"AUTONOMY" OR "UNIVERSALITY"?

The Dilemma of Habermas' Discourse Ethics

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■ Abstract

Contemporary ethics has to make a choice between modern Enlightenment normative ethics based on the individual and postmodern neo-Aristotelianism one based on community or tradition, since it has set a boundary between "Autonomy" and "Universality". In order to respond to the challenges posed by modern Enlightenment and postmodern neo-Aristotelianism ethics, Habermas tries to integrate "Autonomy" with "Universality" on the basis of universal pragmatics so as to achieve the revival of normative ethics in contemporary horizon.

■KEY WORDS   autonomy; universality; neo-Aristotelianism; universal pragmatics; life-world

Ⅰ. Introduction

So far, in contemporary ethics, more attention has been paid to the specific structure of Habermas' discourse ethics by scholars, but they just neglect Habermas' original intention which not only protects the great achievement of Enlightenment Project—Autonomy, but also rebuilds the normative ethics—Universality. In addition, the dilemma Habermas has faced and the solution he has found have not received corresponding attention either. As we know, according to the general conclusion of modern metaphysics and ethics, it was the overemphasis of Enlightenment Project on "Autonomy" that destroyed "Universality" of reason. As a result, "Autonomy" and "Universality" became incompatible with each other. And we have to make a choice between them; either step in "the defeatism initiated by the deconstructionists" through choosing "Autonomy", or revive the contextualism which has been advocated by neo-Aristotelians through accepting "Universality". However, instead of making such a choice, Habermas intends to preserve both of them by integrating "Autonomy" with "Universality". In this, he has faced great challenges from two aspects. This essay tries to elaborate the challenges he encounters and then comments on the solution he has claimed.

II. "Autonomy" of Enlightenment Project and its Predicament

Habermas has defined the greatest achievement of Enlightenment Project as "self-consciousness" or "subjectivity", which means the independence or liberation of the individual from the salvation theology and natural teleology in his book *Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne* (*The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*).[1] He claims that, when the "subjectivity" gives expression to ethics, it would become individual "autonomy", which means that individuals will not bend to the demand of external moral authorities any more. Instead, they begin to reflect on the validity of moral rules by their own internal reason.[2]

It is to be noted that, as long as we deal with the concept of "autonomy", we cannot fail to mention Kant. According to Habermas, Kantian ethics has set a good example in elaborating the application of individual "autonomy". But this does not mean that Habermas would absolutely lend countenance to Kantian project. For Habermas, Kantian ethics does have two aspects. That is, on the one hand, based on individual autonomy or subjectivity, Kantian ethics has laid a new foundation for normative ethics and protected it from the attack of Utilitarianism and Skepticism, which has lost its traditional basis—theology and natural philosophy—in the course of its modern transformation. Moreover, comparing with the traditional salvation theology and natural teleology, individual reason has outstanding merits. For it not only protects the individual from submitting to a priori morals of religion or natural philosophy by making individual autonomy prominent, but also guarantees the validity of moral proposition through setting subjective reason as the foundation of normative ethics.[3]

On the other hand, Habermas considers, Kantian ethics also contains a hidden trouble which is common to most autonomy ethics.[4] Although it is not obvious in Kantian ethics, it has been embodied in the developing direction of his ethics. As we know, it is because of drawing lessons from Kant's emphasis on "autonomy" that modern skepticism and relativism admit that different moral projects designed by different agents have equal validity. Moreover, in the process of promoting individual reason, they find that the true features of reason are nothing but "Will" (Nietzsche), "Ge-Stell"(Heidegger) or "Puissance"(Foucault).[5] In consequence, they completely spurn normative ethics. For them the net result of normative ethics cannot have any other choice but to accept emotionism or voluntarism.

Different from many contemporary scholars of ethics, in response to the challenge posed by Nietzsche et al., Habermas does not deal with it merely by labeling them "irrationalism". Instead, he considers that the root cause why Nietzsche equals reason to will or power has already hidden in the basic structure of modern philosophy. For him the will to control or power of individual reason has its roots in the birth defect of modern philosophy. In this connection, Habermas claims, it is also embodied in Kant's three postulates of practical reason.[6] In other words, affected by the view on the relation between subject and object, when dealing with autonomy, individual reason adopts an extreme way, namely by terms of enhancing the autonomy and dynamics of subject to control the object completely. In this case, Nietzsche's negation of individual reason is in fact an entire development of it. Or, we could cite McIntyre,"the Nietzschean stance turns out not to be a mode of escape from or an alternative to the conceptual scheme of liberal

individualist modernity, but rather one more representative moment in its internal unfolding".[7] As such, controlling reason shows itself in ethics as different incompatible constructions stemming from isolated individual tastes, which conflict with each other and can not be harmonized by conscious philosophy based on individual reason. As a result, modern individual reason, being supposed to be autonomy and universality, gradually changes into a symbol of controlling and oppression. For

this reason, Romand Cloes considers that we could not simply label Foucault with Nihilism.[8] Individual reason which appeals to controlling and power when facing conflicts can only be treated as the variant of will and power. The point is how individual reason, which has placed so much emphasis on autonomy, can transcend the diversity caused by different individuals, and reach the consensus of universality. This is the problem Habermas inherits from Kantian ethics.

III. Neo-Aristotelianism in terms of Universality

In opposition to the efforts of autonomous ethics based on the individual, neo-Aristotelianism grounds its ethics on the community or tradition. The powerful aggressiveness of neo-Aristotelianism has forced Habermas to admit, "neo-Aristotelianism, in particular, enjoys a certain success today. In view of the problematic of ecology, it allows itself to call for a cosmological ethics."[9] Due to resemblance to ancient cosmology ethics and reviving the authority of the community or tradition, neo-Aristotelianism has successfully rebuilt "Universality" of ethics.

Neo-Aristotelianism has not taken individual reason or autonomy as its opponent at the very start. Instead it incorrectly takes moral skepticism and relativism as its opponents. However, when having devoted itself to such a critique, neo-Aristotelianism wakes up to its real opponent, namely modern individual reason which tries to deduce from itself all moral principles. But to neo-Aristotelianism such design would not only lead to tense antagonism between individual and community, but also may destroy the theatrical basis of the community. As a consequence, "the crucial moral opposition is between liberal individualism in some version or other and the Aristotelian tradition in some version or other".[10]

According to neo-Aristotelianism, the project that modern Enlightenment adopted to rebuild moral principles on the basis of individual reason would be bound to fail. In other words, it is the very attempt to deduce moral principles on the basis of individual reason that results in the popularity of moral skepticism and relativism. Neo-Aristotelianism firmly believes that the source and foundation of moral principles is not the deduction from individual reason, but the cultivation of the community or tradition.[11] For them ethics contains following three indispensable elements: first, "untutored human nature", second, "man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-telos", and third, "the moral precepts which enable him to pass from one state to the other".[12] The problem is that with the transform or debacle of ancient society, "ideal human being" (second) disappeared, and only a set of "moral injunctions" (third) are left. The aim of modern Enlightenment is to deduce the notion of ideal human being from its own concept of "human being" (first), and to establish their connection with remaining "moral injunctions". Nevertheless, according to one of the *Two Dogmas of Empiricism*, the separation between factual proposition and evaluative proposition makes it impossible to deduce ideal

human nature from the uncultivated human nature. So MacIntyre affirms that "no valid argument can move from entirely factual premises to any moral or evaluative conclusion—to a principle, that is, which once it is accepted, constitutes an epitaph to their entire project".[13] Based on this, they think the first step for overcoming the dilemma caused by moral skepticism and relativism is to abandon the foundation of modern philosophy—individual reason. As far as the contemporary moral problem is concerned, the prescription offered by neo-Aristotelianism does not aim for improving Enlightenment, but completely denying the design of Enlightenment, and opening up an absolutely new direction for ethics.

Neo-Aristotelianism totally refuses the possibility of laying the foundation for ethics from individual reason or autonomy. Instead it advocates reviving the authority of the community, culture and tradition. Through this way it has successfully overcome moral skepticism and relativism, and then to some extent restored normative ethics. But at the same time it has also paid the price for it, suppressing individual autonomy. It is the very cause that Habermas cannot agree with them. Habermas takes individual autonomy as the greatest achievement of modern Enlightenment, and attempts to proceed with the work initiated by Kant through reestablishing human being's autonomy. To him, both the Virtue ethics of neo-Aristotelianism and the contextualism of

Communalism betray the original intention and ultimate aim of modern Enlightenment. In order to guarantee the validity of normative ethics, neo-Aristotelianism has no choice but to revive moral hierarchy by replacing God or reason with the tradition or community. As a result it has denied individual autonomy to people in moral situations. Neo-Aristotelianism has resolved the problem of moral relativism and guaranteed the universality on the surface by placing emphasis on the priority of the tradition and community. However, unconditionally submitting to the tradition or community means entire rejection of individual autonomy. Essentially, there is no difference between neo-Aristotelianism and traditional cosmological ethics. But for Habermas, "instead of giving up modernity and its project as a lost cause, we should learn from the mistakes of those extravagant programs which have tried to negate modernity."[14] When having realized the extreme promotion of individual autonomy would destroy its universality, Habermas does not accept the radical project proposed by neo-Aristotelianism. Instead he suggests a reformist project. Nevertheless, it has been accepted that the concept of autonomy and universality cannot be compatible with each other. If Habermas attempts to integrate autonomy of the individual with universality of the community, then he must refute this prevailing view above all.

IV．The Dilemma between Autonomy and Universality

Habermas claims, "the outcome of our reflections leaves us with two alternatives: either we return to the Aristotelianism under these criticisms, or we modify the Kantian approach to take account of legitimate objections." [15] Of course he has chosen the latter. For him, the conflict between autonomy

and universality in ethics embodies in philosophy as the antagonism between transcendence and experience. Kant's practical philosophy has successfully integrated these two aspects by virtue of giving priority to transcendence. However, it seems impossible for the philosophy after Kant

to avoid the division. Nietzsche's sharp critique of reason has torn off the mask of reason's transcendence, made it appear as will and power discourse with no universal character. Here, the problem is that modern philosophy has inherited a proposition from Kant, which asserts that only the transcendence could guarantee the universality. If individual reason is proved to be empirical will or power discourse, obviously it cannot guarantee the universality and necessity of moral principles any more.[16] In addition, if neo-Aristotelianism's project is accepted, then we have to abandon the concept of autonomy initiated by Enlightenment. The dilemma between experience and transcendence makes autonomy and universality incompatible with each other. Whereas Habermas not only attempts to protect the great achievement of enlightenment—autonomy, but also plans to revive the spirit of normative ethics—universality. But, in order to connect these two aspects he has to build bridges between them.

According to Habermas, the cause why modern philosophy failed to bring out such communication is that in the very beginning it has mistakenly considered reason as the "monologue" of isolated individuals who have been separated from the community and tradition. Moreover, modern philosophy also tries to deprive universality of transcendental reason on the basis of individual monologue construction.[17] When the construction cannot reach an agreement because of divided opinions, its transcendence would be questioned, and its imagined universality would vanish into thin air. Being faced with this problem, it seems that the only design is to adopt neo-Aristotelianism's proposal— rebuilding the authority of the tradition and the community, taking them as the new foundation of transcendence and universality, and restoring the subordinate position of individual reason. However, to Habermas, reverting to pre-modernity

not only means the negation of Enlightenment Project, but also represents the retrogression in theory. Therefore, Habermas attempts to open up a third way beyond modern subjective philosophy and neo-Aristotelianism, which could protect individual autonomy as well as the community universality at the same time. Since the problem of modern philosophy is the isolated construction of individual reason, to break the isolated state of individual reason and to establish a public field of communication would be a breakthrough. If Habermas could get rid of the isolated construction of monologue reason and achieve sufficient communication among different individuals, he may be able to rebuild universality guaranteed by transcendental reason in terms of consensus based on individual autonomy.

As we know, Habermas is not the first scholar who tries to revive the universality of normative ethics by virtue of consensus form. Most of the contemporary scholars believing in Kantian ethics share the same faith with him, and among them the most famous one is John Rawls. But the question is, just like Foucault has criticized, a project which believes that different individuals will give up their own local positions and embrace universality is nothing but another naive edition of Enlightenment Project. According to Foucault, unless we could unify different elements on which different traditional beliefs and cultural identity based, we cannot expect anything from communication. In response to this problem and also in order to reach consensus, Rawls appeals to "the Veil of Ignorance", by which he tries to carry out the communication among different individuals before their respective local positions emerging. Rawls's design is succeeded in guaranteeing the universality of moral principles and establishing a new ground for contemporary normative ethics. Unfortunately, its imaginary and conceiving traits have called forth a lot of criticism. Habermas is

also one among them. Habermas refuses "the Veil of Ignorance" of Rawls. Instead he wants to put the communication into realistic moral situation.[18] This impels Habermas to supply another theoretical basis on which the empirical communication will not become a battle of different views, but reach a consensus.

V. Pragmatics and Life-World

Pragmatics has been used in a sense contrast to the meaning of Semantics. As we know, Semantics devotes itself to the syntax and form of real-valued function, but pragmatics pays more attention to the context and condition of propositions. According to pragmatics, when studying the meaning of language, we should take language as interactive utterance between speaker and listener, which involves different expectation and understanding, as well as misunderstanding and misinterpretation of participants. This is the general meaning of pragmatics. Through assimilation of pragmatics Habermas has discovered a turning point of overcoming the contradiction between autonomy and universality.

For him, universal pragmatics emphasizes that each communication has to be carried out in some realistic context or language situation. This makes Habermas agree with neo-Aristotelianism's judgment—the community or tradition is prior to the individual, the latter must be subordinate to the former. So we cannot follow the example of Kant to take individual reason or autonomy as the transcendental premise from which one can deduce all moral principles. To Habermas reason is not a natural capability but a skill we gradually acquire from the community and tradition.[19] In other words, there is no individual transcendental reason prior to the world, also no construction based on such foundation. Reason is an achievement from experience. The individual can only develop his reason by communicating with other individuals in a posteriori context or empirical community.

Therefore, we cannot equate individual autonomy which Habermas defends with the analogue which Kant has established. For Habermas, his autonomy can only be generated from the cultivation of the community, tradition, as well as the interaction with others. So such autonomy has its born limitation.

However, It would be a mistake to conclude that what Habermas has achieved by means of universal pragmatics is nothing else than neo-Aristotelianism's emphasis on the priority of the tradition and community. In order to fight against moral skepticism and relativism neo-Aristotelianism not only admits that the tradition or community has fashioned individual reason, but also requires the individual to be submitted or subordinate to the community or tradition. Habermas cannot agree with them on this point. For him, the community is the source of individual reason or autonomy, but that does not mean the individual has no choice except being totally submitted to the community. The difference between Habermas and neo-Aristotelianism is in that the former thinks that even individual reason has lost the transcendental status and descended to the level of the community's derivative, it still keeps its autonomy and there is no need to be entirely submitted to the community. In contrast, the individual deduced from the community or tradition can revive its autonomy again, and questions the validity of the community's universality. Moreover, it would reach new universality in the form of consensus in terms

of communication with other individuals.[20] Attempting to revive the universality of normative ethics on the one hand while not giving up individual autonomy on the other hand, this is the very original intention of Habermas' universal pragmatics.

However, before Habermas confirms his judgments, he needs to answer another two key questions in theory. First, for what reason the individual cultivated by the community can question the validity of its matrix. In others words, if we admit the priority of the community to the individual, then we have to impose restrictions on individual autonomy. How can Habermas keep room for individual autonomy on the premise of admitting the community's priority? And this is also Habermas' response to neo-Aristotelianism. Second, how to reach a consensus instead of an endless dispute if we take different individuals' isolated designs for universality as the start point? That is to say, how to achieve universality on the basis of individual autonomy? And this is also Habermas' answer to moral skepticism and relativism.

Coinciding with neo-Aristotelianism, Habermas is not content to Kant's emphasis on individual reason, but admits the priority of the community to the individual. In such a case, it seems that he also has to face with the choice between the individual and the community. But in reality, he avoids the choice. The reason is that Habermas has redefined the relation of the community and the individual. As we know, until Enlightenment we have always equated the relation between the individual and the community to the relation between subject and object in epistemology, which in turn forces us to make an exclusive choice between subject and object. Even Kantian ethics is no exception.

According to Habermas, when putting emphasis on the priority of the tradition and community to the individual, neo-Aristotelianism unconsciously separates the individual from the community and takes the individual as a derivative of the community. Such an understanding, the individual being considered as the antithesis of the community, leads neo-Aristotelianism's into an exclusive choice. That is, since neo-Aristotelianism disagrees with Enlightenment's design for individual autonomy, they deeply convinced that the community or tradition is their only choice. Thus there cannot be any room for individual autonomy. Generally speaking, such a view on the relation of the individual and the community is still an edition of subject-object dichotomy.[21]

In order to avoid this limitation, Habermas inherits the concept of "Life-World" from Husserl and Heidegger, which interprets the relation of the individual and the community as "in- being" instead of traditional antagonistic relationship. One of the most important achievements of "in-being" is that it has broken the "hard shell" of the individual and subject, and made it possible for different individuals to communicate with each other. On the one hand, individuals can only gradually develop their own reason within the community or tradition through the cultivation of it and their communication with others. In this connection, the community or tradition has priority over the individual. But on the other hand, the individual generated from the community or tradition also could evaluate its matrix; even reform the community in terms of its own standard and reason developed from the cultivation and communication. In other worlds, neither the community nor the individual is unchangeable, because they are always engaged in the course of interaction. The community has fashioned the fundamental traits of the individual while mature individuals can also criticize the community by their own autonomy. We could

regard the community as a unity of transcendence and universality while take the individual as an aggregation of autonomy and subordinate, as long as we do not consider "Life-World" as an objective closed world.[22] Therefore, to Andersen, "Habermas' theory of communicative action can be perceived as a large-scale attempt to create a basis for a theory that can mediate spectatorial and participatory perspective."[23]

Moreover, such an understanding to "Life-World" could also serve as the foundation of Habermas' answer to the second question, namely how to reach a new consensus from different individuals' isolated construction. Since the relation between the individual and the community is not equal to the same one between subject and object, the new consensus will not be generated from factual proposition in epistemology but produced by validity proposition in communication. Instead of constructing different projects by different isolated individuals in the first place and then comparing them with each other, now different individuals will keep communicating with each other at all times and places. Since neither the community nor the individual is the closed material, no matter where the moral principles come from, they will not be rigid regulations. Therefore, now all of what Habermas needs to do is to identify the procedural condition by which proper consensus could be produced. This is the two famous communicative principles – universality principle "U" and discourse principle "D". In a word, the concept of "Life-World" not only breaks the boundaries among different individuals, but also offers possibilities to reach consensus through communication.[24]

We can therefore conclude that it is through the assimilation of universal pragmatics and Life-World that Habermas has succeeded not only in answering neo-Aristotelianism's challenge to how the individual generated from the community could keep its autonomy, but also in responding moral skepticism and relativism's puzzle of the possibility of different designs produced by isolated individuals to reach consensus.

VI. How to Evaluate Habermas' Attempt

Lastly I want to deal with the problem of how to evaluate Habermas' discourse ethics. For a long time there has been a lot of controversy surrounding Habermas' attempt, most of which concentrate on the issue this essay has discussed, namely whether Habermas has achieved the unity between transcendence and experience as well as autonomy and universality, and whether he has established a totally new model for normative ethics. Some scholars believe Habermas' discourse of ethics is a successful revival of traditional normative ethics, and has set up a new foundation for contemporary ethics. For instance, Wood considers that in contrast to other ethicists' designs, Habermas' discourse ethics has adopted a new argumentation of non-realism and non-foudationalism. For him, Habermas' successful integration between non-realism and irrationalism has changed the popular view in that "various forms of non-realism in recent years has often gone hand in hand with an irrationalism… Habermas' approach represents a possibility of replying to contemporary irrationalists on their own grounds."[25] However, there are also a lot of scholars who have reservations about Habermas' attempt, because they just think Habermas still stays in the frame of Enlightenment and has not completed any substantive breakthrough. For

example, Meadwell says, "He must show that his own position is different from the postmodern position, yet still not foundationalist…but I am arguing that, at critical points, this combination in fact produces a form of foundationalism."[26] Because, Meadwell claims, Habermas still takes Kant's "reason man" as the foundation of his discourse ethics. Besides, according to Gaon, although Habermas' discourse ethics has successfully responded to moral skepticism and relativism, his appeal to metaphysics and his retaining of teleology make him unable to transcend the fundamental frame of Enlightenment. So we cannot term Habermas' discourse ethics as post-metaphysical non-foudationalism.[27]

There are a lot of more similar comments. However, when trying to evaluate Habermas' achievement of ethics, we have to take into account the background on which Habermas carries out his discourse ethics. In other words, Habermas makes his attempt to protect the positive achievement of Enlightenment Project when most of his contemporaries have given up their hope of normative ethics and been submitted to various post-modern contextualism and local positions. Habermas' original intention and great ambition should gain our respect. His integrity of autonomy and universality may be somewhat problematic, and his excessive expectation of ideal communication is perhaps too optimistic, but just as Habermas puts, if we do not want to settle disputes by violence or war in a world where traditional ethics having lost its authority, communication seems to be a feasible option for us.[28] Quoad hoc, Habermas' achievement cannot be obliterated.

Notes:
1 Jürgen Habermas, *Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998, p. 27.
2 Jürgen Habermas, *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996, p. 20.
3 Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992, P. 162.
4 Ibid., p. 163.
5 Habermas, *Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, op.cit., P. 356.
6 Ibid., pp. 106-107.
7 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue—a Study in Moral Theory*, second edition, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984, p. 259.
8 Romand Coles "Communicative Action & Dialogical Ethics: Habermas & Foucault", *Polity*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Autumn, 1992), p. 71.
9 Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Ben-Habib, "Modernity versus Postmodernity", in *New German Critique*, No. 22, Special Issue on Modernism (winter, 1981), p. 13.
10 MacIntyre, *After Virtue—a Study in Moral Theory*, op.cit., p.259.
11 Ibid., p. 258.
12 Ibid., p. 54.
13 Ibid., p. 56.
14 Habermas and Ben-Habib, "Modernity versus Post-modernity", op.cit., p. 11.
15 Jürgen Habermas, *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, Cambridge, Mass, Polity Press, c1993, p. 122.
16 Habermas, *Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne,* op.cit., p. 345.
17 Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken*, op.cit., P. 48.
18 Habermas, *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, op.cit., p. 57.
19 Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken*, op.cit., P. 190.
20 Ibid., P. 50.
21 Habermas, *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, op.cit., pp. 98-99.
22 Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken*, op.cit., P. 181.
23 Heine Andersen, "Morality in Three Social Theories: Parsons, Analytical Marxism and Habermas", in *Acta Sociologica* (1990), 33 (4), p. 332.
24 Habermas, *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen*, op.cit., pp. 56-64.
25 Allen W. Wood, "Habermas' Defense of Rationalism", *New German Critique* 35, Special Issue on Jurgen Habermas (Spring - Summer,1985), p. 163.
26 Hudson Meadwell, "The Foundations of Habermas's Universal Pragmatics", *Theory and Society*, 23 (5) (Oct., 1994), p. 725.
27 Stella Gaon, "Pluralizing Universal 'Man': The Legacy of Transcendentalism and Teleology in Habermas's", *The Review of Politics*, 60 (4), (Autumn, 1998), p. 717.
28 This does not mean that there is absolutely no other design for us to choose any more. For example, the theory of agonistic democracy based on the struggle among different opinions in the political arena, could also be taken as an alternative.