

Theorizing Teacher Dispositions from Kantian Perspectives on Practical Reason and Judgment

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This essay identifies Kantian dispositions — understood as the character traits necessary for engagement in practical reasoning and judgment — for inclusion in the current “teacher dispositions debate.” In developing this approach, I draw on the work of Felicitas Munzel and Jürgen Habermas, and articulate their positions on the necessity of certain subjective and intersubjective conditions for engaging in moral deliberation. On Munzel’s grounds, I maintain that teachers should not: lie, be hypocritical, break promises, keep bad company, or gossip. Based on a positive formulation of these five conditions, the resulting dispositions are: truthfulness, sincerity, trustworthiness, irreproachability, and discretion. From Habermas’s work, the conditions of practical discourse are identified as: inclusion, participation, truthfulness, and non-coercion. Based on the necessity of these conditions to moral deliberation and judgment, I posit corresponding dispositions of: inclusiveness, participation, truthfulness, and noncoerciveness.

There is growing academic interest in the articulation and cultivation of teacher dispositions.¹ *Dispositions* are most generally understood as the personal attributes, patterns of behavior, or tendencies for an individual to act in predictable ways under particular circumstances.² In general, the value of dispositional approaches to education is well-theorized and represented in a number of specific areas, including moral education,³ effective teaching,⁴ and critical thinking.⁵ Constructs aimed at formally schematizing appropriate dispositions for teachers have also received recent and multiplying attention with various categorizations including “virtues of character, intellect, and care”⁶ and covering various domains including the “intellectual, cultural, and moral.”⁷ Moreover, as Deborah Schussler, Lisa Stooksberry, and Lynne Bercaw point out, “the recognition that effective teaching extends even deeper than knowledge and skills is steadily creeping in the teacher education policy arena as organizations like INTASC [Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium] and NCATE [The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education] incorporate dispositions into program evaluation standards and benchmarks for teacher candidates.”⁸

Beyond recognizing the general role dispositions can play in a number of educational interests, I argue that a Kantian approach to practical reasoning and judgment implies a reconceptualization of the moral development of teachers through the cultivation of specific dialogical dispositions. In an important sense, therefore, this essay is not meant as a reiteration of arguments for the schooling of teachers in a variety of substantive moral virtues,⁹ nor as support for “character education”, defined by Lickona as “the deliberate effort to cultivate virtue[s] of . . . wisdom, justice, fortitude, self-control, love, a positive attitude, hard work, integrity,

gratitude, and humility.”¹⁰ Nor do I argue for “a transcendent universal set of [moral] values ... related to foundational principles or virtues such as honesty, justice, integrity, respect, kindness, and trustworthiness.”¹¹

Instead, my proposal is for education in the subjective, dialogical dispositions that enhance receptivity to and sustain engagement in human and practical discourses as a necessary requirement for justifiable moral judgments. As a Kantian approach to teacher dispositions that is in keeping with interpretations of Immanuel Kant’s theory of moral reasoning as inherently dialogical, this essay recommends a specifically epistemological move toward the moral development of teachers. This move identifies the unavoidable and inevitable means by which justifiable moral judgments must be made in pluralistic societies and attempts to forge a link between the means of moral reasoning and the character traits supporting its concrete realization. By making a clear distinction between substantively moral and dialogically epistemic character traits, the focus of teacher dispositions can be further refined to the formation of specific dialogical dispositions of character. I argue it is then possible to move beyond contentious attempts at establishing and promoting the “correct” moral virtues of a teacher, as well as to obviate claims that the moral education of teachers is always an ideologically biased enterprise. These two issues form the crux of the recurrent deadlock in the teacher dispositions debate and highlight the difficulty of reaching general agreement on an impartial set of moral character traits for all teachers.¹² My overarching aim is to create space for a conception of the moral education of teachers that is not ideologically driven but is governed by criteria of impartiality and universality by posing the question: What character traits might Kantian perspectives on practical reason and judgment contribute to the increasing catalog of teacher dispositions? In working toward an answer, I identify epistemic dispositions that correspond with necessary features of subjective and intersubjective practical reason. While not substantively moral in themselves, such character traits are integral to establishing a moral point of view within posttraditional societies. As such, these dispositions comprise indispensable character traits for teachers who willingly engage in practical reasoning over issues of fairness, equity, and social justice.

I open discussion with a brief review of the teacher dispositions debate. Following these considerations, my initial objective is to establish that the Kantian approaches to moral reasoning presented by Munzel and Habermas are inherently “dialogical.” It is then possible to differentiate each of these interpretations of practical reason as necessitating particular dialogical norms for establishing the moral validity of judgments. These dialogical norms are described as either “subjective conditions” or “intersubjective conditions” of discourse that guard against strictly instrumental or strategic uses of reason in moral deliberations. I then identify eight dialogical dispositions of character, corresponding to each of the conditions of discourse deemed by Munzel and Habermas as indispensable to making moral judgments. These epistemic dispositions are proposed as initial constructions for consideration and further development as essential teacher dispositions in the moral domain.

THE CURRENT DISPOSITIONS DEBATE IN BRIEF

The starting point of the current debate over moral dispositions in teacher education may be traced to a NCATE document published in the United States in 2000.¹³ This document and its subsequent editions claim to set appropriate standards for the accreditation of new teachers and, according to NCATE's president in 2006, acknowledges that it is time "for teacher educators to pay attention not merely to knowledge and skill development and teaching and learning but also to the moral and ethical development of teachers."¹⁴ NCATE's new-found concern for the moral character of teachers precipitated and legitimated a proliferation of interest in identifying morally appropriate teacher dispositions and in creating frameworks for assessing these novel educational requirements. A notable example of this interest includes a recent flurry of disposition-focused papers published in the *Journal of Curriculum Studies* and in the *Journal of Teacher Education*. As might be anticipated, the highly contested nature of teacher education was quickly revealed in the ensuing and sometimes heated debate over appropriate teacher dispositions. Meanwhile, subsequent editions of the *NCATE Standards* attempted to define and direct the teacher dispositions debate with statements such as, "Dispositions are guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values such as caring, fairness, honesty, responsibility and social justice."¹⁵ More recently, NCATE has further specified the two fundamental dispositions accredited institutions are expected to assess as "fairness and the belief that all students can learn" while allowing professional learning units to "identify, define, and operationalize additional professional dispositions."¹⁶

On first reading, such dispositions and their underlying values may appear uncontroversial and generally beneficial, but many educational researchers and theorists, particularly those interested in social justice and equity, have recognized such guidance as simply fuelling the controversy. As Hilda Borko, Dan Liston, and Jennifer Whitcomb point out, concern has mounted that through the interpretation, application, and assessment of preservice teachers' moral attitudes "the educational community becomes vulnerable to the danger of ideological bias ... [in that] by incorporating dispositions in a curriculum or assessment system, a teacher education program runs the risk of supporting a social or political agenda of indoctrination."¹⁷ If taken seriously, the potential for nesting ideological bias in the moral dispositions of teachers is a major obstacle blocking this avenue of teacher education. Moreover, while the lists of morally appropriate teacher dispositions continue to grow in the literature, it appears unlikely that broad agreement on an acceptable set of teacher dispositions can be reached so long as suspicions of ideological bias persist.

What is needed, therefore, is not a further piling-on of moral traits for teachers, but the cultivation of dispositions oriented toward impartial and universal reasoning. Such an epistemological approach to character development would construct an impartial, moral point of view that is not grounded in morally substantive values. From a Kantian perspective, a moral point of view sets conditions on practical reasoning with the aim of forming judgments that are impartial and universalizable. I take such a moral epistemology to be inherent in the work of the Kantian theorists Munzel and Habermas, and want to connect their interpretations of practical reason

and judgment with the concept of teacher dispositions as a productive and timely means of advancing the debate. A moral epistemology gives an account of the nature and criteria of justifiable claims to moral rightness. In doing so, it provides characteristics and competencies claimed as universally necessary or culturally appropriate to making practical decisions. Familiar examples include Aristotle's virtue-based ethics, John Rawls's concept of an overlapping consensus, and Alasdair MacIntyre's weighting of cultural traditions. Different moral epistemologies offer distinct conceptual schemes, frames of reference, and possibilities for constructing supporting sets of dispositions. For this reason, philosophers of education are especially well positioned to engage the teacher dispositions debate — to bridge between moral theory and policies aimed at defining the character of a good teacher.

THE DIALOGICAL NATURE OF KANTIAN VIEWS OF MORAL REASONING

In its most general form, “dialogue ... is a conversation with a center, not sides ... in which people think together in [a reciprocal and sincere] relationship.”¹⁸ It involves acts of reciprocal perspective-taking where judgments follow not from the monological viewpoint of a single agent but from seeking to jointly establish what is in the equal interest of all. It is in this sense of sincere and reciprocal reasoning that Munzel's reading of Kant offers a dialogical interpretation of the justifiability of moral judgment. Moral reasoning requires a trans-subjective cross-testing of maxims against the impartial and universal point of view set by the categorical imperative: “The turn within requisite for active, individual exercise of judgment can only be carried out in a way that fulfills human purpose or vocation when the individual also freely submits that judgment to the measure of the universal ascertainable by adopting the standpoint of the other in one's self-reflection.”¹⁹

For Munzel, the dialogical perspective-taking inherent in moral judgments made under the categorical imperative is expressed in the term “human discourse.” This indispensable means of judging right from wrong is also how good character is practiced, preserved, and exhibited. Additionally, as a trans-subjective form of moral reasoning, human discourse may take place both internally within a subject's imagination or externally between two or more subjects, provided that sincerity and reciprocal perspective-taking are displayed. Munzel emphasizes this conceptualization of human discourse and its relevance to moral education in a succinct set of passages:

“To think” is just to “converse with oneself,” and “speech is the foremost vehicle of understanding ourselves and others,” writes Kant in an earlier section of his *Anthropology*.

“A further dimension of the concrete exercise of character ... [is] its exhibition and self-preservation in and through human discourse, both inner and outer.”

“The relevance of principles governing the human *means* [i.e. “human discourse”] for carrying out these acts [of a good character] is readily apparent.”²⁰

Habermas also interprets Kant's approach to moral reasoning from a dialogical perspective but argues an additional requirement of intersubjective dialogicality that goes beyond the reciprocal mode of moral reasoning offered by Munzel. For Habermas, moral reasoning and judgment must be submitted for public examination in “practical discourses” where each participant freely gives their perspectives on an

issue without coercion. This further requirement of actually engaging with the other is viewed by Habermas as epistemically necessary. It acknowledges an irreversible move toward the “detranscendentalization” of reason that emphasizes the fallibility of subjective understanding and presupposes that “no one can speak for another through recourse to a realm of a priori reason.”²¹ As such, Habermas asserts that moral reasoning requires an intersubjective cross-testing of norms from within an impartial and universally oriented point of view. A full test of the rightness of a norm is possible only through a cooperative dialogue between real interlocutors. William Rehg summarizes these aspects of Habermas’s discourse theory of morality as follows:

“Although Habermas (like Kant) conceives reason as an elevated source of unity among persons that goes beyond desire and interest, the individual has access to moral reason in its full sense only through dialogue.”²²

“[For Habermas] individuals ‘take’ the moral point of view precisely insofar as they give themselves over to such a process of dialogical interchange, to the give-and-take of opinions striving toward consensus.”²³

Rehg concludes that Habermas’s project rests on a “dialogical conception of moral reason.”²⁴ In his own work from the same period, Habermas posits the finer point of “mutual understanding” as the central aim of reciprocal perspective-taking undertaken in actual instances of dialogical interchange:

“In dialogue, interlocutors want to *understand* each other and, at the same time, to reach a mutual understanding about something, that is, to come to an agreement.”²⁵

“‘Dialogue’ is seen as the model for an exchange between interlocutors reaching mutual understanding about something in the world.”²⁶

In this regard, Habermas views sincere attempts at mutual understanding and joint agreement as a critical link between the impartial reasoning central to a discourse theory of morality and the reciprocity and intersubjectivity of communication generated by dialogue.

SUBJECTIVE AND INTERSUBJECTIVE CONDITIONS OF DISCOURSE

While both Munzel and Habermas provide Kantian interpretations of the moral point of view that rest on the sincerity and reciprocal perspective-taking central to dialogue, there remains an important distinction between these two dialogical conceptions of moral reasoning that has implications for identifying the necessary conditions of human or practical discourses. In the first instance, Munzel’s reading of Kant provides a subject-oriented analysis of moral reason whereby the features of human discourse are located within the character of individuals themselves. Munzel identifies a set of five such subjective conditions for human discourse:

“It is truthfulness that is the *formal subjective condition* providing *surety against the instrumentation* (actual or potential) of the moral universal itself by the human subject.”²⁷

“Do not play the hypocrite, overtly displaying good will and covertly harboring ill will.”

“Do not break your promises.”

“The fourth principle advises against keeping the company of those who are morally deficient in their thinking [do not keep bad company] ... while the fifth counsels ignoring libellous gossip whose source is but insipid and malicious opinion.”²⁸

In Habermas's case, his reading and reconceptualization of Kant provides a wholly dialogical conception of moral reason whereby the conditions governing practical discourse are rationally reconstructed from the unavoidable presuppositions interlocutors have to make when engaging in a search for mutual understanding. As such, he provides an intersubject-oriented and cooperative analysis of full moral reasoning. Habermas is consistent in identifying four conditions necessary to orienting interlocutors in concrete instances of reciprocal perspective-taking through practical discourse: "complete inclusion of all those affected, equal distribution of argumentational rights and obligations, the uncoerciveness of the communicative situation, and ... that every participant be honest with herself and unbiased toward others."²⁹ That these epistemic conditions are already well represented in philosophy of education is a considerable support for the further aims of the current essay.³⁰

In an important epistemological sense, therefore, Habermas's detranscendentalization of reason leads to an intersubjectification of moral reasoning grounded in the necessary presuppositions of argumentation. In turn, this epistemic grounding of practical reason provides the impartial conditions of practical discourse. These conditions present an important opportunity for the teacher dispositions debate. If Habermas has it right, the inherent "neutrality" of the conditions of practical discourse could be tapped in the construction of dispositions that address concern over possible bias and risk of indoctrination associated with teacher dispositions prescribed on substantively moral grounds. This would offer a way forward past the principal concern that has waylaid the valuable contribution a dispositional perspective might make to the formation of good teachers and to conceptions of their accountability and professionalism. In aid of this aim, it is worth recounting Habermas's clear statement that the four intersubjective conditions of practical discourse are not normative in the moral sense but rationally reconstructed from universal presuppositions of argumentation. They are the unavoidable and irreplaceable features of discourses aimed at mutual understanding and agreement:

Inclusivity only signifies that access to discourse is unrestricted; it does not imply the universality of binding norms of action. The equal distribution of communicative freedoms and the requirements of truthfulness in discourse have the status of argumentative duties and rights, not moral duties and rights. So too, the absence of coercion refers to the process of argumentation itself, not to interpersonal relations outside of this practice.³¹

FROM CONDITIONS OF DISCOURSE TO EIGHT PROPOSED TEACHER DISPOSITIONS

Taking a dispositional perspective on subjective and intersubjective conditions necessary for the dialogical orientation of moral reasoning suggests an essential situating of these conditions within the character of, in this instance, teachers. The need to situate dispositions in the character of teachers, however, is considerably more problematic for Habermas than for Munzel. This is because Munzel's conditions for discourse are already clearly located within the human subject and related directly to good character: "On the face of it, these [five conditions] are but common sense moral principles pertaining generally to human conduct in relation with others. Kant has, however, specified that they "relate to character," and that they may be understood as formal conditions for discourse."³²

In Munzel's case, it appears a straightforward matter of identifying dispositional terms that capture the essence of each of her five subjective conditions for discourse understood as the dialogical but subjectively located means of making moral judgments. The single provision in play is a clear understanding that these essential character traits are meant to support "consciousness of the law" (that is, Kant's categorical imperative) in reasoning and judgment and should not be read as empirically contingent dispositions of any particular ethnocentric point of view.³³ Instead, emphasis needs placing on an epistemological reading of Munzel when advocating dialogical teacher dispositions that are consistent with "the habit of exercising moral judgment in connection with life's actions, that [is] accustomed to effectuate the mutually referential unity of thinking [i.e., human discourse] ... in accordance with moral laws."³⁴ On this understanding, Munzel's subjective conditions of discourse necessary to a mutually referential unity of thinking — what I have construed as sincere and reciprocal perspective-taking — are: do not lie, do not be a hypocrite, do not break your promises, do not keep bad company, and do not listen to or repeat gossip. Based on positive formulations of these five subjective conditions for discourse, I offer the following for consideration as teacher dispositions that are rationally necessitated when taking a moral point of view on substantive issues: truthfulness, sincerity, trustworthiness, irreproachability, and discretion.

In providing a subjective or dispositional view of Habermas's necessary conditions of practical discourse, further work is warranted. At issue is the importance of explicitly situating the intersubjective conditions of discourse within the character traits of individuals. Viewed from the perspective of what constitutes a good character, the conditions that frame the moral point of view require a suitable instantiation as the subjective dispositions of participants in practical discourses. As such, a good character is one who actively and reliably seeks mutual understanding and agreement within the specific conditions of practical discourse. While Habermas does not offer an account for how to make the transition from necessary conditions of discourse to subjective dispositions, he clearly recognizes the task and the obstacles to be overcome: "Often lacking are crucial socialization processes, so that the dispositions and abilities necessary for taking part in moral argumentation cannot be learned."³⁵

It is on account of such observations that I seek to theorize the conditions of practical discourse from their intersubjective role in orienting joint moral reasoning to a dispositional role affecting the personal character of each participant in such deliberations. It seems reasonable that each participant in a discourse must embody their own set of subjective, dialogical dispositions if the governing conditions of intersubjective moral reasoning are to be sufficiently met. This is based on an assumption that the conditions of actual discourses are highly reliant on the characteristics of the participants and the features of a discourse will vary depending on the subjective dispositions of each interlocutor. Given this relationship, the necessity of cultivating subjective dispositions that support practical discourse is apparent. Such dispositions firmly situate the sincere and reciprocal orientation

required by the moral point of view within the individual, guarding against performative self-contradiction in the pursuit of mutual understanding and agreement about what is in the equal interest of everyone concerned.

Recognizing the commensurability of intersubjective conditions with subjective dispositions enhances the opportunity of educating for “a reflexive and mutually symmetrical coordination of subjective perspectives in an impartial point of view.”³⁶ Such recognition licences the construction of a suitable set of dispositions for the development of dialogically receptive teachers. On this supposition, it is crucial that the dispositions necessary for taking part in practical discourses — as underwritten by inclusive, participative, truthful, and non-coercive reasoning — be identified, well articulated, and cultivated in the moral education of teachers. To this end, I further submit inclusiveness, participation, noncoerciveness, and restate truthfulness for consideration as impartial and universally applicable teacher dispositions.

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 2. Ana Maria Villegas, “Dispositions in Teacher Education: A Look at Social Justice,” *Journal of Teacher Education* 58, no. 5 (2007): 370–380.
 3. See, David Carr, *Educating the Virtues: An Essay on the Philosophical Psychology of Moral Development* (London: Routledge, 1991); and David Carr and Jan Steutel, eds., *Virtue Ethics and Moral Education* (London: Routledge, 1999).
 4. Richard Percy, “The Effects of Teacher Effectiveness Training on the Attitudes and Behaviors of Classroom Teachers,” *Educational Research Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (1990): 15–20.
 5. Harvey Siegel, “Critical Thinking as an Educational Ideal” (paper presented at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, Boston, Mass., May 1980).
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 7. Deborah Schussler, Lisa Stooksberry, and Lynne Bercaw, “Understanding Teacher Candidate Dispositions: Reflecting to Build Self-awareness,” *Journal of Teacher Education* 61, no. 4 (2010): 350–363.
 8. Deborah Schussler, Lynne Bercaw, and Lisa Stooksberry, “Using Case Studies to Explore Teacher Candidates’ Intellectual, Cultural and Moral Dispositions,” *Teacher Education Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2008): 105–122.
 9. See Terry Burant, Sharon Chubbuck, and Joan Whipp, “Reclaiming the Moral in the Dispositions Debate,” *Journal of Teacher Education* 58, no. 5 (2007): 397–411; and Jonathan Cohen, “Social, Emotional, Ethical, and Academic Education: Creating a Climate for Learning, Participation in Democracy, and Well-being,” *Harvard Educational Review* 76, no. 2 (2006): 201–237.
 10. Thomas Lickona, *Character Matters: How to Help Our Children Develop Good Judgment, Integrity, and Other Essential Virtues* (New York: Touchstone, 2004), xxv.
 11. Elizabeth Campbell, *The Ethical Teacher* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2003), 14.
 12. Borko, Liston, and Whitcomb, “Apples and Fishes.”
 13. National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), *Professional Standards for the Accreditation of Schools, Colleges, and Departments of Education* (Washington, DC: NCATE, 2000).

14. Arthur Wise, "Preface," in *Teacher Dispositions: Building a Teacher Education Framework of Moral Standards*, ed. Hugh Sockett (Washington, DC: AACTE Publications, 2006), 5.
15. National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), *Professional Standards for the Accreditation of Schools, Colleges, and Departments of Education* (Washington, DC: NCATE, 2006), 53.
16. National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), *Professional Standards for the Accreditation of Schools, Colleges, and Departments of Education* (Washington, DC: NCATE, 2012), Glossary.
17. Borko, Liston, and Whitcomb, "Apples and Fishes," 362.
18. William Isaacs, *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together: A Pioneering Approach to Communicating in Business and in Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 19.
19. Felicitas Munzel, *Kant's Conception of Moral Character: The "Critical" Link of Morality, Anthropology, and Reflective Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 236.
20. *Ibid.*, 237 (emphasis in original).
21. See, Jürgen Habermas, "From Kant to Hegel and Back Again: The Move Towards Detranscendentalization," *European Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (1999): 129–157; and William Rehg, *Insight and Solidarity: The Discourse Ethics of Jürgen Habermas* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 194.
22. William Rehg, "Discourse Ethics," in *The Ethical*, eds. Edith Wyschogrod and Gerald P. McKenny (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 85.
23. Rehg, *Insight and Solidarity*, 76.
24. Rehg, "Discourse Ethics," 85.
25. Jürgen Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, trans. B. Fultner (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 56 (emphasis in original).
26. *Ibid.*, 71.
27. Munzel, *Kant's Conception of Moral Character*, 244 (emphasis in original).
28. *Ibid.*, 237 (emphasis in original).
29. See, Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, 269; Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, trans. Ciaran Cronin and Pablo de Greiff (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 44; and Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, J. 1990), 89.
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31. Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other*, 45.
32. Munzel, *Kant's Conception of Moral Character*, 237.
33. Felicitas Munzel, "Kant on Moral Education, or 'Enlightenment' and the Liberal Arts," *Review of Metaphysics* 57, no. 1 (2003): 61.
34. Munzel, *Kant's Conception of Moral Character*, 320.
35. Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, 209.
36. Habermas, "From Kant to Hegel and Back Again," 143.