

INCLUSIVE UNIVERSALISM AS A NORMATIVE PRINCIPLE OF EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT. In recent years we have seen a newfound engagement with Jürgen Habermas's work in philosophy of education, focusing on his conception of argumentative dialogue, or discourse, as the origin of both truth-related epistemic judgments and justifications of moral norms that claim *rightness* rather than truth. In this article, Krassimir Stojanov first reconstructs the way in which Habermas determines the relation between truth and rightness, and he then shows that moral rightness functions as a "truth-analogue" since moral norms, like true facts, transcend the actual and local practices of their justification. In the case of moral rightness, this transcendence occurs as an infinite process of inclusion of the perspectives and interests of all potentially concerned persons — also (and foremost) the perspectives and interests of those who are strange to each other in their respective values, worldviews, and interests. With this account of "truth-analogue" moral rightness, Habermas conceptualizes a kind of processual and "difference-sensible" universalism, which is very different from the substantialist universalism of some traditional conceptions of education, or *Bildung*. In the final section, Stojanov shows why including children *in their otherness as children* in the discursive process of production of moral knowledge, and thus treating them with a kind of epistemic respect, is a constitutive condition for that process. The demand for the discursive inclusion of children follows from the discourse ethics approach, but it requires an enlargement and some corrections of that approach.

KEY WORDS. Jürgen Habermas; discourse ethics; processual universalism; discursive inclusion of children; respect for children

It took quite some time for Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action receive substantial attention in the Anglo-American philosophy of education. One reason for this longstanding hesitation about Habermas could be that during the last three decades or so the discipline has been strongly influenced by the tension between analytic philosophy, which had long dominated the field, and poststructuralism. Many philosophers of education associated the latter with so-called "Continental philosophy," which they saw as an alternative to the analytic tradition, or even as a way to escape from it.

However, Habermas's work clearly does not fit in the category of poststructuralist Continental philosophy, since the main task of all of his writings is the reconstruction and defense of rationality and its universalistic principles and norms. Although Habermas's style is strongly analytical, his work does not really belong in the category of traditional analytic philosophy either. His work is distinct not only because it includes a large number of historical references and extrapolations, which is unusual for analytic philosophers. Moreover, Habermas's central topic, dialogue, is predominately associated with alternative approaches and intellectual traditions such as phenomenology, existentialism, and, above all, hermeneutics.

In recent years, though, we have seen a newfound engagement with Habermas's work in philosophy of education, focusing on his conception of

argumentative dialogue, or discourse, as the origin of both truth-related epistemic judgments and justifications of moral norms that claim *rightness* rather than truth. Particularly instructive for examining philosophy of education's engagement with Habermas is the controversy between Walter Okshevsky and Harvey Siegel on whether epistemic judgments are necessarily dialogical in their structure and their origin, as justifications of right moral norms are insofar as these norms regulate interpersonal relations and their validity depends on mutual acceptance among the actors. In the first section of this paper, I address this controversy over the relation between truth and rightness. Then, in the next section, I reconstruct the way in which Habermas himself determines that relation. I shall show that he, on the one hand, makes a clear distinction between truth and rightness while, on the other hand, he conceptualizes both truth claims about matters in the objective world and justification of moral norms in the social realm as embedded in an argumentative dialogue, in a discourse that transcends the local contexts in which these claims and justifications initially take place. Hence, moral rightness functions as a "truth-analogue" since moral norms, like true facts, transcend the actual and local practices of their justification. In the third section, I shall show that in the case of moral rightness, this transcendence occurs as an infinite process of inclusion of the perspectives and interests of all potentially concerned persons — also (and foremost) the perspectives and interests of those who are strange to each other in their respective values, worldviews, and interests. With this account of "truth-analogue" moral rightness, Habermas conceptualizes a kind of processual and "difference-sensible" universalism, which is very different from the substantialist universalism of some traditional conceptions of education, or *Bildung*, and which avoids the ethnocentric bias of these conceptions. In the final section, I shall show why including children *in their otherness as children* in the discursive process of production of moral knowledge, and thus treating them with a kind of epistemic respect, is a constitutive condition for that process. The demand for the discursive inclusion of children follows from the discourse ethics approach, but if it is understood as a norm, as I propose here, it requires an enlargement and some corrections of that approach.

DISCOURSE ETHICS AS (MORAL) EPISTEMOLOGY?

We can describe discourse ethics as the Habermasian theory of justification of moral norms under conditions of the value pluralism characteristic in late-modern societies. This theory states both necessary conditions for the determination of moral norms and the criteria for their rightness, or validity. The procedure for justifying moral norms is based on the so-called "discourse principle" (D). According to this principle, only those norms that could be accepted by all affected as participants in a practical discourse can claim validity. Thus, the justification

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requires, first, that all (potentially) affected by the norm should be granted equal access to the discourse.

The rule or standard for the validation of moral norms — that is, for what Habermas generally calls “moral argumentation”— is the “principle of universalization” (U). According to it, a moral norm is valid when the foreseeable results and side effects to the interests and values of those affected by general compliance with the norm would be acceptable to all without coercion. Thus, once the discourse participants jointly accepted a norm, they should check its universalizability, that is, whether it could be accepted without coercion by all individuals, even if they are not directly affected by the norm, or even if they do not (or cannot) participate in the discourse — for example, whether the norm could be accepted by future generations.¹

Both principles obviously imply a number of subsequent discourse rules, such as ensuring equality and reciprocity of the participants, avoiding the oppression or exclusion of some participants by others, or acknowledging only the power of the better argument.² Okshevsky rightly states that these rules and principles should be understood in the sense of a “strong dialogicality,” which he distinguishes from a “weak dialogicality” that marks a commonly accepted interpretation of Habermas’s theory, especially in philosophy of education. According to the model of “weak dialogicality,” a discourse — that is, an “open and undominated dialogue” — can contribute to making a right decision regarding moral norms, but it is not a necessary condition for doing so. This view implies that an individual thinker or group could determine and justify right moral norms and decisions without engaging in an argumentative dialogue. Hence, assessing the rightness of norms would require criteria that are independent from the discourse principles and rules.³

In contrast, for the model of strong dialogicality, the discourse principles and rules described previously *are* necessary conditions for the determination and justification of moral norms. Okshevsky describes this model as follows:

Strong dialogicality states that no norm may justifiably be accepted as universalizable, and hence morally justified and right, independent of engagement in dialogue with others. For it is only through such collective engagement that participants are given the opportunity to present to others perspectives, needs, and interests relevant for the construction of a universalizable norm. What is sought in discourse is an impartial judgment or decision from the epistemic perspective of universal egalitarianism — a perspective defined by formal procedural conditions that ideally ensure symmetry and reciprocity across interlocutors’ contributions to the process of argumentation.⁴

1. See Jürgen Habermas, *Erläuterungen zur Diskursethik* [Justification and Application] (Frankfurt, Germany: Suhrkamp, 1991), 12. See also Christopher Martin, “Introduction: Discourse Ethics and the Educational Possibilities of the Public Sphere,” *Educational Theory* 66, no. 6 (2016): 687.

2. Jürgen Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung* [Between Facts and Norms] (Frankfurt, Germany: Suhrkamp, 1992), 15–32.

3. Walter Okshevsky, “Discourse, Justification, and Education: Jürgen Habermas on Moral Epistemology and Dialogical Conditions of Moral Justification and Rightness,” *Educational Theory* 66, no. 6 (2016): 694–699.

4. *Ibid.*, 701.

I think that there is a very convincing argument for strong dialogicality. In sum, because of the value pluralism that characterizes late-modern society, moral norms are not self-evident anymore; rather, they are now in need of justification. Under postmetaphysical conditions, this justification cannot take the form of deriving norms from a particular doctrine about the good life, or from ontological or anthropological premises. Rather, the justification of moral norms must proceed as reasoning, as giving and asking for reasons to validate the rightness of a norm, and as weighing against each other concurring reasons for and against the norm and its possible alternatives. And reasoning (at least reasoning on moral norms) is always a dialogical activity; it takes the form of “justification-as-justification-to-others.”⁵

The proponents of weak dialogicality would surely agree that moral norms are in need of justification and that justification proceeds in the form of argumentation, or reasoning. At the same time, they insist that norms could be justified without a dialogue. Such a stance, however, seems to contradict central assumptions about the very nature of reasoning as the mechanism of justification. Consider Harvey Siegel, for instance. He clearly disapproves of “strong dialogicality,” arguing that there could also be justified true beliefs — including beliefs about moral norms — that are justified in an entirely monological way.⁶ Nevertheless, he endorses a pluralistic — actually a discursive — view of reason as the source of justification of beliefs and norms. According to Siegel, reason is not a monolithic, homogenous entity, nor is it a faculty of the lone individual. Rather, it should be treated as “[a]lways implicitly in the plural, referring to reasons, that is, considerations that are or can be offered in support of candidate beliefs, judgments, and actions.”⁷ Thus, reason should be understood as *reasoning*, that is, as the practice of giving justifications for candidate beliefs and of evaluating or weighing the validity of these justifications. But this practice is in itself *dia-logic*, for it presupposes at least two agents: a speaker who articulates and justifies a belief and a respondent who evaluates the belief and then accepts or rejects it. Hence, reason via reasoning could only emerge within and from a dialogue understood as a speech practice in which participants articulate as speakers their propositions to other participants and react as respondents to the propositions of those other participants. The apparently monologic reasoning requires its agent to divide herself into two parts — that is to say, to engage as speaker in a dialogue with the self occupying the position of hearer or respondent. Thus, monologues are always virtual or “internal” dialogues; in other words, they are a derivative of dialogue. Even if one is apparently engaged in monological reasoning, she participates in the social practice of deliberation, of weighing alternative beliefs and justifications against each other — in short, she is playing the game of giving and asking for reasons. This applies also to the criteria

5. *Ibid.*, 704.

6. See Harvey Siegel, “Justice and Justification,” *Theory and Research in Education* 16, no. 3 (2018): 313–315.

7. *Ibid.*, 323.

for evaluating the outcomes of a discourse, since these criteria themselves can only be established and justified through reasoning. Thus, they must ultimately also be dialogical, at least in essence.

If these considerations are correct, then the difference between epistemic and moral reasons is meaningless *with respect to their dialogical common ground*. Siegel emphasizes this distinction between epistemic and moral reasons; however, Okshevsky also endorses it when he speaks about empirical, nonmoral truths. According to Siegel, discourse principles such as equality, symmetry, or reciprocity are *morally right* because they require that all persons be treated with respect, but he asserts further that these principles are not epistemic reasons, for they cannot by themselves justify or evaluate truth claims — including claims about moral truths.⁸ For Okshevsky, in contrast, moral knowledge — that is, justified true beliefs about moral norms — is radically different from knowledge about facts in the objective world precisely because of the “strong dialogicality” of the moral knowledge. Strong dialogicality, he contends, implies that the “[p]ractice of morality cannot be pursued within a strictly propositional attitude for which meaning and truth of judgment are decided ‘objectively’ via truth conditions for statements.”⁹ Okshevsky links this attitude to theoretical knowledge or inquiry concerning matters specific to the objective world. The truth of statements in that line of inquiry are ultimately decided by the world that transcends every discourse. Therefore, the discourse principles and norms do not apply to the justification of “empirical truth,” that is, to propositions that claim truth about facts in the world.¹⁰

However, this interpretation of Habermas’s account of world-related knowledge is not quite right. To be sure, Habermas makes a clear distinction between empirical and moral judgments. While the former try to grasp the truth of matters in the objective world, the latter are about rightness in the intersubjective realm.¹¹ Relatedly, empirical propositions have an outward orientation while moral ones operate in a self-reflective mode: in the latter case, actors reflect on their own

8. *Ibid.*, 316–317. It is important to note that for Siegel respect is not a principle that is built into and arises out of dialogue, but it is instead a substantial norm, which he draws from a conception of persons as “free rational beings.” Siegel ascribes that conception of personhood to Kant and interprets it as the kernel of the “Kantian principle of respect” (317), the validity and justification for which is independent from dialogue (or any other kind of social practices). However, one can pose the question whether this interpretation of Kant’s understanding of personhood is somewhat one-sided. There is no doubt that for Kant rational autonomy is the most important feature of human persons, but he also asserts further traits of personhood, such as being a member of the society or acting according to given cultural standards and conventions, and explicitly identifies these as key educational goals. Still, it is true that these personal traits are subordinated to the highest feature, rational autonomy. See Immanuel Kant, “Über Pädagogik” [Kant on Education], in *Immanuel Kants Sämtliche Werke, Bd. 8*, ed. D. Friedrich Theodor Rink (Königsberg: Nicolovius, 1803), 455–513.

9. Okshevsky, “Discourse, Justification, and Education,” 702.

10. *Ibid.*, 713.

11. Jürgen Habermas, *Vorstudien und Ergänzungen zur Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* [Preliminary Studies in the Theory of Communicative Action] (Frankfurt, Germany: Suhrkamp, 1984), 354–355.

— real and intended — actions and interactions with each other, and they try to determine whether these actions and interactions are conducted according to the principles of equality, reciprocity, inclusion, and nonoppression. For Habermas, however, those principles are also necessary conditions for true assertions about objective matters. According to him, truths about facts in the world can be articulated and justified only within argumentative dialogues and only when the participants in those dialogues obey the discourse principles set out above.¹²

On the other side, Habermas conceptualizes moral norms as “truth-analogue.”¹³ This implies that not only do both empirical truths and right moral norms originate from argumentative discourses, but both also somehow transcend these discourses of justification. This transcendence grounds the fallibility of discursive agreements on both truth propositions *and* moral norms. It is time to shed more light on the Habermasian dialectic between truth and rightness, one that has far-reaching and nontrivial educational implications, among others.

ON THE TRUTH-ANALOGUE CHARACTER OF MORAL NORMS AND THE INCLUSION OF OTHERNESS IN THEIR JUSTIFICATION

Habermas introduces a very important distinction between rational acceptability and truth of empirical propositions. Such propositions are rationally acceptable, when an agreement upon them is reached by the participants in a discourse that embodies the model of a community of inquiry. This is a discourse in which (1) an open exchange of arguments and counterarguments takes place and (2) the perspectives and positions of all persons who are related to the subject of the propositions, whether by experience or by expertise, are included and brought into expression.

Still, even agreements that are reached under ideal conditions of argumentation might be wrong. That is to say, every justification of truth-claiming statements is fallible — even those developed in adherence to the criteria of the ideal communicative situation. For Habermas, the fallibility of knowledge is a basic precondition for learning processes that are an indispensable part of the dynamics of the life-world, of its openness for possible future experiences, findings, or objections that might undermine the rational acceptability of propositions that nowadays count as justified.¹⁴

Exactly the same presumption of fallibility applies also to moral norms and moral discourses. Agreements on moral norms that have been reached under ideal discursive conditions might also be proven wrong by learning processes that open new perspectives and articulate new arguments. That is to say, the rightness of moral norms transcends the justified agreements on these norms, just as the truth of empirical propositions transcends their justified agreements, regardless of

12. Jürgen Habermas, *Wahrheit und Rechtfertigung. Philosophische Aufsätze: Erweiterte Ausgabe* [Truth and Justification: Philosophical Essays: Extended Edition] (Frankfurt, Germany: Suhrkamp, 2004), 48–50.

13. *Ibid.*, 303–314.

14. *Ibid.*, 50f., 314–319.

how discursively “perfect” the conditions in which these agreements have been established are.

Significantly, though, the moment of transcendence in moral discourses could not be conceptualized in the same way and under the same premises as the moment of transcendence in empirical discourses. In the latter, this moment is grounded in the realistic assumption of a world independent of statements about that world and their justifications. When making and assessing truth-claiming propositions, the interlocutors are assuming that they are talking about contents of the world, which is one and the same for them (and for all others), is not based on their own or anyone else’s disposition, and is something they can grasp only partially. That is why any justified agreement about empirical propositions is not a sufficient condition for these propositions to be rendered true.

On the contrary, when the interlocutors are discussing moral norms, they are referring to their own constructs that do not have any existence as (valid) normal norms outside of the practice of their justification, that is, outside of the discourse on them. Nevertheless, the justification-constitution of moral norms also presupposes a transcendent instance as its condition — otherwise the fallibility of this justification-constitution would not be given. However, this instance is not a world independent of its articulations in language and interpersonal communication, but persons who are distinguished by their otherness to the interlocutors who actually agreed on the norms that are the subject of discourse. These are persons with “outlandish” interests, values, views, and claims that have not yet been given consideration in the actual moral discourse and that could not have been anticipated by the participants in that discourse.¹⁵

The otherness of those persons in moral discourses operates similarly to the otherness of the world in empirical argumentations. Truth assumptions and norms, once discursively justified, are taken for granted or viewed as self-evident unless they clash with the transcendent reality either of the outer world (in the case of truth assumptions) or of persons who are distinguished by their otherness and who have not yet been included in the justification process (in the case of moral norms). In other words, justified truth assumptions become habitualized by the actors unless practical experiences and actions in the world prove them to be wrong, and moral norms become habitualized by the actors unless considerations of the interests and values of particular others, or groups of others, is not compatible with the established norms. In both cases, the truth assumptions and moral norms in question lose their habitual status and a new discourse on them takes place that leads to their revision.¹⁶

In a final account, the justification of moral norms requires a never-ending inclusion in the discourses on these norms of persons characterized by their otherness, that is, by interests and values that are qualitatively different from and even

15. *Ibid.*, 319–329.

16. *Ibid.*, 319–323.

contradictory of those agreed upon by the “old” discourse members. Habermas uses the term “difference-sensible universalism” to refer to this understanding of the discursive inclusion of otherness as a necessary condition for moral rightness.¹⁷ It stands in clear opposition to the substantialist universalism that underpins many prominent conceptions of educational moral norms and goals — first and foremost, those that endorse what often is characterized as a “Kantian” understanding of morality.

UNIVERSALISM AS INCLUSION OF OTHERNESS VERSUS SUBSTANTIALIST UNIVERSALISM

Habermas’s difference-sensible, procedural universalism can be best described by comparing it with the substantialist universalism of Siegel’s moral principle of respect for all persons as “free rational beings.”¹⁸ As noted earlier, Siegel draws this principle from the Kantian understanding of personhood. According to this understanding, a person as “free rational being” is a human individual who is capable of exercising self-legislation and who effectively does so; in other words, it is a person who autonomously determines the laws and norms that she obeys. Now, Kant conceptualizes this understanding of rational freedom qua self-legislation in explicitly Eurocentric terms, denouncing the spontaneity of “savage people” as indicative of their lack of the abilities and dispositions required to obey to laws and to behave in accord with the European way of life.¹⁹ Apart from its ethnocentric bias, this understanding is far too demanding and literally exclusive. It excludes not only persons with mental disabilities, but also persons for whom — for example, because of their religious beliefs — autonomous self-legislation is not a value or a desirable life goal. But do not these persons deserve respect? Obviously, they do.

Children in general are immature human beings who are not yet capable of self-legislation or rational autonomy. In which sense, then, do they deserve respect? I believe that the “Kantian” answer to this question would be that they deserve a kind of “prospective respect”²⁰ for their potential to develop as “free rational beings” in the future. For the Kantian, then, their actual status as children — that is, their childhood as such, not their potential as adults — does not seem to merit respect. On the contrary, from the standpoint of Habermasian difference-sensible universalism, children should be respected precisely *in their otherness* to adults — and this respect should be accomplished through the

17. Jürgen Habermas, *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen. Studien zur politischen Theorie* [The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory] (Frankfurt, Germany: Suhrkamp, 1996), 57.

18. Siegel, “Justice and Justification,” 317.

19. Kant, “Über Pädagogik,” 458.

20. I borrow the term “prospective respect” from Randall Curren, although he does not introduce that term explicitly with regard to a Kantian framework. See Randall Curren, “Coercion and the Ethics of Grading and Testing,” in *Philosophy of Education: An Anthology*, ed. Randall Curren (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 47.

inclusion of children *in their otherness* in moral discourses. Their inclusion in this process would allow children to play a constitutive role for discourse ethics and deliberative democracy in general. Precisely because children are (radically) different in the ways they see the world and in how they think about morally relevant issues, they could become the transcendent instance that must be built into the practice of discursive justification of moral norms. This claim is obviously in need of further clarification.

DISCURSIVE INCLUSION OF CHILDREN — A REVISED CONCEPT OF RESPECT

I believe that the demand for the discursive inclusion of children *as children* follows logically from Habermas's theory of discourse ethics, although I do not know of a single place in his writings where he explicates this demand. In fact, it seems to be not easily compatible with some aspects of the discourse ethics, especially with the normative principles of equality and reciprocity of the discourse participants. In what sense we can talk about equality or reciprocity between adult and child participants? Obviously not in the sense of equality of cognitive abilities, such as abstract thinking or rational self-determination, that are measured by conventional adult standards.

To be sure, in recent years there have been numerous attempts to apply the principles of discourse ethics to children and to examine how and to what extent they can be included in the process of democratic deliberation. In a recent paper, for example, Christopher Martin developed a quite sophisticated argument for a kind of limited and rather future-orientated deliberative inclusion of children.²¹ There, he argues:

I conclude that deliberative democrats should extend epistemic inclusion to children and, in so doing, treat them as an independent source of claims about what is just and fair. Once included, adult deliberators have a responsibility to practice circumspection about the claims children make as befits their degree of deliberative competence. This is because they have reasonable grounds for anticipating that such claims are less likely to be reliable, all things considered.²²

He admits that seeing children as independent sources of reasons entails a certain shift of our understanding of deliberative democracy, but this shift should be "[t]empered by adult circumspection."²³ According to Martin, there are two main reasons for performing that shift with caution and paternalistic control. First, the model of discourse ethics that is the normative kernel of deliberative democracy simply requires that the perspectives and the claims of all potentially affected by a norm should be included in the deliberative process of determining and evaluating that norm. This applies also to the perspectives and the claims of the (potentially) concerned children. However, their claims should be treated with "circumspection" because children in general have yet to develop fully their capacity to make

21. Christopher Martin, "Should Deliberative Democratic Inclusion Extend to Children?," *Democracy & Education* 26, no. 2 (2018): 1–11.

22. *Ibid.*, 8.

23. *Ibid.*

reliable and well-grounded claims. In other words, children are deficient with regard to the practical reasoning that underlies rational moral discourses. This supposed deficiency is closely connected to the second reason for including the children in these discourses: when adults, especially educators, take children's claims seriously and discuss them, they are demonstrating for children how to exercise practical reasoning and training them to become more fluent in it; in this way, adults are helping children to gradually overcome their discursive deficiency.²⁴

At the end of the day, Martin endorses an account of what I, following Randall Curren, previously called "prospective respect" — that is, a respect toward children's potential to develop into competent participants in moral discourses. In order to foster this development, one has to take children's morally relevant views, claims, and reasons seriously; however, one should do so basically for pedagogical reasons and with a paternalistic attitude. These views, claims, and reasons, as they actually stand, have only limited epistemic worth.²⁵ On this understanding, then, the discursive inclusion of children is a distinctly future-oriented form of respect for them. More precisely, the purpose of including children, according to Martin, is to facilitate their assimilation of established adult discursive norms and standards. But once children have assimilated adults' norms and standards, their views and claims obviously cannot serve as the instance of otherness that is, according to Habermas, constitutive for moral discourses and for deliberative democracy in general.

In contrast to Martin, Johannes Giesinger proposes an understanding of respect for children that focuses on their actuality *as children*, and not primarily on their future status as rational adults and on their potential to reach that status. According to Giesinger, future-oriented and present-oriented respect for children often conflict; further, he asserts that, in such cases, priority should be given to respecting the child in her "present individuality." This would enable the child to see herself as a "holder of legitimate claims" and, as such, a moral equal to all other persons. These claims should not be neglected, nor should they be disrespected as unreliable and not well-grounded in comparison to mature standards of rationality, because to do so would impede the child's development of self-respect.²⁶

This is, according to Giesinger, not acceptable for two reasons — one moral and the other educational. First, recognizing the child as equal to every other person (including adults) with respect to his entitlement to make will enable him to develop self-respect, which is the kernel of human dignity. Dignity expresses itself through one's defending oneself against others' oppression of one's needs,

24. *Ibid.*, 8f.

25. While Martin assumes that children's moral claims might have not only an informative worth for the refinement of effective deliberative politics that take into account what children believe and value, but also an epistemic value with regard to the moral norms of those politics themselves, he suggests that the scope of that value is limited, since children's claims do not have the same validity as the claims of adults (see *ibid.*, 8).

26. Johannes Giesinger, "Respect in Education," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 46, no. 1 (2012): 100–112, esp. 110f.

desires, aspirations, views, or opinions, and the ability to mount such a defense requires self-respect. The recognition of the dignity of every human being — a recognition that cannot be partial or unequal — is a fundamental moral principle. Thus, recognizing the claims of children on us as legitimate and deserving of concern in equal measure to those of adults is an unconditional moral demand.²⁷ Second, Giesinger argues that recognizing the legitimacy of children's claims is a necessary precondition for their development of self-respect and their ability to become "full-blooded, autonomous member[s] of the discursive community" who are capable of autonomous deliberation.²⁸

In my view, Giesinger offers a strong argument for the moral and educational demands to respect children's claims and views in their actuality. But should we ascribe *epistemic* value to these claims and views? That is, should we see them as potentially enriching our moral knowledge, specifically, the generation and the justification of true beliefs about moral norms in the society? While Martin contends that children's claims and reasons have only limited epistemic value — one not constitutive for discourses — Giesinger remains quiet on that question. For him, respect for children's claims seems to be a moral and pedagogical demand, not an epistemic one.

One promising way to address the question of the epistemic dimensions and functions of respect to children is to approach it from R. S. Peters's well-known account of respect, which he developed as part of his philosophy of education. Peters sums up his view of respect as follows:

In general respect for persons is the feeling awakened when another is regarded as a *distinctive centre of consciousness*, with peculiar feelings and purposes that criss-cross his institutional roles. It is connected with the awareness one has that each man [*sic*] has his own aspirations, his own viewpoint on the world; that each man [*sic*] takes pride in his achievements, *however idiosyncratic they may be.*²⁹

To respect a person as a "distinctive center of consciousness" means to respect her as the origin of unique perspectives and beliefs. In the case of children, these perspectives and beliefs (not only their achievements) are often "idiosyncratic" in the view of adults, that is, they could not be derived from and subsumed under existing norms, rules, or conventions. Precisely because of their otherness and strangeness, these perspectives and beliefs, if adults treat them seriously and with epistemic respect, could transcend established norms, and so they could contribute to their further development, revision, or modification as well as to the articulation of new norms and new reasons supporting them.

Let me illustrate this claim with an example:

Our son goes to an elementary school in a big German city. The parents of many of his classmates are immigrants from different countries. Children

27. *Ibid.*, 108f.

28. *Ibid.*, 110.

29. Richard S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966), 59 (emphasis added).

with different skin colors, different religious backgrounds, and different levels of language proficiency are sitting together in the classroom. Our son himself came to Germany one year ago, just a couple of weeks before his admission in the first grade of the school, and with almost no knowledge of German language and “culture.”

I was astonished to see that these demographic differences do not matter at all to our son and his classmates. They interact with each other as individuals with particular characters, strengths, and weaknesses. They mutually appreciate or dislike their respective personal traits, and so they become friends with some classmates and adversaries with others, but no one links these personal traits, mutual sympathies, and antipathies to ethnic origins or supposed cultural identities. We never had the impression that our son ascribed to himself particular deficits or felt any need for special support because of his initial lack of German-language skills, and he does not now see his becoming fluent in German so quickly as a particular achievement. In other words, he does not ascribe a particular significance to his own ethnic origins as well as to the fact that he is “foreign-born” — and this seems to apply to his peers as well.

In contrast, we, the adults, tend to classify persons according to their supposed ethnic, national, and cultural identity. In fact, in most cases we simply cannot imagine not doing so. We might even link these demographic classifications with a notion of compensatory justice that would require granting more support to representatives of ethnic or cultural identities that we see as underprivileged or marginalized.

However, we can learn from the way in which our children interact with each other and see themselves that, even when such support efforts are well-intentioned, the ethnic or cultural collectivization they entail could be oppressive to individuals and could create barriers and limitations for their actions and interactions — barriers and limitations that were previously not there and that are unnecessary and counterproductive. In other words, we might learn from our children that justice ultimately requires recognizing and treating human individuals equally *as individuals*, not as representatives of ethnic or cultural collectives.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I first argued that, according to Habermas, justification of both empirical truths and moral norms is necessarily dialogical or discursive. Empirical truths are ultimately proven by the objective world, which transcends discursive justifications. Habermas describes moral norms as “truth-analogue,” which implies that their rightness must also transcend their justification in actual moral discourses. In the case of moral norms, though, the instance of that transcendence is not an outer world, but persons or groups of persons who possess interests, values, and views that are supposedly not compatible with the norms agreed upon in the actual discourses. Hence, right moral norms could be established only through discourses that continually include new participants who are characterized by their otherness. Children, by virtue of their otherness to adults, could perfectly incorporate the instance of transcendence in moral

discourses. Their inclusion in these discourses is a matter of respect due to them not so much on the basis of their prospective rational autonomy, but rather on the basis of their actual status as children. This is not only a form of moral and pedagogical respect, but also (and most importantly) of *epistemic* respect for the perspectives and the claims of children. These perspectives and claims are constitutive for the generation and the enrichment of moral knowledge precisely because of their otherness to the established moral views and norms of adults. In a final account, then, moral discourses — even the very process of democratic deliberation as such — can only function properly if adults are ready to let themselves be surprised and enriched by perspectives, views, and (implicit) claims of children, and then willing to revise their own normative claims based on those perspectives, views, and claims.