

The Us and the All-of-Us: Habermas' negotiation of the ethical and the moral

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1. Introduction

In this thesis, I will attempt an investigation of the plausibility of moral learning processes in the lifeworld in Jürgen Habermas's discourse ethics. In order to characterize these processes, I will conduct an investigation of Habermas's distinction between ethical and moral spheres of normative judgment, which have a complex interrelation. The formation of moral norms happens in highly formalized discourse, and serves to abstract from the contingent values of a plurality of evaluative contexts those needs that are held in common by all. This highly abstracting process causes an "*Entweltlichung*" of morality from the world of everyday practice, which leads to questions of its practical usefulness. In order to meet these questions, Habermas must convincingly show that the application of moral norms back into the complex and limitedly rational evaluative situation of the lifeworld is possible in a practically meaningful way, in a process he calls the rationalization of the lifeworld. An important part of this process is what Habermas calls "moral learning processes", directed processes of the systematic integration of moral insights into concrete practices and institutions in the lifeworld – an integration of moral lessons into everyday culture. I will attempt an investigation and interpretation of the way these moral learning processes are presented, beginning with an investigation into the distinction between the ethical and moral spheres of practical reason.

The origin of this distinction can be found in the history of the project of discourse ethics as a unifying program of various schools of thought, most prominently the Kantian, Hegelian and/or Marxist and pragmatist schools, as a result of which there are a number of natural tensions in the greater whole. One of these, due to the coexistence of Kantian and Hegelian themes, is this tension between the ethical and moral, the concrete and the abstract realms of social discursive action.

Owing to the Hegelian heritage's critical view on Kantian ideas of the efficacy of the purely moral, the endeavor to unify two disparate principles generally found in ethical theories is central to discourse ethics: Hegel pointed out a problematic, according to him even false, dichotomy between theories that focus on the primacy of a principle of justice and those that focus on the primacy of a principle of solidarity – respectively holding up the free and respect-worthy individual and the value-laden community as essentially in need of protection and thus incorporation into ethical theory. His aspiration was to sublimate these two opposing principles into a single principle which covered both aspects of ethics – his view of most other ethical theories was that they neglected one for the other. Discourse ethics then seeks to "redeem this Hegelian aspiration with Kantian means", combining Hegel's insight with a Kantian formalism in order to accommodate, roughly speaking, both the 'liberal' and 'communitarian' impulses.

It is this beginning point that leads to the distinction of the ethical and moral: together they represent a respect for the principles of both justice and solidarity, while (as we shall see) casting them in such a way that they are seen as two sides of the same coin. Then, the ultimate test of the plausibility of this worldview is the success of moral implementation into the lifeworld: the success of moral learning processes, and the rationalization of the lifeworld in general.

We will see that morality's extreme feats of abstraction are still in principle obstacles to the reality of this idea. But in the end, this distance from the lifeworld is plausibly compensated for by retaining a substantive connection with concepts of the good at all times. I hope to show that this internal connection is ultimately based in the potential for rationality inherent in the lifeworld. This incipient rationality is thrust upon us in our encountering 'the other', who paradoxically espouses values different from ours, coming from a conception of the good that is different from ours, yet holds a shared normative basis with us in the form of the structural aspects of communication, which essentially show us our common humanity. In existentialist terms, we could say that this confronts us with the absurdity of our still very deeply held values. This simultaneously forces us to adapt to this otherness by re-evaluating our own values and offers us the possibility to come to a higher understanding of what it means to live together with others.

I will begin with a general introduction into the views behind discourse ethics, and quickly move on to a consideration of the distinction between the ethical and moral spheres. I will attempt to show that there is a deep interconnection between the two in terms of a shared role in both ethical and moral judgments for a substantive concept of the good. But, on emphasizing this internal link between them, we implicitly necessarily de-emphasize the abstraction and *Entweltlichung* that is achieved in moralization. This leads to a view of the moral as a context-transcending force in the sense that it works to connect variable ethical contexts through a minimal shared normativity in that it transcends particular contexts, but not context as such (following the linguistic turn). This normativity is to be seen purely as a form of knowledge (in line with its characterization as coextensive with rationality), which ultimately means that discourse ethics does not move from "is" to "ought", but simply distills a clearer knowledge of "is", and thereby the knowledge of how to act. I will argue that this is a plausible conception of the moral in view of its connection with the ethical, and in view of Habermas's pragmatist position. By an elucidation of this conception of moralization, I hope to gain a somewhat better understanding of the paradoxical fact that the further the lifeworld is rationalized, the more fragmented it becomes in terms of disparate ethical forms of life – even though the moralizing impulse is a reaction to difference, it does not negate this difference but seems to celebrate it.

In my conclusion, I will show that this fragmentation serves exactly to protect the integrity of both individual and community, and is necessary to safeguard both the principles of justice and solidarity. In these circumstances, through the rationalizing power of moralizing discourse, the individual must reinvent his identity-constituting evaluative background in order to be able to live together with others – but gains in both autonomy and rationality.

2. The ethical-moral distinction

Habermas most directly focuses on the conceptual distinction between the ethical and moral spheres of practical reason in his article *On the Employments of Practical Reason*,¹ where he makes a threefold distinction in the uses of practical reason: pragmatic, ethical and moral – to be seen respectively as considerations about the purposive, the good, and the just. Habermas begins clarifying the classical question of ethics, “what should I do?”, by classifying the type of situation in which this question can arise and the respective roles that answers to it will play. He designates these types of situations the *pragmatic, ethical* and *moral*.

First of all, pragmatic questions are concerned with determining what the rational course of action is in the light of one’s ends, where these ends are given prior to the pragmatic question. Therefore, pragmatic questions can be seen as merely technical considerations as to what is the most expedient approach to achieving a certain goal – the pragmatic use of practical reason handles rational choice considerations,² as it only concerns a decision on the best means by which an end can be reached, where this end is already established. What we are interested in, however, is that decision of ends: the ethical and moral employments of practical reason are concerned with these.

Ethical problems go beyond the realm of pragmatic reason to a point where one first questions the goal or end that is to be pursued; i.e., when the question “what should I do?” first arises in an evaluative meaning, and requires one to weigh and even re-evaluate one’s interests and values. Habermas poses ethical questions as including relatively trivial questions of aesthetic preference, but more importantly existential identity questions in terms of the choice of one’s life projects or career decisions, questions of the good life: “who one is and who one wants to be”.³ One thus enters the ethical realm as soon as the question is posed whether a certain end is really worth pursuing, or what end then is

¹ Jürgen Habermas, “On the Employments of Practical Reason”, in: *Justification and Application*, 1-17.

² William Rehg, “Discourse Ethics”, in: *Habermas: Key Concepts*, 116.

³ Habermas, “Employments”, 4.

better, or the best, to pursue. Ethical considerations are considerations of what is good to do, what are good ends to pursue in one's life in order for it to be a successful life, where the meaning of success is determined by one's personal values and those of one's direct community. This question can be asked at the personal level, but due to the strong interconnection of one's value orientations with the intersubjectively shared form of life of one's community, these questions can shift to the "we" level, and form a discourse of self-clarification at the level of communal identity.⁴ This definition goes back to the interpretation of ethical life used by Hegel under the term *Sittlichkeit* to describe the concrete way of life of a cultural community, in terms of its values, ideals, practices and institutions.⁵ The Hegelian heritage in general forms an important addition to the Kantian basis of discourse ethics: the conception of the ethical as a separate sphere of practical reason, for which there was no real equivalent in Kant, indicates a concern for the false dichotomy in ethical theory that was pointed out by Hegel between the principles of an individual-focused justice and of a community-focused common good.⁶ Discourse ethics seeks to fulfill the aspiration to reconcile the two extremes by combining Hegel's critique with the use of a Kantian formal-deontological structure.⁷ These two counterconcepts of ethics, the protection of the individual's sovereign rights and the protection of the integrity of her social environment are then in discourse ethics reconciled via the intersubjectivist view on personal identity: following this view, the two principles both actually spring forth from the same source – a view to the protection of the ethical identity of the individual. It is just the fragility of this identity, which depends for its formation and continuous reproduction on being embedded in a concrete evaluative social reality,⁸ which prompts us to both protect the individual herself and the social context her life more or less literally depends on. The formulated ethical and moral spheres of practical reason in fact then correspond, as responses, to these two crucial responsibilities of the philosophical project of ethics (for short, called justice and solidarity⁹) and provide us with a framework in which to collectively engage in a system of reciprocal identity-stabilization. Thus, the distinction between the ethical and moral spheres is simply an answer to the dangers that threaten individuals whose identities depend on evaluative backgrounds, and serves to protect both the individuals themselves and the contexts they depend on. Although deontological systems are generally thought of as both highly individualistic and staunchly nonconsequentialist, discourse ethics' intersubjective conception of personal identity

⁴ Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 160.

⁵ James Gordon Finlayson, *Habermas: a very short introduction*, 92.

⁶ Habermas, "Morality and Ethical Life", in: *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, 195.

⁷ Habermas, *Ibid.*, 201.

⁸ Habermas, "Individuation through Socialization", in: *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, 152-153.

⁹ Habermas, "Morality and Ethical Life", 200-201.

makes it so that a neglect of the integrity of the community would ultimately be at odds with the deontological focus on the worth and freedom of the individual.¹⁰ In addition, as exemplified in (U)'s consideration for the prospective consequences and side-effects of norms,¹¹ there is a marked consideration for unwanted consequences – but only in a negative sense: the focus of normative validation still remains on the force of “good reasons”. Because of this simultaneous focus on the rights of the individual and the dependence of the individual's well-being on his social context, discourse ethics stands between purely liberal and purely communitarian systems of ethics and has a proportionally broader scope than both.¹²

Moral questions arise whenever we are confronted with the possible consequences that our value decisions have on the fulfillment of the interests of others: when a conflict of interest occurs and a decision on action norms is necessary which goes beyond questions of (collective) self-understanding. The question of what one should do then acquires an additional element of *impartiality*, transforming the part played by the subject that is concerned with a decision on the proper course of action from that of an individual situated in a community into that of G.H. Mead's generalized other, into ‘one’ as in “one does not do that”. When we move from ethical to moral discourses, we raise the bar for the requirements on our conclusions from good reasons as determined within the context of our background values to good reasons *in general*. A distinctive quality of moral reasoning is that it no longer accepts answers that are provisional or relative to specific reasons that not all involved share, but strictly seeks answers that conclusively provide for the interests of all affected – a much more stringent requirement, because failure will result in injury to a neglected party. Moral questions are ultimately about the regulation of interpersonal action conflicts, and thus must pose the normative question on a higher plane than that of the ethical: the question of what end to pursue is *just*, right, good for all.¹³ In his characterization of the moral sphere it becomes clear how much the structure of Habermas' ethics owes to a Kantian heritage: moral norms are arrived at through universalization principle (U), in a procedure of moral argumentation centered on a Habermasian take on the essential moral intuition behind Kant's formulation of the categorical imperative, namely as providing “a principle of justification that discriminates between valid and invalid norms in terms of their universalizability.”¹⁴ The crucial difference with Kant is that both the self and its capacity for moral autonomy are

¹⁰ Habermas, “Discourse Ethics”, 91.

¹¹ Habermas, “Über Moralität und Sittlichkeit – Was macht eine Lebensform 'rational'?", in: *Rationalität*, 229.

¹² Habermas, “Remarks on Discourse Ethics”, in: *Justification and application*, 91.

¹³ Here it is important to note, that even though one speaks of pragmatic, ethical or moral questions, the different categories must be taken as differentiating between *uses* of practical reason: this means that one can look at practical questions (or, situations) from each of the three perspectives alternatively.

¹⁴ Habermas, “Morality and Ethical Life”, 197.

conceived as *intersubjectively constituted*.¹⁵ As such, Habermas's (U) arrives at objective moral validity *intersubjectively*, different from the classical idea of monologically discovered objective moral validity *in foro interno*. The moral question pivots on whether all could will that, for a certain general situation, any person in that situation act in accordance with the same norm, constraining "all *affected to adopt the perspectives of all others in the balancing of interests*",¹⁶ where the way of arriving at what 'all' could will is the actual inclusion in practical discourse of all affected in determining what would be a satisfactory norm.¹⁷ Thus, after the 'classically Kantian' step of individually formulating a moral norm that one can foresee to be universally valid for all, this claim is also *actually* submitted to all others conceivably affected by its possible enactment, as a proposal, for discursively testing its claims to universality.¹⁸ This way, we may truly, empirically, arrive at a norm that is willed by the *general will*.

In summary, the three categories of practical reason can be said to roughly correspond, respectively, to the questions "what are expedient means toward my ends?", "who am I and who do I want to be?", and "what are the right ends, or just ends (for anyone in my situation generally)?"

In designating the respective judgments of the ethical and moral categories, we speak of ethical *values* and moral *norms*.¹⁹ This is a key indicator of the relationship between the ethical and moral categories, since it denotes a difference in the roles that these judgments play: when we engage in moral questions, we move from the *teleological* point of view of goal-oriented cooperation to the *normative* point of view of regulating our interactions in the shared interest of all.²⁰ However, we will see that these types of claims are ultimately not as radically different in substance from each other: Habermas tellingly remarks that "*Moral judgments differ from ethical judgments only in their degree of contextuality*."²¹ The difference in degrees of contextuality points to the fact that in the investigation of moral questions, unlike in ethical questions, we are prompted to pursue an unprecedented generality and universality. But, this being the only property by which we can truly distinguish between ethical and moral judgments, connected to their respective descriptions as "good for me/us" and "good for all", point to a similarity in *substance*

¹⁵ Joel Anderson, "Autonomy, agency and the self", in: *Habermas: Key Concepts*, 90.

¹⁶ Habermas, "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification", in: *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, 65.

¹⁷ Habermas, *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁸ Habermas, *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁹ Habermas, "*Eine genealogische Betrachtung zum kognitiven Gehalt der Moral*", in: *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen*, 50-51.

²⁰ Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 161.

²¹ Habermas, "Remarks on Discourse Ethics", 105.

between the two categories. Revealing in this respect, Habermas notes, is that we judge actions and intentions as “good” or “bad”, using *evaluative* terms to denote the (im)morality of behavior – and he sees this as an indication that moral norms can in fact be grounded, pointing to an interrelatedness with evaluative content that is closer than appears at first sight.²²

3. The substance of the right and the good

Ethical values concern particularities firmly embedded in a concrete, sociohistorically constituted lifeworld, whereas moral norms are about general situations, necessarily without any reference to particular persons, places or actions – rather purely *general* reference to *types* of persons, places and actions. Habermas concisely characterizes this relationship in his description of the right as simply what is “*equally good for all*”, as set off from the characterization of the ethical as being *good for me* or *good for us*.²³ Morality only concerns itself with behavioral rules based on the protection of very general and universally shared interests. The protection of these universal interests then ties back into the central focus of Habermas's theory of justice – safeguarding the two fundamental aspects of justice and solidarity. This characterization of the distillation of moral norms as 'from the clay of ethical evaluations' deflects any claim that valid moral norms no longer have any connection with their origin in the lifeworld.

Rather, because this connection with the evaluative background is maintained (in fact, forming substantive moral norms without this connection would be unintelligible²⁴), ethical values and moral norms are in fact *substantively* the same, differing only in the scope of their application – the substantive content that the lifeworld delivers into moral discourse is merely 'cut down to' only that which turns out to be universalizable: thus, what survives universalizing discourse necessarily points to a conception of the good that is shared by all participants.

Nonetheless, while meant to prevent unjustified encroachment on the identity-constituting interests of all, the moral sphere can still end up juxtaposed to sometimes existentially important ethical considerations of constituents of the community. Valid moral norms do have a specific priority when it comes to the resolution of action conflicts, but this is *exactly* to safeguard the values of all reciprocally: we allow morality to curtail some of our interests, for the overall protection of the interests of all. The role of morality is

²² Habermas, “Eine genealogische Betrachtung zum kognitiven Gehalt der Moral”, 13.

²³ Habermas, “Remarks on Discourse Ethics”, 64.

²⁴ Habermas, “Discourse Ethics”, 103.

precisely to ensure that the basic interests that are universally resolved by all to be of central importance to all, are safeguarded – pragmatic and ethical reasoning may be acted upon only within the bounds of our moral duties to others. But at the same time, the ethical has an existential primacy, in two ways: the choice to be moral in the first place must be an ethical one (motivation must be anchored in the lifeworld),²⁵ and the rationality inherent in the ethical sphere of value is ultimately the source that both initiates norm formation (upon encountering conflict that proves insuperable by purely ethical means) and provides the normative substance that will undergo the universalization test. Thus, the idea of an unwarranted primacy of the moral, allowing it to in some way unduly encroach on the ethical, is without basis.²⁶

4. Razor-sharp cuts

This respect for both the integrity of the individual and the community is then connected to the procedure for discursive moral validation via the concept of individuation through socialization. A procedure of fair argumentation is taken as the starting point precisely because it provides the best way to convert the normative potentiality of a plurality of ethical spheres of value into a just system for arbitrating social action, and the necessary cooperation and cohabitation of their constituents, while keeping justified norms clear from any influence of unjustified coercion or force. This is achieved by prescribing as little substantive content as possible, and keeping the discursive procedure highly formal. Both the existence and the form of this procedure are justified argumentatively by the postulation of the pragmatic presuppositions of argumentation, arguably ultimately the anchor point for all the rest of discourse ethics: *“Anyone who seriously undertakes to participate in argumentation, by that very undertaking, implicitly accepts general pragmatic presuppositions which have a normative content. The moral principle can then be derived from the content of these presuppositions of argumentation, provided one knows at least what it means to justify a norm of action.”*²⁷ These presuppositions are not morally neutral, since they are ingrained in the lifeform in which we are socialized.²⁸ Their content in fact already shapes the process of daily life interactions, and is actually only *formalized and made explicit* in the procedure of discourse ethics. In engaging in communication oriented to understanding, we necessarily accept certain presuppositions

²⁵ Rehg, “Discourse Ethics”, *Habermas: Key Concepts*, 117.

²⁶ Habermas, “Remarks on Discourse Ethics”, 91.

²⁷ Habermas, “Morality and Ethical Life”, 41.

²⁸ Habermas, “Remarks on Discourse Ethics”, 77.

varying from the rationality and autonomy of our communicative partner(s) and the shared meanings of our utterances to propositions about the logic, process and procedures of argumentation, such as the principle of no self-contradiction and the ruling out of all forms of coercion, pointing to an open form of argumentation in which all are afforded an equal voice and equal respect. In addition, part of these presuppositions is the regulative idea of the possibility of arriving at a situation of mutual understanding and agreement (regulative ideas validate the endeavor toward attaining what they represent, by presupposing their attainability: morality, rationality, etc.). These presuppositions, which we necessarily find ourselves already making whenever we engage in argument or reasoned communication in general, undergird the entire structure of our social world, the formation of personal identity, and ultimately the construction of morality. The strategy for showing that these presuppositions are binding is a negative one, that of pointing out self-contradiction in whoever refuses to abide by them. This is illustrative of the pragmatism in discourse ethics, in employing Peircean principles for arriving at “rational warranted acceptability” for validity claims of any kind.

Habermas shows that in a modern, pluralist social situation, members of a community find their attempts to come to purely ethical understanding with one another on the basis of shared evaluative foundations unsuccessful, because their values are grounded on competing conceptions of the good. For coming to a shared understanding, they are then dependent on *any* characteristic they *do* share in their form of life, namely *the process of coming to understanding in linguistically structured communication* – specifically, it is these structural aspects that can provide a way to pursue mutual accord. These structural aspects are then held to be intimately connected to relationships of mutual recognition, as expressed in the pragmatic presuppositions of communication, providing them with normative content on how we should relate to one another. From this follows that the ultimately resulting morality that draws from these structures of communicative relating has an existence independent of any particular conception of the good – and is rather born from the structures of communication as such.²⁹

The specific contents of the presuppositions can be clearly recognized in the formal procedure (U) that guides moral discourse: as every person who accepts the presuppositions (by virtue of engaging in communicative rationality), and knows what it means to justify an action norm, must implicitly presuppose (U) as valid.³⁰ For reference, the formulation of (U) is: “All *affected can accept the consequences and the side effects* [a proposed action norm's] *general observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction*

²⁹ Habermas, “Eine genealogische Betrachtung zum kognitiven Gehalt der Moral”, 56-57.

³⁰ Habermas, “Discourse Ethics”, 86.

of everyone's interests (and these consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities for regulation)."³¹ We direct ourselves to those norms which can be expected to achieve the uncoerced consent of all involved; this criterium also determines the scope of practical discourse, in terms of which issues can be addressed by it – those issues about which idealized consent *could* not be achieved, fall outside this scope. Now, the specifics of the procedure, largely analogous to the pragmatic presuppositions of communication, consist in the requirements on the discursive justification of moral norms of (1) the enforcement of strict and specific rules of fair and open argumentation, leading to the instatement of as noncoercive and inclusive a discursive environment as possible – this noncoerciveness is fallibilistic and ultimately counterfactual, but functions as one of the regulative ideals: these strict rules of fair discussion are meant to take all considerations but the force of good argument out of proper deliberation, divorcing the pure reasonableness of the good argument from any influence of the identity of its utterer, the precise form of its utterance, etc., and (2) a striving toward idealized (again, counterfactual) consensus as encoded in the central principle of universalization, (U) – norms must be “agreed upon by all affected”.³² Through these conditions, the participants in any joint deliberative action situation are ensured of both the clear, unimpeded expression of their interests *and* their interests having a claim to validity that is equal to all others. The pursuit of such consent then continues until further dialogue no longer alters the (consensual) outcome, which is considered adequate justification of the action norm.³³

To reiterate what has already been said about the protective qualities of the formality of moral discourse, the procedure of (U) is just what leads to the separation between the ethical and the moral spheres.³⁴ It does this by making, in the material of all practical issues generally, “razor-sharp cuts” between universalizable questions (holding out the prospect of consensus) and non-universalizable questions.³⁵ Whatever makes it past the cutting line of “reciprocity and generality” is recast as moral.³⁶

The resultant norms must necessarily take on a very abstract, decontextualized form, since the reason we require the regulating potential of moral discourse in the first place is because we are unable to come to agreement concerning what to do by purely ethical deliberation, due to a value-pluralistic social situation.^{37,38} But it must be made clear that the formalism of the procedure for arriving at discursive decisions in no way limits it

³¹ Habermas, *Ibid.*, 65.

³² Habermas, *Ibid.*, 65.

³³ Rehg, “Discourse Ethics”, 125.

³⁴ Rainer Forst: “Ethik und Moral”, in: *Die Öffentlichkeit der Vernunft und die Vernunft der Öffentlichkeit*, 347.

³⁵ Habermas, “Discourse Ethics”, 104.

³⁶ Forst, “Ethik und Moral”, 352.

³⁷ Habermas, “Über Moralität und Sittlichkeit – Was macht eine Lebensform ‘rational’?”, 223.

³⁸ Habermas, “Eine genealogische Betrachtung zum kognitiven Gehalt der Moral”, 15.

to producing only purely formal norms, empty of substance: because the procedure that guides the move to the moral provides us only with an argumentative structure with which to *form* moral norms, the 'normative content' that makes up the substance of suggested moral norms necessarily derives from the situatedness of the discourse of justification in the background values of the participants, which are interwoven with the lifeworld.³⁹ Practical discourse does not generate norms, but only tests *proposed* norms for their hypothetical validity.⁴⁰ In fact, practical discourses are only started when *triggered*, by a disturbance in normative agreement – this is actually a general characteristic of Habermas's pragmatic approach to communicative rationality in all its forms: we carry on in our daily lives, unreflexively acting from established norms and values, until a conflict or incoherence is encountered. Only then, because there is a need to, we engage in discourse: it is ultimately a procedure for conflict resolution and problem solving.

5. Abstraction

Compared to the type of reasoning that takes place in ethical discourse, the sphere of morality is characterized by a strong reflexivity: by allowing all aspects of previously unquestioned values to become questionable, even the ones that are central to one's personal or group identity, all evaluations are recast as hypothetical. Within ethical discourses, these values are already in a sense questionable, but in the moral perspective for the first time *reflexively* – values may be questioned in comparison with other values, or reinterpreted in the light of core values, but always as a result of reasons residing within the evaluative context. In moral discourse, we first look outside our evaluative contexts to question our values *in general*. In Habermas's words, this results in a *moralization* of normatively ordered interpersonal relationships, analogous to the *theoretization* of factual states of affairs as in the natural-scientific method⁴¹ – where in both cases we see a *rationalization*. Values previously held as unquestioned may suddenly be problematized,⁴² compared and contrasted with each other and reinterpreted, and any and all resulting possible normative configurations can be checked for coherency and reasonableness – these two properties being the only criteria for acceptance. When this attitude of abstraction is adopted in moral argumentation, the participant first sees the value sphere of unquestioned culturally and traditionally grounded evaluations that he has left behind *as the sphere of ethical life*, and *juxtaposes* it with the normative content

³⁹ Habermas, *Ibid.*, 63.

⁴⁰ Habermas, "Discourse Ethics", 103.

⁴¹ Habermas, *Ibid.*, 107.

⁴² Habermas, "Über Moralität und Sittlichkeit", 220.

abstracted from it that can survive as rationalized principles in general without the support of contingent background convictions belonging to traditional ways of life – in the move to the moral perspective, the ethical sphere is thus for the first time *created* as a category of itself, and merely depends for its defined existence in a separate sphere on the abstraction inherent in moralization.⁴³ When looking at the transition from the subject's prereflexive embeddedness in the ethical lifeworld to the reflexive and critical mode of moral discourse, what triggers it is just the problematization of previously unquestioned ethical evaluations in an unprecedented value conflict that is thrust upon us: though the values of the lifeworld are based on those background convictions that are *always already accepted*,⁴⁴ when the subject encounters conflicting value systems, inevitably a questioning, reflexive attitude emerges.

The *moralization* of the lifeworld's background values by the subject in pursuit of rational coherency (or practically speaking, a lack of cognitive dissonance) between conflicting evaluative contexts is analogous to the endeavor of rational *theoretization* in the natural-scientific method, which, on encountering in pre-theoretical observations salient conflicts between principles pre-reflexively accepted to be true, takes these conflicts as an impetus for a stringent reflexive critique of the coherency of these previously unquestioned principles – making them each hypothetical, necessarily opening every single one of them to questioning and attempting to distil from them *overarching* principles, or rules, to resolve these conflicts by moving to a more encompassing worldview, reinterpreting all earlier values in the light of a new principle that has the potency to negate said conflict, in order to de-problematize them and come to a new, more useful understanding or interpretation of the way states of affairs hang together.⁴⁵ Precisely in the same way, the reflexive problematization of evaluative principles from the lifeworld leads to the rational pursuit of overarching rules that can act to dissolve the conflicts between them by reorganizing them and subordinating them to a higher-order principle of justice that removes the problem of how to act. This process is extensive, and Habermas even refers to it as a process of *dialectical sublation*, in that “*higher-level cognitive structures replace the lower ones while preserving them in reorganized form*”, pointing to a direct relationship between adopting the moralizing attitude and a rationalizing restructuring of one's previously unquestioned evaluations, even at the level of individuals, speaking of a reflexive “self-application”.⁴⁶ This is a striking indication of the pervasiveness of the effect of the structures of communicative rationality inherent in

⁴³ Habermas, “Discourse Ethics”, 107.

⁴⁴ Habermas, “Über Moralität und Sittlichkeit”, 225.

⁴⁵ I.e. the supersession of Newtonian classical mechanics by quantum mechanics, which uses a different physical principle to explain more phenomena, and the same old ones in a different way.

language: they provide us with the potential to *rationaly supersede* even our (previously) unquestionable, identity-constituting values.

An interesting observation that first appears in discovering (and simultaneously creating) the separation between the ethical and moral spheres is the matter of the question of *choice*: no-one is able to choose in which lifeform they are socialized, since it necessarily involves, in being individuated through socialization (in becoming someone who can choose), the unquestioning acceptance of contingent background convictions ("questions which have always already been answered"⁴⁷) that ground values from which one can impossibly separate oneself. These values are problematized in the consideration of questions of *rightness*, which necessarily involve an impartial, decontextualizing attitude, but this still does not involve the possibility of choice, the choice for a norm of which one has been convinced that it is valid, since choice of which norm one must choose as best surviving the stringent procedure for the determination of validity is determined by what rationality allows. In true cognitivist-deontological spirit, considerations of what one *wants* are then reduced to what one *knows*, at least as soon as we originally commit ourselves to being rational.⁴⁸ This is the practical meaning of the determination of the will by practical reason in moral discourse.

An important result of this move toward reflexivity is that in the moral attitude "*The fusion of validity and social acceptance that characterizes the lifeworld has disintegrated*",⁴⁹ basing validity instead solely on acceptability on the basis of good reasons, rather than social currency – in moral discourse, *good reasons* have priority, where social acceptedness as such is insufficient, but must be accompanied by an awareness and avowal of the right reasons for why a certain norm is preferred.

Then, to reiterate, what happens as the moralizing gaze turns to look back at the sphere of previously unquestioned evaluations is that the sharp abstraction and decontextualization of the elementary (ethical) concepts into higher-level (moral) concepts causes this decontextualized concept to reflect back on the superseded (ethical) concept as a *counterconcept*, irrevocably changing its meaning in the interplay between the moral and ethical orientations – no longer is the traditional, socio-historically and contingently arrived at concept just that, it has become a concept that no longer stands completely unquestioned in its embeddedness in a context based on a particular conception of the good, but must admit of a relative *irrationality* (relative to the rationality of the moral).

⁴⁶ Habermas, "Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action", in: *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, 168.

⁴⁷ Habermas, "Discourse Ethics", 108.

⁴⁸ Habermas, "Über Moralität und Sittlichkeit", 222.

⁴⁹ Habermas, "Discourse Ethics", 108.

The ethical concept can then make a claim to being rational only within a particular context, and so the scope of its translation into action becomes limited.⁵⁰

6. Morality as rationality

As we have already seen above in passing, in moral discourse the will is completely determined by practical reason: Habermas views morality and rationality as identical.⁵¹ Moral autonomy is ultimately defined as bringing the will in line with what “the force of good reasons” demands of one. Because these reasons are still emphatically construed as intrinsically connected with discourse, moral autonomy then is a matter of giving and responding to reasons: to the fully rational person, not acting after what one strongly wants as a result of what reason demands is no obstacle whatsoever.⁵² After all, the construal of moral answers as a type of knowledge removes the relevance of what one wants. The idealized orientation toward moral objectivity precludes the influence of will and choice beyond what is allowed by reason conclusively; however, this serves to illustrate the extreme stringency of the claim that morality raises, and the exceptional force a norm is to demonstrate before it can be considered for adoption. There must literally be no other alternative but to accept the norm, as the result of a maximally stringent and lasting investigation into the validity of its claim – only if it survives *all* manner of critique that *all* participants can come up with, may a norm be considered valid. Due to this demand on the moral actor, her will must be entirely clear from the heteronomous features of contingent interests and value orientations, and must remove itself from its particular form of life and the traditions that have shaped its identity. “*The autonomous will is entirely imbued with practical reason.*”⁵³ However, the consequent price of this complete rationalization that pushes other motivations that pull at the will entirely out of the equation is that its power to act in the social world of action is limited to the motivational force of good reasons alone. Since the connection to identity-constituting and therefore *motivation*-constituting forms of life is necessarily bracketed in allowing one's will to be determined by reason, the possibility of acting out the norm back in the lifeworld is made tenuous, relying on the contingent presence of the motivation to act after good reasons, to “be rational” – whereas on the other hand, contingent, socioculturally

⁵⁰ Habermas, “Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action”, 169.

⁵¹ Habermas, “Remarks on Discourse Ethics”, 81.

⁵² Joel Anderson, “Autonomy, Agency and the self”, 96.

⁵³ Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 163-4.

embedded values are *intrinsically* motivating in virtue of stemming from a conception of the good central to one's identity.

For coming to sound judgments in practical discourse, a type of inescapable rational realizations lie at the basis of normative conclusions: realizations which, rather than being a preference or choice, simply *force* themselves upon one as an inescapable rational conclusion – much like one cannot ignore, without falling into irrationality and ultimately self-contradiction, an empirical claim 1. to which any and all objections one has been able to think of have been convincingly met and 2. which coheres well with all one's other beliefs and in relation to them yields explanatory power, one cannot ignore a fully rational normative conclusion based on good reasons because one simply knows it to be the best or right thing to do from the perspective of either the good life or justice – their only difference lying in their context of validation. The moral and ethical both being employments of the same practical reason, they share the same structure for discursive validation. Additionally, as they share this structural similarity even with empirical claims to truth (although they are ontologically different), we may conceive of validated normativity of both kinds as ethical and moral *knowledge*, respectively. This is why the question of the distinction between the right and the good is an empirical question.⁵⁴ In both types of discourses, participants operate under the presupposition that a conclusive answer is attainable, and the discourse is only declared successful when all options have been fully exhausted. Thus, the resulting answer can be seen as forcing the type of inescapable realization that is also experienced with successful truth claims – of course, respectively determined as within a particular ethical context and within the general human context.

Focusing now on the implementation of morality in the lifeworld, we clearly see that in the case of a valid moral norm, neglecting it in one's action decisions is certainly possible (since in everyday praxis in the lifeworld the will is not necessarily bound by reason), but this is accompanied by the pangs of guilt that a knowing transgression of duty causes, which indicate a realization of having committed an irrational act; having acted against ourselves in a sense (i.e. doing something we emphatically *know* to be wrong).⁵⁵ This illustrates how far Habermas's cognitivism about morality and the ethical reaches: a proper moral norm is simply rationally 'proved' to one on the basis of good reasons – as a result of a search for right norms analogous to the pursuit of truth in factual matters⁵⁶ – and from there it derives its strong normative force. Habermas illustrates this with the very real experience of moral questions being 'forced upon us' beyond our control (in the

⁵⁴ Forst, "Ethik und Moral", 357.

⁵⁵ Habermas, "Employments", 14.

⁵⁶ Habermas, *Ibid.*, 17.

cognitivist sense that we *cannot wish them away*⁵⁷) when we encounter real problems – correspondingly, the same goes for ethical answers. This can be gleaned from the equally forcible character with which ethical *questions* pose themselves to us.⁵⁸ On encountering insuperable conflict in ethical evaluations, the individual must react by taking up the moral perspective and work toward a sublation of the conflict by arriving at a moral answer to it, on pain of succumbing to irrationality. Analogously, when we encounter a conflict that may be solved on purely ethical grounds – this refers to ethical problems that do not allow for moral answers, such as the choice of a life project – in the 'imperfectly reasonable' sphere of purely ethical discourse, the same effect can then be said to occur: an ethical answer must necessarily be pursued, owing to the presuppositions of communication's push toward greater rationality. The proposed answer that *best* survives scrutinizing discourse (as best supported by good reasons valid within the horizon of the lifeworld) may then be seen as forcing itself upon us as the proper ethical answer to our question, from the viewpoint of practical rationality, as a result of the pragmatic presuppositions and the structure of reasoned communication.

This points back to the fact that the process of justifying moral norms is really a matter of acquiring knowledge: by the stringent criterium of reciprocity and generality, we are left with only the interests shared by all; this is a discovery of which *interests we apparently already agree on*, effectively distilling a shared moral knowledge from ethical knowledge by comparing and contrasting our respective ethical knowledge bases to the end of making explicit our evaluative commonalities – essentially subverting the classical problem of ethics of how to move from “is” to “ought” by staying comfortably within the sphere of “is”. The result of successful moral validation represents an increase in the awareness of shared interests that were already latently available in all of our ethical value orientations, but which required thorough discourse to be brought to light. If a prospective norm cannot survive the stringent procedure of practical discourse and remain standing as being based on good reasons in the eyes of all, it does not deserve the very special status of a moral norm. The same in fact applies for ethical decisions, only as seen within a particular ethical context: “[...] *real problems are always rooted in something objective. The problems we confront thrust themselves upon us; they have a situation-defining power and engage our minds with their own logics.*”⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Habermas, “Morality and Ethical Life”, 211.

⁵⁸ William Rehg, “Discourse Ethics”, 134.

⁵⁹ Habermas, “Employments”, 17.

7. Degrees of rationality

The ethical “ought” is based on arguments derived from the self-understanding of a concrete form of life. They are relative to the background values of this lifeform, but within this horizon, oriented toward authenticity, they can take on an absolute (objective) character, “for us”.⁶⁰ This is because ethical questions may not lend themselves to universal answers, but in contrast to the hypothetical imperatives of pragmatic reasoning they do not only have a validity relative to an individual's 'weak' preferences, preferences that are not essential to our identity.⁶¹ Rather, they derive their validity from *identity-constituting* reasons and 'strong' preferences, values that we cannot give up without entering into an unintelligible relation to ourselves and which thus for us possess an absolute character.⁶² In fact, ethical questions possess an objectivity within their own context – and this reflects on the perception of morality from the ethical viewpoint: from the perspective of one's own conception of the good, the idea of morality appears as simply another value, embedded in the same context, not as a context-transcendent arbiter for justice. Habermas distinguishes the two viewpoints, to respectively contextual and transcontextual justification, as *weak* and *strong* cognitivism, where both have the same orientation toward objective answers, but weak cognitivism refrains from taking a hypothetical attitude to the self-understanding of the lifeworld's evaluative background – strong cognitivism is oriented to the categorical validity claim of moral duties.⁶³ As we see from cases of formal or informal self-authentication before others (for instance, in applying to medical school,⁶⁴ declaring our love for someone or reinterpreting our communal identity), the ethical possesses its own rationality in which reasons have an objective power, but only within the evaluative horizon of the lifeworld. This autonomy is only seen as limited, and the objective status of context-bound reasons recast as subjective, when we first venture into the moral employment of practical reason, and discover that the subject attains a type of autonomy that is free even from the contextual confines of the lifeworld, as it is able to reflect on its contingent values and limited only by the force of context-transcendent reasons. Note, though, that it is free only in the sense that *any* of the ethical background values can be put in a hypothetical perspective, but emphatically *not* in the sense that the activities of the free will are somehow completely detached from these values: since we cannot adopt a hypothetical attitude to our own contingent

⁶⁰ Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 161.

⁶¹ Rehg, *Habermas: Key Concepts*, 134.

⁶² Habermas, “Employments”, 4.

⁶³ Habermas, “Eine genealogische Betrachtung zum kognitiven Gehalt der Moral”, 15.

⁶⁴ Rehg, *Habermas: Key Concepts*, 134.

background values (as they constitute our situated identity),⁶⁵ only via mutual ideal role taking we may, *together* (in virtue of the plurality of ethical contexts), view any background value as hypothetical by taking a hypothetical stance toward each other's contexts. I believe this is the only plausible interpretation of what it means to take a hypothetical attitude to values, for a postmetaphysical, post-linguistic turn, pragmatic system such as discourse ethics: without regressing to the thought of a philosophy of consciousness, we cannot separate ourselves from the background evaluations that make up our identity as critical participants in the first place, and Habermas claims no different. Taking a hypothetical attitude can only be done toward values that are not essential to the constitution of our own identities, thus, other's values – but in discourse, we are not alone. In fact, we first learn of the contingency of our identity-constituting values, forcing us to make difficult moral decisions, upon encountering an ethical other.⁶⁶ Of special interest here is that in engaging in idealizing, universalizing practical discourse with all those involved, we apparently obtain from them (and they from us) the possibility to, indirectly, learn what results when one enters in a hypothetical stance toward *our* identity-constituting background values.

So framed, the evaluative stock from which the moral impulse draws both *enables* and *limits* what the reach of morality is. Thus, the sense of the 'context-transcending' potential of the moral viewpoint must be understood as such: subjects in discourse do not transcend *all* contexts and somehow arrive at noumenally inspired conclusions on what is right, they together transcend *their own respective* contexts (into the 'general or largest context' of all available participants), and thus together can determine general answers as to what is in the interest of all.⁶⁷

The ethical and the moral are ultimately made up of the same evaluative substance, and reside in the same context, their claims working with the same presupposed continuum of normative reality. The difference between them is characterized by their role as different *employments of practical reason*; they are the same type of reasoning applied to different problems, respectively problems concerning what is good for me or for us and problems concerning what is good for all, or right. Again, they differ only in their degree of contextuality.

⁶⁵ Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 163.

⁶⁶ Habermas, *Individuation through Socialization*, 183.

⁶⁷ Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 323.

8. Contexts of validity

As a factor of its contextuality, ethical discourse allows for a measure of unproblematic disagreement (“agreeing to disagree”) in our communicative interactions. Authenticity claims are considered valid if the appropriate audience can rationally agree that nothing they know about the claimant contradicts her claim about what is good for her, and that the speaker makes coherent and understandable reference to the reasons for her claim's relation to a significant good. This means that not everyone needs to agree with her, for her claim to be fully justified.⁶⁸ This procedure for justification is, in form, very similar to universalizing justification in that it structurally resembles (U) – there are obvious substantial differences such as that only an *appropriate* audience needs to agree and that the reasons for validity claims are judged within the particular context of the lifeworld, but in the exact same manner it follows the Peircean-pragmatist conception of fallibilist warranted assertibility: following all the information available to us, and after maximal possible scrutiny by an appropriate audience, the claim that survives as *best justified* is the one we should accept. The criteria for what an appropriate audience is in this case are still unclear, but would presumably come down to a variant of the principle of “all affected”, following the basic structure of communicative rationality. In practice, if we wish to stick by the pragmatist principles inherent in discourse ethics, what counts as an appropriate audience would have to be determined as the type of audience that best leads to a conclusive ethical answer to a particular ethical conflict: an answer that strikes a balance between being exhaustively supported by good reasons and being sharply defined. That is to say, including too few participants with a useful understanding of the ethical situation would lead to a less than exhaustively supported conclusion, and including too many participants or participants that are too ethically diverse, with divergent ideas on what good ethical reasons consist of, would fail to lead to a concrete answer to the ethical question, rather leading to a more general and abstract one – in fact, inching toward the moral. Where this precarious balance lies would be an affair to be pragmatically decided in discourse.

The qualification of the procedure as by an *appropriate* audience then explains why we can unproblematically recognize different evaluative contexts, acknowledging their differences with ours without ever feeling the need to accuse their constituents of irrationality: we understand that they draw for the grounding of their values from different reasons than we do, reasons the validity of which can be shown to us to be supported by reasons (and ultimately a concept of the good) within their context, even if we do not

⁶⁸ Rehg, *Habermas: Key Concepts*, 136.

share them.⁶⁹ Even within a single culture we unproblematically accept value differences between groups and even among individuals, barring conflicts with morality, because we understand that their values originate from different life histories, having grown up and having been socialized in different contexts from our own and possessing a correspondingly different self-understanding. Because of this, we can speak of ethical contexts in the plural – and this, the value-pluralistic situation of modern society, is the occasion that prompts the need for moral norms to regulate the conflicts resulting from evaluative disagreement.

The moral, on the other hand, is characterized by its singularity, and the moral claim to spatiotemporal universality definitively precludes any talk of different moral contexts. Moral norms are only plural in the sense that we formulate different norms for different generalized action situations – 'one should perform actions of type A in situations of type B' – but these norms all occupy the same conceptual space, and *qua* moral norms do not admit of special exceptions or qualifications according to particular persons, situations or times: morality is about types, not tokens. They have an absolute and universal character, and require correspondingly universal backing.

However, (U)'s conditions are always presented by Habermas as idealized, and the requirement of ideal consensus as ultimately counterfactual. As such, we may imagine that discourse proceeds up to a reasonable level of inclusion, implementing the procedure of openness and noncoercion up to a reasonable level, and declares justification achieved after a reasonable approximation to complete consensus has been achieved. Here, what the contents of "reasonable" are is, in true pragmatic spirit, also up for discussion – since, in its intersubjectivism, discourse ethics considers the criterium of "rational acceptability" to be context-dependent (this is why ultimately, the procedural properties of processes of argumentation bear the burden of explaining why the results of the procedure are presumed to be valid.⁷⁰).⁷¹ The rational acceptability of contested claims is thus in the end based on the connection between "good reasons" (what these turn out to be is a result of the insertion of normative substance from the ethical sphere) and the idealizations of the epistemic situation⁷² that participants necessarily make when they engage in rational discourse. Again, when we engage in justification-oriented discourse, just like in ethical discourse, we judge justification as a fallible *approximation by negation*: whatever norm holds up to maximal scrutiny, and is arrived at by a procedure also maximally scrutinized,

⁶⁹ Habermas, "Remarks on Discourse Ethics", 100.

⁷⁰ Habermas, "Eine genealogische Betrachtung zum kognitiven Gehalt der Moral", 53.

⁷¹ Habermas, *Ibid.*, 54.

⁷² Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 82.

may be accepted as justified.⁷³ This is the pragmatic concept of justification through and through.

A property of justification for Habermas is that it expands over the reach of the idea of validity *in general*. Validity as a concept is tied to argumentation in general, and following the linguistic-pragmatic turn and the surrender of the unrealistic aspirations of a philosophy of consciousness, all rationality is seen as embedded in language in the form of practices of coming to mutual understanding. What this comes down to for Habermas, is that we may see various forms of reasoning as the striving for validity in general, of which ethical and moral reasoning are subtypes.⁷⁴ This explains why Habermas conceives the claims of morality as analogous to claims for empirical truth: after all, whether we relate to the objective world of empirical reality or the social world of normative validity, we in fact engage in the same endeavor of searching out and attempting to justify validity claims in discourse – since our thinking is inescapably intra-linguistic, our relationships to the empirical and social worlds are inevitably expressed as the practice of making claims and giving reasons.⁷⁵ All forms of the pursuit of validity are the same in this practical respect. The analogousness of the moral pursuit with the empirical one in terms of *transcontextuality* following from their similar structural characteristics in the game of validity claims also explains quite well how convincingly justified moral norms can make a claim as forcible as empirical claims: namely, that of being objectively true and inescapable to any rational participant – the negative process of elimination of invalid claims necessarily leaves one with *no alternatives*, in the case of a justified norm. Any objections one can think of must necessarily have been met, or the norm is by definition not justified.

This same striving for singularity we in fact see in the ethical sphere as well, but its effectuation is immediately mitigated by the greater potential divergence in underlying conceptions of the good, as compared to the moral sphere: the pragmatic presuppositions of argumentation necessarily point toward a unifying endeavor even in ethical questions, but in their case we may in discourse realize that this endeavor will not lead to useful conclusions due to the impossibility of reconciling reasons grounded in divergent conceptions of the good. This is in fact how ethical and moral discourses are differentiated in practice: we naturally project what kind of answer we are likely to be able to give, ethical or moral, but we can only truly retrospectively distinguish whether and to what

⁷³ Rehg, “Discourse Ethics”, 126.

⁷⁴ Habermas, “Eine genealogische Betrachtung zum kognitiven Gehalt der Moral”, 54.

⁷⁵ Important, however, is that Habermas does distinguish between the ultimate *meaning* of achieving validity in both types of claims: both are aimed at rational acceptability, but only empirical claims are aimed at truth. Justified moral and empirical claims exert the same kind of force on us, but moral claims do not point to objective validity beyond our intersubjectively constituted social world: we call them valid, but not true.

extent we have been able to arrive at evaluative unification. Certain answers to normative questions allow for universalization and may be designated moral answers in retrospect, and certain questions do not, remaining ethical in nature. The practical orientation on practical discourse in general should therefore be one of conflict-resolution: we collaboratively attempt to resolve a conflict on the proper action to be taken, and depending on the universalizability of the answer we arrive at after an exhaustive procedure-guided search for the best answer, we may determine whether our conclusion is ethical or moral in nature. In some cases this status will be clear beforehand, as in deciding on one's personal life project on the one hand or in deciding on a norm against murder on the other hand – but not in other cases, as for instance in deciding the concrete action norms that should result from our recognition of 'positive' rights, such as the right to the alleviation of poverty.

9. The rationalization of the lifeworld

The process of the rationalization of the lifeworld, or, the effectuation of the rationalizing potential of moral normativity on the concrete lifeworld, is a complicated concept. The question of appropriate application of abstract norms among concrete values remains problematic. But, factual examples of what Habermas calls "moral learning processes" can be seen in social, cultural and institutional changes such as the abolition of slavery and the implementation of a framework of Human Rights, which show very clearly a "stable direction"⁷⁶ in their practical political results, converging to their ever further realization in practice. The workings of this process can be explained by reference to the general procedure for claim-validation that we find in all types of validity discourses: we are unable to come up with the right way to act out a norm in practice just like that, but in a fallible process oriented to negative validation through falsification of alternatives, we can certainly distinguish between *better* and *worse* norms, which (together with the presupposition of the possibility of success) provides us with a stable direction. Habermas himself attests this as an example of the objectivity of certain norms, which we simply *discover* to be 'good for all'. Ideas that simply morally 'work' should ideally gradually end up being adopted more and more widely into concrete institutions, practices and habits in the lifeworld. Looking at such examples, we see that it was not a matter of at one special point in time ever collectively reaching a *conclusive* decision, leading to the swift application and integration into the lifeworld of a certain norm; rather, the active ingredient was the practical result of a discourse *oriented to* the ideal of valid morality,

⁷⁶ Habermas, "Discourse Ethics", 105.

employing the *moral attitude*, converging on concrete results of which we have a hunch that they might work very well, such as the idea of Human Rights.⁷⁷ The impetus of abstraction toward the purely moral is a form of self-directedness via a continuous striving for ever further rationalization and derives a clearly projected goal to orient ourselves to from the as yet incompletely rational material of our ethical values, that even just in its formulation (though not yet its achievement) reflects back on those ethical values and informs us about them in a deep way, allowing us to perhaps discover a new way of getting incompatible values to cohere more closely or reinvent values to arrive at new ways to combine them with others. This impetus, accorded by the moral attitude's projection toward a more fully rational possibility, can influence the lifeworld to reinvent itself in response to, very simply, good reasons, and actually progressively precipitate the development of a form of life that "meets morality halfway."⁷⁸

The critical appropriation of tradition in ethical discourses is a process of rationalization limited to reasons that originate from contingent background values of the respective context. But placing this scenario in the modern pluralist world, we may envision ways in which *general* moral conclusions reflect back on concrete ethical values, such as the moral development of concepts of fairness and equality reflecting on institutionally ingrained value constellations centering around the catholic church, for instance. These conclusions may prompt us to reconstruct traditions in a rationalizing manner, for instance allowing homosexual and female priests to enter the church for reasons of fairness, bracketing contingent reasons that lead to their exclusion. Nothing in effect changes about what we should see ethical discourses to be doing: already they provided critical appropriation of traditions, institutions and communal identities, only in this interpretation of the potential to learn from the moral, we may see them utilize higher-level information on what is rational to this effect.

Habermas elaborates in great detail on the circumstances within the lifeworld that facilitate further rationalization via the application of moral norms: a certain type of education oriented to acquiring an abstract concept of self, specific institutions and a cultural openness to moralization. This approach, oriented to the idea that the lifeworld must meet morality halfway if it is to be effective, is based on the striving to fill the gap between *moral judgment* and *moral action*.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ We can see this in the historical facts: even with the ratification of the Universal Declaration in 1948, both full agreement by all affected and certainly practical adherence by all was far from a concrete reality and as such we cannot label this moment as the decisive 'conclusion' of a moral discourse – but we can certainly view it as a milestone in a struggle towards further moralization of the lifeworld, which has been and probably will be followed by further steps toward a near-unachievable ideal situation.

⁷⁸ Habermas, "Discourse Ethics", 109.

⁷⁹ Habermas, "Über Moralität und Sittlichkeit", 230-231.

Habermas's characterization of the process of the rationalization of the lifeworld is a somewhat paradoxical one: morality endeavors to unify us in an awareness of what we all share as conceptions of the good, yet the further rationalization proceeds, the more fragmented the ethical sphere becomes. In modernity, and the increasing pluralization of value spheres, we find ourselves turning to the moral perspective to solve action conflicts because purely ethical forms of agreement are ineffective;⁸⁰ yet with increased moralization in the social world of action, the greater this plurality becomes.⁸¹ *"The more the principles of equality gain a foothold in social practice, the more sharply do forms of life and life projects become differentiated from one another. And the greater this diversity is, the more abstract are the rules and principles that protect the integrity and egalitarian coexistence of subjects who are becoming increasingly unfamiliar with one another in their difference and otherness."*⁸² There is in fact a feedback loop that recursively reinforces itself, leading to further and further fragmentation of the lifeworld. As there are fewer and fewer shared needs among participants, the sphere of moral questions that can be answered rationally shrinks, while at the same time the questions that do remain demand answers more strongly than ever. In the end, because of the ultimately shared structure of communication that we must still maintain, only a hyperabstract morality remains, that nevertheless is more crucial than ever to the protection of these multifarious forms of life.⁸³

However, it is the first part of this bi-directional cycle of ever increasing rationalization that interests us here: the influence of justified morality on the lifeworld. As we see from the evaluative vocabulary with which normative behavior is described, this connection with "thick" evaluative feelings already shows that there is a foothold for the realization of moral learning processes in the lifeworld.⁸⁴ A provisional way to explain this would be as follows: the problem of motivation, resulting from the necessary expulsion of heteronomous elements from the morally autonomous will, and thus the loss of any connection between the full rationality of the moral conclusion and the contingencies of the lifeworld, can be mitigated by the fact that a minimal conception of good already resides in those considerations that are allowed in moral discourse by virtue of their reciprocity and generality: those goods that are "good for all". As we have seen, moral norms carry a substantive (no matter how general) idea of the good in them, because of the necessary connection with the lifeworld in 1. the structural aspects of communication that are shared by all, 2. the pre-requisite value (to taking up the moralizing perspective in the first place)

⁸⁰ Habermas, "Moral Consciousness", 164-165.

⁸¹ Habermas, "Über Moralität und Sittlichkeit", 231.

⁸² Habermas, "Remarks on Discourse Ethics", 91.

⁸³ Habermas, "Morality and Ethical Life", 205.

⁸⁴ Habermas, "Eine genealogische Betrachtung zum kognitiven Gehalt der Moral", 13.

that "it is good to be moral", and 3. that substantive content that is supplied by participants from the ethical sphere. 1. and 2. in effect can be seen to act as anchors for the arrival and effectuation of moral norms in the lifeworld, which, added to the 'feedback' nature of the interplay between the evaluative and moral spheres evidenced in the ever increasing pluralization of the social world provides a convincing mechanism for moral learning processes.

If we see moral conclusions as simply a type of knowledge that we first come across in moralizing discourse, but which is closely related to ethical knowledge in virtue of their necessary substantive contents, and we find out that they differ only in their degree of contextuality and rationality, ethical knowledge being conditional to contingent background values and moral knowledge being conditional⁸⁵ only to *universally shared* values, it becomes plausible to suggest that this knowledge can 'jump between spheres'. We in fact see this in Habermas's description of the process of moralizing abstraction: we re-cast our ethical values as heteronomous rather than autonomous, contextual rather than objective, turning familiar institutions problematic and forcing us to reconsider them.

Conclusion

In our investigation of the issues so far, we have seen that Habermas gives a convincing picture of how moralization of the lifeworld can come to effect. He does this in an indirect way, by appealing to general trends we can distinguish in concrete reality that seem to move towards greater moralization, and by showing how the individual who is enlightened by her moral perspective has the option to choose for fully rational reasons, rather than contextual yet deeply cared for beliefs, at her own discretion – strongly tying the problem of the implementation of morality in the lifeworld to that of weakness of the will in the individual. This way, the necessity of moral learning processes taking place in the lifeworld is certainly not conclusively proven, but is certainly made plausible in line with the general tendency of Habermasian discourse ethics toward weak transcendental-pragmatic arguments. Beginning ultimately from the normatively laden necessary presuppositions we must make whenever we engage in reasoned communication, the voice of reason tells us that we are being irrational in not acting out what the conclusions of morality command. This basis of the whole theory in these presuppositions conclusively shows the potential

⁸⁵Perhaps the use of *unconditional* is misleading; after all, the moral does not transcend *context as such*, it transcends *particular contexts*.

rationality that is inherent in the lifeworld, which we may view as effectuated by moral learning processes.⁸⁶

When we speak of "rationalization of the lifeworld", thus, we are talking about an inherent process in which the stage of morality acts as a stepping-stone. The true importance of morality in rationalization lies not in its *products*, moral norms, but rather in its *direction*; the regulative ideal of justified morality, and with it the vision of a lifeworld in which value conflicts and harm to fragile identities is systematically minimized, is both a far-reaching and convincing claim. The orientation of the theory from the intersubjectivist beginpoint is the key to this result, leading ultimately to the paradoxical 'fragmentation' or pluralisation of the lifeworld in the progression of rationalization, which falls into place when one realizes that this is the only way to safeguard both the individual and the community, both justice and solidarity.

Participants in discourse, in applying the moral attitude and together taking up a hypothetical stance to their contingent background values, in the interchange of viewpoints and mutual perspective-taking under the rationalizing procedure of practical discourse, gain a priceless perspective on their identity from the view of the 'general will' that is achieved in the rational comparison of one another's evaluative backgrounds. We cannot adopt a hypothetical attitude toward our own identity-constituting evaluative backgrounds, but others can, and we can do it toward their backgrounds in turn. The information that this exchange of perspectives offers us has great value, because of the true implications of aiming for maximum rationality (which is what the moral attitude *essentially is*): once we allow our wills, as participants in moral discourse, to be completely determined by reason, we can arrive at a just way to live together, ultimately without having to give up our identity-constituting values – our identities. We will have to reconsider them, but only in the light of what seems rational to us. A more motivating reason to be moral is hard to conceive.

Finally, I would like to offer an illustration to my suggestions. In "Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur," Habermas uses Kierkegaard's philosophy to comment on the psychological dimensions of the existential-ethical self-understanding of the individual subject in the face of the moral. Kierkegaard's God is equated with discourse ethics' generalized other, where the plight of the solitary individual is equal with both thinkers in several respects: first, Kierkegaard views the individual in its "thrownness" in the world, being solely responsible for 'collecting himself' (compare "self-application") and becoming independent of his environment – similar to the givenness of one's prereflexive background values, in which one has been socialized, and which can only be really

⁸⁶ Habermas, "Über Moralität und Sittlichkeit", 231.

criticized via the generalized other. What must be made of the way the "moral gaze" reflects on one's personal identity? In the face of the universal perspective, one must assert oneself, reconstruct one's identity, and do this on faith. Faith in God for Kierkegaard, and faith in the Other for Habermas. On the basis of this faith, which we may equate with the evaluative "it is good to be moral", this self-reconstruction is a possibility, and a type of salvation is available. "*Schon in der Kommunikationsformen, worin wir uns miteinander über etwas in der Welt und über uns selbst verständigen, begegnet uns eine transzendierende Macht.*"⁸⁷ Via the transcending power of a shared language, and the necessary presuppositions of freedom and truth inherent in it, we are able to assert ourselves as ourselves, even in the company of others.

⁸⁷ Habermas, *Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur*, 25.

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