop within networks of dependence with others, and[…] these networks of dependence constitute the "moral bonds" that continue to bind us even as moral adults.

Benhabib's critique extends a lineage of post-Enlightenment philosophic thought (e.g Taylor, 1989; MacIntyre, 1985), that has informed contemporary relational approaches to the moral self in sociology (Abbott, 2020). Yet, building on Gilligan (1982), Benhabib also provides a decisive feminist challenge to Western moral thought. She argues that the Enlightenment view of universalism is far from universal, both in that those who are conceptualised as being capable of universalising thought is implicitly (and often explicitly, as with Kant (see Tronto (1994:194)) exclusionary, and in that it restricts the domain of properly moral action to the realm of principles and justice. Firstly, universalist theories in the Enlightenment tradition conceptualised the 'moral point of view' in accordance 'with projections of the ideal of moral autonomy which only reflect[ed] the experience of the male head of household', which was taken to be 'the paradigmatic case of the human as such' (Benhabib, 1992:50, 153). Secondly, because Enlightenment philosophers defined the moral domain in terms of detached universalizable justice, the private sphere and the sphere of everyday moral concerns (which is to say the domain to which women have historically been restricted) was relegated to being of marginal moral concern.

These issues arise from how properly moral judgement was defined. The 'moral point of view' of Enlightenment universalism presupposes 'that "like cases ought to be treated alike" [and] that I should act in such a way that I should also be willing that all others in a like situation act like me' (Benhabib, 1992:163). This is the principle of *reversibility* that lies at the heart of most universalist thought. Yet the problem with the Enlightenment formulation is that the subject undertaking this reversibility is the abstracted disembedded rational subject, which therefore supposes sound moral judgement is formulated according to what would be universally acceptable to fellow disembedded rational subjects. This is what Benhabib refers

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to as 'substitutionalist universalism': the position of the legislator, as a rational disembedded being, can be substituted with the representation of what would be acceptable to the general features that define mankind as such, namely their capacities for detached rationality. The other to which reversibility is applied is thus a 'generalized other'[2]: it has no particularity or identity, it is not beholden to cultural norms or contextual circumstances, and it has no dependants or histories of subjugation or dominance. Benhabib (2011) argues that a generalizing perspective has its virtues, in that it allows us to judge basic rights that should apply to all people. Yet, it is precisely the fact that this substitutionalist perspective abstracts from the concrete features of personhood that leads to 'inconsistencies in universalistic moral theories', as such theories become unable to assume the 'standpoint of the other' in a way that reflects their human realities, such as their cultural heritage, religious identity, personal relationships and responsibilities, or their relative poverty or wealth (this represents the distinction between the 'generalized other' and the 'concrete other' discussed shortly) (Benhabib, 1992:165).

The flawed assumptions of substitutionalist universalism flow through more recent extensions of modernist moral theory, including Rawls's (1971) "veil of ignorance" and Kohlberg's (1984) theory of the development of moral judgement, which continue to assume that the soundest form of moral judgement involves the decontextualising self imaginatively assuming the perspective of what would be acceptable to all others in general (Benhabib, 1992). For Benhabib, however, such judgement neither reflects how moral judgements are made in reality, nor does it provide an adequate model for how most moral situations can be judged. For example, Benhabib (1992:163) asks whether certain moral situations, such as family disputes, can be judged 'independently of our knowledge of the agents involved in these situations, of their histories, attitudes, characters and desires'. In such circumstances, we

> not only disagree about the principles involved; very often we disagree because what I see as a lack of generosity on your part you construe as your legitimate right to not do something[…]. Universalistic moral theory neglects such everyday, interactional morality and assumes that the public standpoint of justice, and our quasi-public personalities as right-bearing individuals, are the center of moral theory.

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The crux of Benhabib's critique is that Enlightenment universalism firstly elides the messy, emotional, intersubjective, and entangled nature of moral situations and judgements, and secondly systematically relegates everyday moral concerns and care to the periphery of moral thought. The first point echoes Bauman's (1993) more sociologically-familiar critique of Enlightenment thought that morality is less a question of formulating unambiguous judgements than it is responding compassionately to others in the emotion-laden opacity of social encounters (Hookway, 2017). The second point reflects more recent sociological arguments (which have occasionally drawn on Benhabib) that it is precisely in the realm of the personal that the majority of moral situations and judgements are encountered, from everyday decisions of making time for a friend in need, to some of the most challenging moral decisions we will face, such as how best to provide adequate care for elderly parents (Smart and Neale, 1999; Abbott, 2020). Benhabib's work has thus not only been prescient of contemporary arguments in the sociology of morality, but has also made some of the most compelling arguments for why 'obligations and relations of care are genuinely moral ones, belonging to the centre and not at the margins of morality' (Benhabib, 1992:186).

And yet, as Benhabib (1992:50-51) sets out, she

> is not arguing that a truly universalist articulation of the moral point of view, one that includes women and children, mothers and sisters, as well as brothers and fathers, is not possible. The gender blindness of much modern and contemporary universalist moral theory, in my opinion, does not compromise moral universalism as such, it only shows the need to judge universalism against its own ideals and to force it make clear [sic] its own unjustified assumptions.

What Benhabib seeks to achieve is a reconstruction of universalism that is (1) genuinely universal in terms of who it includes and (2) does not succumb to the limitations of Enlightenment thought that have been so thoroughly critiqued in contemporary social and philosophic thought. Rather than seeking to apply general moral principles across situations, Benhabib proposes that moral judgement be formed on the basis of taking into account the contextualised perspectives of as many people as possible, including one's own contextualised perspectives (Young, 1994).

> The more human perspectives we can bring to bear upon our understanding of a situation, all the more likely are we to recognise its moral salience[…] the more we are able to think from the perspective of others, all the more we can make vivid to ourselves the narrative histories of others involved.
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> (Benhabib, 1992:137)

The recognition of particularity and the contextualised perspectives of concrete others is the basis of Benhabib's move from 'substitutionalist' to 'interactive' universalism, which is defined as follows:

> Interactive universalism acknowledges the plurality of modes of being human, and differences among humans, without endorsing all of these pluralities and differences as morally and politically valid. While agreeing that normative disputes can be settled rationally, and that fairness, reciprocity and some procedure of universalizability are constituents, that is, necessary conditions of the moral standpoint, interactive universalism regards difference as the starting point for reflection and action.
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> (Benhabib, 1992:153)

What Benhabib therefore aims to maintain is the basic foundation of moral universalism while reorienting how it is applied (Hutchings, 1997). Initial aversions this might provoke among sociologists, who are often suspicious towards notions of universalism (Sayer, 2011), may be somewhat allayed by Benhabib's (1994:173) definition of what she takes to be basic to universalism, which is simply 'the principle that all human beings, by virtue of their humanity, are entitled to moral respect from others'. She (2007:13) continues:

> many who are skeptical about providing definitive accounts of human nature and rationality may nonetheless urge that the following norms and principles ought to be respected by all legal and political systems claiming legitimacy: all human beings are entitled to certain basic human rights[…] including, minimally, the rights to life, liberty, security, and bodily integrity, some form of property and personal ownership, due process before the law, and freedom of speech and association, including freedom of religion and conscience.

Indeed, in challenge to the often-implicit assumption amongst sociologists that recognition of moral diversity necessitates the acceptance of moral relativism, Lukes (2009) argues that many sociologists would be hard pressed to not accept the universality of similar points as those set out by Benhabib. Furthermore, Sayer (2011:99) argues sociologists have regularly maintained a mistaken position against notions of universalism on the basis that they imply 'the denial of the extraordinary variety of human life'. Yet, not only can we 'note similarity without denying difference' (as Benhabib seeks to do), but social scientists also base many of their foundational claims on generalising normative premises predicated on assumptions of shared human experience, even if this is not made explicit: for example, the wrongness of racism and huge economic inequality rests on the assumption that humans are social and vulnerable beings who can suffer or flourish in relation to the society of which they are part, and that people should be able to expect some standards of reasonable treatment and existence (ibid). This is not altogether different to the basis of Benhabib's argument. Yet, the question for the rest of this paper is whether Benhabib is successful in reorientating how her basic point of universalism is applied to contextualised settings and concrete others.

The Concrete Other, the Generalised Other, and the Moral Point of View

Benhabib's (1992:164) universalism seeks to redefine the moral point of view via an 'enlarged mentality' oriented by the recognition of the particularity of people and moral situations while remaining universal in its application through acknowledgement of what is common to, and should be expected for, all people; a position that 'acknowledges that every generalized other is also a concrete other' (Benhabib, 1992:165). Benhabib (1994:179) defines these concepts as follows:

> 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.

Enlightenment universalism charges us to consider moral problems from the standpoint of the generalized other; moral reasoning is assumed from a perspective of what would be acceptable to all, under the proviso that the person would be willing to accept for themself what they prescribe for others. The trouble is, this either requires the legislating subject to assume an 'Archimedean' position outside of their own cultural heritage and life history, or requires us to make universalizing moral judgements of what is acceptable to all from an admittedly partial perspective. The former entirely misrepresents our embedded and socialised development as subjects, while the latter carries the evident flaw that what a secular, well-off white man, for example, takes to be acceptable to all is likely to be very different to, and possibly at odds with, what a member of a marginalised religious community may construe to be acceptable to all (Benhabib, 1992).

The standpoint of the concrete other, however, recognises that our socialisation thoroughly situates us within cultural heritages, relations of privilege and domination, and entangled personal relationships, through which our identities, emotional dispositions, and ways of understanding the world are constituted. From the standpoint of the concrete other, 'each is entitled to expect and to assume from the other forms of behaviour through which the other feels recognized and confirmed as a concrete individual being with specific needs, talents and capacities' (Benhabib, 1992:159). Benhabib's concrete other depicts a mode of subjectivity that reflects sociological accounts of socialisation and identity, and recognises how inequalities and differences colour moral perspectives, and the role personal relationships and emotions play in moral judgements. In this respect, Benhabib's conceptualisation, and the reasoning behind it, also pre-empt Ahmed's (2000) arguments for recognising others according to their particularity, rather than according to their position within broad social categorisations. Yet, as Keane (2010) reminds us, even the particularities of identities and moral circumstances are intelligible to others only in relation to at least some framing of what is shared. Thus, rather than dispense with the standpoint of the generalized other, Benhabib (1994:179) envisions

> 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.

However, Benhabib seems to revert to giving precedence to the universalising perspective of the generalized other in deciding how moral situations should ultimately be resolved (Hutchings, 1997). This occurs as Benhabib moves to extend an argument for how universalising moral principles can be established that take account of the concrete other, whilst recognising what is basic to all humans that deems them worthy of moral dignity. Her argument is as follows. If we assume basic human rights, then we must also assume that there are justificatory strategies (e.g. arguments, evidence) available to make these claims, and that people are able to understand and engage with these claims. 'The task of justification, in turn, cannot proceed without the acknowledgement of the communicative freedom of the other, that is, of the right of the other to accept as legitimate only those norms as rules of action of whose validity she has been convinced with reasons' (Benhabib, 2011:11). Benhabib (2011:67) argues that the capacity for communicative freedom can be assumed because it is a basic form of human agency, in that 'all human beings who are potential or actual speakers of a natural or symbolic language are capable of communicative freedom'. Because the capacity for communicative freedom is a basic feature of human agency that is also necessary for assuming that moral claims can be made, Benhabib proposes that moral justification rests on a morally universal stipulation of 'equal respect for the other as being capable of communicative freedom' (Benhabib, 2011:14). Thus, what conjoins the generalized and concrete other is the basic 'communicative freedom' that we all share, despite our concrete differences (Benhabib, 2011).

Benhabib's recognition of communicative freedom does offer a relatively flexible means of facilitating basic expectations of rights that is, for the most part, more inclusive than Enlightenment designations of the kinds of subjectivity that justify moral worth. However, although Benhabib wants to accent the concrete other, she has been critiqued for essentially arguing that 'consideration of the concrete other can only be achieved under the constraints of their consideration as a generalized other' (Hutchings, 1997:140, Onuf, 2009). This is

because she argues that procedural validation of moral judgement needs to be orientated by the features of what make all of us a morally worthy generalized other: 'only judgement guided by principles of universal moral respect and reciprocity is "good" moral judgement' (Benhabib, 1992:54). The generalized other is thus taken as providing the necessary basis for sound moral judgment at all levels of specificity, which, as we will see in the next section, reflects Benhabib's attempt to establish a contextually-sensitive universalist proceduralism on the basis of discourse and the communicative capacities that these entail. That her argument continues to give fundamental priority to the abstract and universal generalized other in orienting judgements that can genuinely be said to be moral is not made by accident, but rather reflects her own formulation of what the moral point of view entails:

> 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
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> (Benhabib, 1994:174-175)

As will be discussed next, this moral point of view aligns with what Benhabib (1992:42) refers to as 'postconventional' moral thought. Not only is this moral point of view scarcely redefined from its predecessors in the priority it gives to the generalized other, but Benhabib also continues to give precedence to a moral point of view that upholds a limited band of moral reasoning that thoroughly prioritises the moral standpoint of Western modernism (McNay, 2003). To briefly touch on this point, socio-psychological research into morality illuminates clear problems with Benhabib's description of what the moral point of view entails. Notably, it seems that the kind of hypothetical moral questioning described by Benhabib less reflects a particular stage in linguistic development than it reflects a particular socialisation into privileged spheres where such hypothetical universalising reasoning has become a cultural feature. It is not that most people do not think about the world in such terms at various points in their lives, nor that they are unreflexive about their moral standpoints. Rather, as Haidt's (2013) extensive global research has shown, the particular terms stipulated by Benhabib, with their universalism and decontextualisation from tradition

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and local context, tend to be the terms through which highly-educated, rich, and Westernised people (acronymised as WEIRD for Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic) are more likely to interpret and engage with the moral world. Haidt's research stresses that such universalising reasoning is not a Western form of moral reasoning: it is a general feature of moral reasoning across the globe, and a key part of his argument is that Western nations are divided on 'culture war' issues between those who assume a postconventional moral outlook and those who do not. Yet the narrow precedence given to universalising reasoning at the expense of consideration of tradition, sanctity, and respect for authority, etc., seems to be a feature of moral reasoning that mostly prevails in highly-educated, richer, more Westernised sectors of societies. Thus, as will be discussed below, Haidt's work shows that rather than being *the* universal moral point of view, postconventional moral reasoning is in fact the exception, rather than the rule.

For someone who critiques Enlightenment universalism for failing to live up to its universalist aspirations, and who seeks to centre difference and embedded, emotion-laden subjectivity in her own conceptualisations of universalism, it seems strange that Benhabib (1992:30) would then move to extend moral judgement as being predicated on the assumption of a moral standpoint that she is aware is the product of 'the normative hermeneutic horizon of [Western] modernity'. As will be discussed next, this not only reflects the discursive underpinnings of what join us together as generalized others (communicative freedom), but also Benhabib's argument that the premise of basic moral respect and the criteria for sound moral judgement align with the apparently in-built normative premises of communicative action. How this leads to the prioritisation of a limited band of moral reasoning will be the final point of discussion.

The Sociological Viability of Benhabib's Discourse Ethics

Benhabib (1994:174) positions discourse ethics as being necessary to establishing how 'crucial insights of the universalist tradition in practical philosophy could be reformulated today without committing oneself to the metaphysical illusions of the Enlightenment'. She argues that formulating her 'post-metaphysical universalist position', which resolves the tension between the particular and the universal, requires us 'to rearticulate a discursive,

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communicative concept of rationality', building 'upon the transformations of philosophy undertaken by Karl-Otto Apel and Jurgen Habermas' (ibid).

Benhabib (1990) is critical of Habermas's version of discourse ethics, arguing that the priority it gives to justice and the "right" means that (1) it is indifferent to the concrete differences between people that shape moral judgements, and (2) is unconcerned with everyday moral situations oriented by care. Benhabib (1992:39) argues that her version of discourse ethics 'promotes a universalist and postconventionalist perspective on all ethical relations: it has implications for family life no less than for democratic legislatures'. Her contention is that her discourse ethics is applicable at both the particular and the universal because the procedures it establishes are built out of how we are as communicative subjects, and because the universal principles it establishes on this basis are founded on the basic recognition and respect for our communicative capabilities (the communicative freedom described above). Benhabib (1992:37) formulates her view of discourse ethics as follows. The basic premise of discourse ethics, referred to as "D",

> states that only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all concerned in their capacity as participants in practical discourse. "D", 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.

Benhabib's point, in line with discourse ethics more generally, is that a moral claim can be judged to be valid by people according to the ordinary arrangements of communicative action, which engender rules of argument that necessitate respect and reciprocity towards the communicative freedom of the other (Dallmayr, 1990). Ordinary parameters of communicative conduct dictate that '[a]ll argumentation entails respect for one's conversation partners[…] to be a competent partner in such a conversation then entails recognizing the principle of equal respect', which represents the 'material normative content of the idea of argumentation' (Banhabib, 1992:31). Likewise, the 'norm of "reciprocity" is embedded in the very structures of communicative action into which we are all socialized' (ibid). But how are these rules of respect and reciprocity extended to apply to respecting the communicative freedom of all people? Benhabib (1990:339-340) argues that this is an outcome of the universalizing horizons of modern society:

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All human communities define some "significant others" in relation to whom reversibility and reciprocity must be exercised—be they members of my kin group, my tribe, my city-state, my nation, my co-religionists. What distinguishes "modern" from "premodern" ethical theories is the assumption of the former that the moral community is coextensive with all beings capable of speech and action, and potentially with all humanity. In this sense, communicative ethics sets up a model of conversation among members of a modern ethical community for whom the theological and ontological bases of inequality among humans has been radically placed into question.

This last point will become significant shortly. But it is important to recognise that Benhabib takes the hermeneutic horizons of modernity as setting the parameters where universal respect is necessarily universalised. Apparently with a view to showing the exception that proves the rule, Benhabib (1990:340) argues that sexists and racists may 'challenge the principle of universal moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity within the moral conversation, but if they want to establish that their position is right not simply because it is mighty, they must convince with arguments that this is so'. Evident issues with this claim abound. Many racists may indeed hold their position to be right precisely *because* it is mighty, as with white supremacists. They also may well be willing to admit that most would not find their position to be right and thus may be unconcerned with convincing people through argument (Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000). Additionally, many people who hold racist or sexist views may not think of themselves as racists or sexists, and may thus be uninterested in convincing others of this position, instead perpetuating racism and sexism through their practices. Benhabib (1992:33) extends this strange argument to illuminate a 'paradox' that she sees as reinforcing the foundational bedrock of discourse ethics:

if such inegalitarianism is to be "rational" it must woo the assent of those who will be treated unequally, but to woo such assent means admitting the "others" into the conversation. But if these "others" can see the rationality of the inegalitarian position, they can also dispute its justice. To assent entails just as much the capacity to dissent, to say no. Therefore, either inegalitarianism is irrational, i.e. it cannot win the assent of those it addresses, or it is unjust because it precludes the possibility that its addressees will reject it.

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This greatly overestimates the extent to which rationality, justice, validity, and the ordering of argumentation affects how such inegalitarian views can be held and propagated in practice. Here Benhabib overemphasises the role of discursiveness in moral judgement, and looks past the sadly dispositional ways in which racist and sexist views are often held. Indeed, it seems the much more pressing issue with racism and sexism is that people are brought up and live in racist and sexist societies to the extent that rational argument does regrettably little to undermine or change prejudiced views (Haidt, 2013). But her argument is choreographed to show that even among dissenters of universal respect, the basic premises of discourse must still be engaged with, otherwise the arguments of the detractors become unsustainable. Unconcerned as it is with whether racists or sexists may be unperturbed if their views fail to stand up to the procedures of discourse, this argument seems to reflect a continued philosophic speculativeness in how Benhabib establishes the foundations of discourse ethics, and how these in turn stipulate universal respect.

Although Benhabib (1985) seeks to use discourse ethics to reinvigorate utopian thinking about how things could be, the communicative basis of discourse ethics is not held up by Benhabib as simply being utopian. Discourse ethics purports to be grounded by 'the normative premises implicit in communication itself' (Dallmayr, 1990:6), and it is cast as being a procedure for morality that is founded on how things are, rather than on how they should be (Jaggar and Tobin, 2013). Yet, the structures of discourse themselves seem unsustainably idealised and washed of power relations:

> discourses, to be distinguished from bargaining, cajoling, brain washing, or coercive manipulation, are dependent upon certain formal conditions of conversation: these are the equality of each conversation partner to partake in as well as initiate communication, their symmetrical entitlement to speech acts, and reciprocity of communicative roles: each can question and answer, bring new items to the agenda, and initiate reflection about the rules of discourse itself. These formal preconditions […] impose certain necessary constraints upon the kinds of reasons that will prove acceptable within discourses[…]: we always already have to assume some understanding of equality, reciprocity, and symmetry in order to be able to frame the discourse model in the first place   (Benhabib, 2007:17)

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She continues 'we must always already presuppose the capacity of our conversation partner to assent or dissent from our claims on the basis of reasons the validity of which she comprehends' (ibid). Benhabib is not saying what *should* be the case, but rather what *is* the case when we enter into discourse. Yet, as Ahmed (2000) argues, the particularity of others that Benhabib herself identifies means that communication is always asymmetrical, forming a site at which histories and experiences of oppression, pain, privilege, and power come to the fore. Indeed, extensive research has shown that discourses, even when had about affable issues of moral concern such as discussions of our medical care, are not devoid of power relations or responses of anger, denial, and refusals to listen to alternative perspectives (Maynard, 1996). Similarly, arguably the most common finding in communications studies is that there are considerable gender disparities in how conversations and discourses are conducted. To give just a few examples, not only do girls in schools answer fewer questions than boys even when they know they know more of the answers, but women are less likely to ask questions, and be asked to ask questions, than men at academic conferences (Corona-Sobrino *et al.*, 2020). Women are also less likely to be considered the primary expert on a topic even when this is the case, and information shared by women is less likely to be taken into account when dealing with a problem than when the same information is shared by a man in response to the same problem (Cameron, 2007). This illustrates an important point about Benhabib's (1985) arguments, because while she is critical of Habermas's discourse ethics for discounting the significance of concrete social and cultural differences to the moral points of views that people bring to discourses, Benhabib does not seem to consider how these differences affect the venerated structure of the discourse itself (Jagger and Tobin, 2013).

The implausibility of the idealised structures of discourse being adhered to becomes still more evident in discourse surrounding contentious political discussions, including discussions about rights, education, climate change, etc., that Benhabib seems to have in mind when discussing discourse ethics. Such discussions, particularly when had with people who disagree with us, have been shown to provoke strong emotional and defensive responses at the outset, which then shape the course of the conversation, meaning that people are generally unlikely to respect the position or meaningfully listen to the argument of someone coming from a different moral perspective (Albert and Raymond, 2019; Eveland Jr *et al.*, 2020). Benhabib (1992:31) uses the example that the rules of discourse suppose that if we

'argued about a particular moral judgement ("it was wrong not to help refugees and to let them die on the wide sea")[…] we could in principle come to a reasonable agreement [which] must be arrived at under conditions that correspond to our ideas of fair debate'. The 'refugee crisis' in Europe from around 2015 illustrates how idealised this notion is. Not only does the concept of reasonable agreement even on the issue of refugees dying seem sadly fictional, but also the way that the issue has become instrumentalised in targeted political discourse across traditional and social media means that the notion of a 'fair debate' (which we might assume implies opposed groups being willing to listen and for discourse to not be in some way manipulated for political ends) on the issue seems incomprehensible (Colombo, 2018).

It seems that discourse does not proceed in the ways described by Benhabib. And if this is the case, where does this leave her arguments for discourse as the basis for universal respect? Keen observer as she is of the suppression of women, refugees, and ethnic and religious minorities, Benhabib recognises an obvious problem with how well her assumptions of the universal respect of modernity marry up with social realities: namely, she recognises that Western modernity was founded on profound sexism, racism, and colonialism, which resulted in increasingly systematic genocides. For someone so attune to the oppression of certain groups and the extension of human rights, Benhabib's response to this is facile and disappointing (Allen, 2007). She describes the repression of modernity as 'a dialectic of universalism and discrimination, the simultaneous spread of the ideals of equality and the formation of prejudice towards "others"', and continues that:

> 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.
>
> (Benhabib, 1994:176-177)

This is a point that she argues requires 'further historical and cultural analysis in order to be substantiated'. Others, however, argue that repression is *the* feature of Western modernity that allowed an Enlightenment vision of the world to achieve hegemonic dominance, within which the Enlightenment ethic of rational universalism was used to justify ongoing subjugation (Bhambra, 2007; Khader, 2018). Recognition of this point illuminates a distinct problem for Benhabib (1992:42) because, despite its claims to emerge out of the normative

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basis of discourse in intersubjective life, she openly admits that communicative ethics 'does privilege a secular universalist, reflexive culture in which debate, articulation and contention about value questions as well as conceptions of justice and the good have become a way of life', which is to say a moral perspective that has achieved "universalising" validity in relation to processes of domination (Bhambra, 2007).

Drawing on Kohlberg's hierarchical conceptualisations of conventional and postconventional moral thinking, Benhabib (1992:42) labels such cultures as 'a system of postconventional morality', which is 'comprehensive[ly] reflexive' and 'distinguishes among modes of argument leading to hypothetic validity'. She contrasts this with a 'conventional moral system' that takes norms to be 'good and fair because they reflect our way of life' (ibid). Those who adhere to conventional moral systems, for example those who rely on sanctity or tradition to guide their moral thought and practices, and who are unwilling (or unable) to go beyond these final vocabularies in their justifications, from the perspective of discourse ethics, can only offer a limited moral point of view to which moral validity cannot be accorded. 'Because the adherents of [conventional] moralities are willing to stop the conversation and because they have to withdraw from the process of reflexive justification in order not to let their world-view crumble, *their position is not comprehensive and reflexive enough*' to be included in processes of the justification and adjudication of moral goods and practices in modern societies (Benhabib, 1992:43, emphasis added).

Indeed, Benhabib (1990:331) argues that discourse ethics and the standpoint it is founded upon should be used to establish 'what norms or institutions would the members of an ideal or real communication community agree to as representing their common interests'. Specifically, Benhabib has been keen to apply discourse ethics for cross-cultural feminist intervention, something that Khader (2018) describes as 'missionary feminism', in that Benhabib's weddedness to the postconventional moral systems of Western modernity leads her to assume that this standpoint is the only means of resolving gendered injustice, while also relegating the moral perspectives of those it claims to benefit. Whilst Benhabib (1992:43) argues that arguments based on sanctity and tradition are 'not excluded from the moral conversation', she is clear that 'communicative ethics "trumps" other less reflexive "moral point of views"', which makes it hard to see the viability of her claim to use discourse ethics to provide moral procedures that are sensitive to particularity.

Tronto (1994:93), argues that moral theory of this kind reinforces the notions that the highest forms of morality 'are likely to be held by the powerful', and therefore 'reinforce the positions of the powerful'. This point is taken up by Jaggar and Tobin (2013:402), who argue that in a world of cultural diversity and inequality, 'those who have more cultural and social power are likely to exert disproportionate influence in deciding how to interpret and use the prescriptive model of discourse ethics'. This is 'because ideas and values that feature in dominant interpretations of the world are more likely to appear universal and culturally neutral than ideas and values used by the members of subordinated cultures, which are likely to appear particular and idiosyncratic' (Jaggar and Tobin, 2013:393). Furthermore, as well as presuming the rationality and neutrality of secularism, Benhabib's argument implies that 'people who insist on invoking religious or cultural values will at best be demoted to moral informants or witnesses' or '[a]t worst […] demoted to the status of objects of moral concern' (Jaggar and Tobin, 2013:395-6).

According to Allen (2013:274-5), the problem is that despite her claim to be sensitive to difference, Benhabib nonetheless contends that 'the hallmark characteristics' of what she takes to be the noblest moral point of view—'the capacity to take up reflexive distance on one's commitments and beliefs (reflexivity), to view them as one set of commitments and beliefs among others (pluralization)'—are features that she herself identifies as being generated by the domination-laden development of Western modernity, but which are then taken to be paradigmatic of what the moral point of view should entail. Global studies of morality, such as the above-mentioned research collected by Haidt (2013), allows these critiques of the moral power at work in Benhabib's arguments to be grounded by empirical evidence of clear descriptive variation in how the 'moral point of view' is understood across the world. Whilst only a minority of people, most often from highly-educated sectors of Westernised cultures, tend towards interpreting the moral world primarily via the kinds of universalising reasoning described by Benhabib, for most people across the globe, moral perspectives and interpretations are also moulded in relation to factors such as sanctity and the authority of tradition. It is not that non-WEIRD groups are any less reflexive about their moral lives nor that they do not apply universalising perspectives, but rather that alongside these perspectives their moral judgements are also likely to be orientated by group loyalty, respect for authority and tradition, sanctity and purity. In light of this, it is hard to not read Benhabib as setting what she takes to be *the* moral point of view from a narrow, Western-

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centric perspective that disregards ways that more people than not have been shown to understand the moral world.

Conclusion

The primary sociological value of Benhabib's work lies in its scything critiques of Enlightenment moral thought. These critiques recognise that Enlightenment thought failed to live up to its universalist aspirations precisely because it was orientated by conceptions of the disembodied subject, which excluded those who were conceptualised as not being sufficiently rational and impartial, and mandated that the moral point of view should be assumed from a perspective that is disassociated from the identities and contexts that make us human. These critiques and their emphasis on socially situated particularity pre-empt—and continue to be of great value to—more recent sociological critiques of the traditions of Western moral thought, from which sociologists of morality have often taken their point of departure. Benhabib's work also stood at the vanguard of developing care ethics into a general perspective on moral action, which has been integral to the recent redevelopment of sociological approaches to morality.

Benhabib's conceptualisation of universalism has gone to great lengths to deal with the messiness of the real world in its formulation. It seeks to formulate a universalism that accounts for both the generalized features of what makes us all human and the concrete differences in experiences and circumstance when we consider how fellow human beings should be treated. Benhabib (1994:173) constructs a persuasive case, without recourse to essentialism, for why 'all human beings, by virtue of their humanity, are entitled to moral respect from others'. As noted above, sociologists such as Lukes (2009) and Gorski (2019) have argued that sociological approaches to morality should not be averse to postulating some moral universalisms based on arguments similar to Benhabib's, which contends that all humans are entitled to moral respect on the basis of their humanity.

Yet it is precisely where Benhabib remains wedded to the Enlightenment that her theory becomes severed from the concrete realities of human life that she wants her work to accent. Benhabib's use of discourse ethics continues to reside within the modernist tradition in that it

seeks to provide foundations of moral procedure based on the apparently fundamental normative premises implicit in the structures of communication. This is taken to be necessary to making claims universal, despite the venerated structure of communication upon which universalising claims are based reflecting social realities only partially. But the most significant issue for Benhabib (1992:42) is where the 'postconventional' system of discourse ethics is used as a means to 'generate norms of coexistence and conduct which would be acceptable to *all* in a modern society'. Against the moral universalism that Habermas develops out of his discourse ethics, Delanty (1997:56) argues that 'Habermas's theory is too rooted in the Enlightenment tradition of universal reason and is unable to address the complex problems that are integral to both multicultural societies and to the interrelations of worldviews on the global level'. Benhabib's arguments specifically seek to redress these inadequacies in Habermas's theory by recognising cultural and personal particularity via the concrete other. However, as with Habermas, Benhabib's keenness to maintain what she sees as the 'crucial insights' of the Enlightenment means that concrete differences in moral perspective, differences that Benhabib herself recognises, are not considered by her to be sufficiently postconventional to be accorded the moral validity necessary for them to be factored into the apparently universal procedures for establishing 'what norms or institutions would the members of an ideal or real communication community agree to as representing their common interests' (Benhabib, 1990:331).

So what might Benhabib's work and the critiques made against it tell us in relation to increasingly regular calls for sociologists to go beyond description and enter normative prospection and moral postulations (Abend, 2013; Vandenberghe, 2017). Similar to Benhabib's assertion that discourse ethics can be used to adjudicate between the moral adequacy and acceptability of norms and institutions, Vandenberghe (2017) compellingly argues that the evidence amassed by sociologists on issues like the effects of certain practices on women, or the oppression generated by certain beliefs and institutions, should embolden sociologists to pass judgement on the moral tolerability of such practices and beliefs. This is of clear concern to Benhabib's work also. However, the question that emerges with Benhabib is how such judgement can be passed on a cross-cultural level without the subjugation of perspectives that do not align with Western Enlightenment interpretations of what the moral point of view entails. Particularly when the judgement being made is cross-cultural in nature, it is vital to acknowledge, much more so than Benhabib does, 'the extent to which the

normative [assessments] are entangled with ongoing relations of neo-colonial and neo-imperial domination' (Allen, 2013:277). In arguing that the only form of moral reasoning permitted to adjudicate between competing cultural moral claims is the kind of secular postconventional reason she claims emerged in the hermeneutic horizons of Western modernity, it is hard to not see how any such adjudication is already decided *ipso facto* in favour of the moral claims of a secular Western morality. Where sociologists of morality do seek to move beyond descriptive moral relativism and into critical normative evaluation of cultural moral practices, they need to intimately bear in mind the extent to which histories and ongoing processes of domination colour evaluations and order the validity of cultural and moral claims (Bhambra, 2007).

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Notes

[1] Benhabib uses 'discourse ethics' and 'communicative ethics' interchangeably.

[2] Benhabib (1992:174) identifies that the term 'generalized other' is borrow from G.H. Mead, but acknowledges Kohlberg's conceptualisation of the 'generalised other' that she critiques departs significantly from Mead.