

Are Kant and Habermas Useful for a Project of Character Development?

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Darron Kelly identified an intriguing problem in his essay, “Theorizing Teacher Dispositions from Kantian Perspectives on Practical Reason and Judgment.” In the current push to character or virtue education initiated by NCATE, while increasing attention has been paid to “the articulation and cultivation of teacher dispositions,” a consensus on what dispositions should be developed in teachers has been hard to reach. Critics have argued that “incorporating dispositions in a curriculum or assessment system” runs the risk of “supporting a social or political agenda of indoctrination” and has “the potential for nesting ideological bias in the moral dispositions of teachers.” Calling it “the crux of the recurrent deadlock in the teacher dispositions debate,” Kelly notes that a “broad agreement on an acceptable set of teacher dispositions” is unlikely to be reached “so long as suspicions of ideological bias persist.”

To break this deadlock, Kelly proposes to bring in Immanuel Kant and Jürgen Habermas in establishing a set of teacher dispositions that transcends ideological biases and bridges different social and political positions. He based his choice on two reasons. First, Kelly suggests that the key to going beyond positions and biases is to cultivate teacher dispositions that are “oriented toward impartial and universal reasoning.” Kant’s moral philosophy aims at forming universalizable judgments and Habermas is known for his theory of reaching consensus through intersubjective and communicative actions. So they are sensible choices. The second reason has to do with Kelly’s realization that no matter what traits and virtues we choose, they will always be perceived as ideologically driven or biased, so there will be no “correct” dispositions. Recognizing that neither Kant nor Habermas endorse the Aristotelian virtue approach, in which character is viewed as inclinations or as internal, substantive traits, he proposes an “epistemological approach to character development” which is “not grounded in morally substantive values,” but in the “subjective and intersubjective conditions” for engaging in moral deliberation. In other words, dispositions for teachers should not be understood as the traits or virtues that have inherent moral worth, but as the subjective and intersubjective *conditions* teachers should develop in themselves so *they are ready to talk about which traits and virtues have inherent moral worth with diverse peoples*. Based on such an approach, Kelly proposes the following teacher dispositions: inclusiveness, participation, truthfulness, and noncoerciveness. In this way, Kelly suggests, we can get away from the deadlock of contentious attempts at finding the “correct” characteristics, and I suspect, he is also trying to get away from the suspicion of adopting the much-challenged notion of a substantial subject, of which virtue ethics cannot be completely innocent, according to the post-humanist challenge.

I have to say that Kelly's project is immediately appealing, but it also has daunting difficulties. I would argue that using Kant for the purpose of character development and for impartiality in the sense that teachers will become intersubjectively engaged and dialogically respectful of each other's different positions is a bit of a stretch. On the other hand, Habermas can indeed be very helpful, even though Kelly has noted the inherent difficulty. The difficulty, I would argue, may be as much Kelly's problem as that of Habermas's. An exploration of such "subjective and intersubjective conditions" for engaging in communicative actions may not only be compatible, but also indispensable for Habermas's theory. In the following, I briefly analyze how, while Kant remains very attractive for such a project, he may still not be viable and how Habermas's and Kelly's projects can benefit each other.

Those who are familiar with Kant's *Groundwork* know that anything related to moral character as inclination is immediately rejected by Kant. However, recent scholarship has paid attention to his idea of character that is different from inclination. Felicitas Munzel, Patrick Ericson, and others have called attention to the fact that Kant also recognizes that there is a distance between *ought* and *is*, between the objective (universal) and the subjective, and between freedom and nature. People need to be educated and cultivated so they can develop the character that will enable them to conduct practical reasoning. According to Kant's definition, character is the will and the determination of human beings to act according to universal principles.¹ It is "the primary instance of the way in which freedom and nature are related,"² and is how "objective practical reason [can] also be made *subjectively* practical."³ Thus Character or virtue for Kant is "a strength of will,"⁴ an "attribute of conduct of thought."⁵ It is indeed the condition under which practical reasoning can take effect, rather than a trait that has inherent moral worth. In this sense, Kelly is right in calling it a moral epistemology instead of virtue ethics. The five dispositions Kelly mentions, however, according to Munzel, are "maxims identified by Kant as specifically 'relating to character.'"⁶ These principles, not strength of will or determination, govern and guide human discourse. Thus it is questionable whether for Kant these are subjective conditions that can be cultivated.

Now for me, the more interesting question is not whether these principles can be cultivated as dispositions, but whether we can benefit from Kant's universality and impartiality for a character development project. Apparently the universal nature of Kant's moral approach is what really attracted Kelly. In this regard, however, I am also not as optimistic as Kelly.

Kelly's project is to work with irreducible differences and ideological biases in teachers' moral education. The purpose is to prepare teachers to engage with differences and reach impartial and intersubjectively agreed-upon consensus. But Kant's universality is not particularly interested in differences nor in engaging differences. His is really about transcending differences so that one single universal reason (regardless of its dubious origin) will determine principles for all to follow, in spite of differences. The particular arrangements of human nature or interests are precisely what need to be transcended and overcome according to Kant. Thus I

believe additional work needs to be done if we want to use Kant's notion of universality to help with the diversity challenges we face today.

But if universality means engaging with and bridging differences, then yes, I agree with Kelly that Habermas can be very helpful.

In an effort to move away from the fallibility of the philosophy of consciousness to a philosophy of language, Habermas emphasizes the importance of the intersubjective procedure of moral reasoning, where, in a dialogical and critical engagement, all parties strive to reach consensus. It is indeed a process where all differences meet and are cross-tested, under the condition of all inclusive, noncoercive, and truthful participation. Understandably, a readiness to engage in such an intersubjective process is necessary on the part of all parties and it is here that I see the importance of bringing Habermas into Kelly's project.

However, as sensible as it is, it is also not without difficulties. Habermas himself has always been highly critical of "virtue" ethics, and his effort to move away from a substantial notion of the subject plays down the importance of talking about individual qualities. "The need to situate dispositions in the character of teachers" is problematic for Habermas because of his explicit effort to externalize the character traits and conditions in the intersubjective process. Habermas clearly stated that the four intersubjective conditions of practical discourse are features of discourses rather than binding norms of action.

But the difficulty Kelly encountered, I would argue, has more to do with Habermas's own lack of development of a solid theory of the subject that would allow for an elaboration of the subjective condition of the participants than with Kelly's incoherent use of his theory. Habermas's philosophy of communication, in moving away from the philosophy of the consciousness, has been ambiguous about exactly how his account of the subjectivity, or intersubjectivity, will address the problems of the philosophy of consciousness and help with his paradigm shift. His theory of the subject has heavily relied on George Herbert Mead's social self, which is still consciousness-based, and lacks "*originary* self-consciousness"⁷ due to its over-reliance on social and external sources. Habermas further admits that in Mead's construction of the self, the self-agency "functions [only] in the consciousness of the socialized individual as society's agent and drives everything that spontaneously deviates out of the individual's consciousness."⁸

With such a half-developed theory of the self/subject, Habermas himself is hard-pressed to answer the question as to how to prepare communicative parties to engage in inclusive discourses, which already presuppose the need for participants to possess a genuinely virtuous attitude. As Kelly notes, "[T]he 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." A deeper understanding of the subjective condition, and a way to cultivate and socialize a subjective condition conducive to truthful and inclusive discourses seems inevitable even for Habermas's communicative theory. Thus I applaud Kelly's effort in bringing Habermas to his challenge and urge educational philosophers to

engage with such a challenge to examine and expand Habermas's contribution to education.

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1. Patrick Ericson, "Character and Evil in Kant's Moral Anthropology," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44, no. 4 (2006): 623–634.
 2. Felicitas Munzel, *Kant's Conception of Moral Character: The "Critical" Link of Morality, Anthropology, and Reflective Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), xxv.
 3. *Ibid.*, xxx.
 4. Robert Johnson, "Kant's Moral Philosophy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2012 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta.
 5. Munzel, *Kant's Conception of Moral Character*, xxxi.
 6. *Ibid.*, 16.
 7. Jürgen Habermas, "Individuation through Socialization: On George Herbert Mead's Theory of Subjectivity," in *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, trans. William Mark Hohengarten (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 172 (emphasis in original).
 8. *Ibid.*, 180.