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The Emergence of Postculturalism

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The title of a symposium organized by Richard Shweder and Unni Wikan for the 1996 American Anthropological Association meetings, 'The concept of culture: Moral pluralism or racism in another guise', expresses the limitations inherent in attempts to respect cultural differences without provision for criteria to evaluate the moral worth of cultural practices. The postmodern rejection of the notion of progress (in favor of the morally neutral construct of change) similarly strips moves toward greater freedom and equality of their moral value. Terms such as oppression, racism, sexism, exploitation, justice, liberty, and compassion lose their moral force once their application has been reduced to the expressions of a particular vantage point. In her splendid article, Diana Baumrind attempts to recover moral criteria for evaluating the moral worth of cultural practices without resort to what she, along with the culture theorists she criticizes, would agree is the empty formalism of neo-Kantian ethics. In doing so she has endeavored to steer discourse about the nature of culture, morality, and human development away from the ethically impotent subjectivism of contemporary culture theory toward a situated view of social and moral progress in which respect for pluralism fits within, rather than astride, morality.

While we are largely sympathetic with Baumrind's objectives, we are not convinced that she has succeeded in making the case for the alternative moral theory that she advances. In our view, Baumrind has staked out an unstable middle position between the poles of post-Kantian ethics and of the cultural relativism that she criticizes. What we will contend in this essay is that the success of her arguments ultimately rests on some version of the formalist criteria that she rejects, and that the sensitivity to context and cultural/historical variation that she justly defends are not lost if one places the application of those formal criteria within a pragmatist rather than an idealist epistemology. We will address these points by critically examining her treatment of Habermas, and by illustrating that her own goals are better served by Habermas' account of morality than the utilitarian ethics which she adopts.

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Between Relativism and Universalism

In developing her position, Baumrind argues against the universality criterion of deontic ethics, and provides a critique of neo-Kantian approaches that require forms of impartiality which she argues are both philosophically empty and practically implausible. This line of argument is most successfully employed in her discussions of Rawls and Kohlberg. The 'original position' as formulated by Rawls is exposed as an idealization that requires the actor to be stripped of fundamental aspects of personal identity and information in order to achieve an impartial moral point of view. Not only is this form of impartiality improbable, but the point of view of *the other* is likewise empty. In the absence of discourse, the particular features or needs of alter can only exist as idealizations of a common humanity as assumed by ego. Similarly, the 'moral musical chairs', which characterizes the impartial perspective taking of Stage 6 principled moral reasoning within Kohlberg's [1984] developmental theory is exposed as a monadic idealization. The force of the arguments articulated by Baumrind have been acknowledged by both Rawls [1993] and Kohlberg [Colby and Kohlberg, 1987; Kohlberg, 1984] in response to similar criticisms offered by others including Habermas [1991], and both authors have taken such criticisms into account in their later works. Habermas, whose discourse theory absolves him of the charge of monadic idealization, fares no better in Baumrind's account because of what she views as the disconnect between his criteria for communicative discourse and what is actually possible in practical discourse situations.

In place of the deontic morality of the neo-Kantians, Baumrind grounds her moral perspective in teleological rule utilitarianism. This move allows her to align a non-arbitrary moral perspective with the historical struggles of particular cultural groups or social classes. This alternative is developed through what she refers to as neo-Marxist standpoint theory. A standpoint is defined within this framework as 'a position in society from which particular features of reality are brought into sharp perspective and others obscured.' According to this neo-Marxist analysis, the objective material factors of social life are construed differently by members of subordinate and dominant groups. These differential social positions are often associated with oppression, which Baumrind defines as 'the imposition on some individuals or groups of exploitive constraints on their freedom to choose the conditions of self-formation by other individuals or groups whose purpose is to enhance their own access to resources and their own options to pursue what they regard as a good life.'

The practical moral remedy to oppression does not emerge from universal principles of equality or fair treatment of persons, but rather from the application of utilitarian considerations of what social conditions within a particular societal framework would lead to the greatest good for the greatest number of its members. Because members of privileged groups dominate the social landscape, they are neither motivated nor required to take into account the standpoint of those in subordinate positions. In contrast, members of subordinate groups must take into account the views of their 'oppressors' in order to 'adapt to, or circumvent' the interests of the dominant group. Accordingly, the standpoint of the oppressed is the more 'progressive' in that it constitutes an orientation that takes into account the positions of both the dominant and subordinate groups. Moral progress, then, follows from the contextualized working through of societal solutions that coordinate the interests of the oppressed classes with the remaining citizens of a particular society or cultural group. Given that the dominant classes of

particular societies may not have it in their own selfish interests to accommodate to the needs of the oppressed, advocacy and intervention by outsiders on behalf of the oppressed classes within a given culture are morally legitimated as concordant with what is the objectively progressive standpoint.

Baumrind's use of standpoint theory, which is not to be confused with simplistic identity politics, allows her to critique social practices, such as genital mutilation, the barbarity of which culture theory must remain mute on. There is an emerging body of empirical evidence that would support Baumrind's assumptions regarding the ways in which members of dominant and subordinate groups read the morality of the norms structuring their social systems. This anthropological and psychological research [Abu-Lughod, 1993; Appadurai, 1988; Wainryb and Turiel, 1994, 1995], much of which is referred to in Baumrind's article, reveals that members of dominant groups, such as the men of a given society, tend to view their privileges and their power relative to members of subordinate classes such as women, as matters of rights. Those in power also maintain the corollary view that the corresponding behaviors of those in subordinate positions are defined by culturally prescribed duties commensurate with the hierarchical structure of the social system.

While members of subordinate classes, such as women, also frame their views of what is right conduct in terms of duties and roles within the social hierarchy, they also tend to frame those expectations in terms of the risks posed by failure to comply with social expectations, and to evaluate the differential privileges associated with their subordinate status as unjust and oppressive. Because they are also affectively connected members of a social group, and not dispassionate observers, they do not generally voice these concerns in militant fashion, but rather find ways, as Baumrind suggests, to circumvent or otherwise adapt to the social worlds they inherit [Turiel, 1997]. Evidence of this heterogeneity and complexity both within societies and individuals argues against a holistic view of culture [Strauss, 1997], and the corresponding tendency to characterize cultures and peoples in terms of the dominant ideology [Spiro, 1993]. The postculturalist view emerging from this new attention to variations, contradictions, conflicts, and transformations within supposed traditional, hierarchically structured cultural systems affords Baumrind with evidence needed to martial her basic thesis. For it is the within-culture diversity that allows her to contextualize the class struggle (understood in its broadest meaning) central to her notion of moral progress.

Unfortunately, Baumrind's trenchant analysis does not make full use of the insights to be gained from this postculturalist body of work. Thus, she misses the critical discovery that the formalist criteria she finds so limiting in neo-Kantian ethics are employed at an intuitive level by individuals across classes and societies in their efforts to make sense of the ethical dimensions of their lives. Individuals appeal not simply to utilitarian teleological considerations in judging moral actions, but to some notion of impartiality, universality and common humanity [Turiel, 1997]. Baumrind's neo-Marxist perspective on the nature of rights correctly identifies rights of well-being (e.g., freedom from starvation) as requiring some collectivist constraints on individual freedom (e.g., capitalist ownership of private property). However, her stance underestimates the importance of individual rights to freedom as the mechanism by which persons may construct individual identity, maintain psychological integrity, and forge responses to a telos uniquely, rather than in a culturally defined manner [Nucci, 1996]. By identifying concerns for individual freedom with Western ideology, Baumrind misses the importance of a substantial body of empirical work on children's social rea-

soning and family interaction patterns [Nucci et al., 1996; Smetana, 1997]. This research indicates that attention to personal freedom comprises a central element of human development across cultures and social classes. Her downplaying of the human desire for individuality allows her to defend a collectivist ethic in which morality is defined in terms of utilitarian criteria rather than in terms of attention to basic human rights. As we shall see below, however, her position wrongly assumes that there is a necessary opposition between these two undoubtedly crucial, moral criteria.

From Is to Ought and Back Again

We began this essay in praise of Baumrind's basic project, but skeptical of her approach. In our view, one can best see the limitations of Baumrind's position via her critique of Habermas. And, not surprisingly, we think that the best chance of recovering Baumrind's project is in merging her basic goals with the insights provided by Habermas. Doing so will not only resolve some of the philosophical limitations we see in her theory, but also bring her effort to set forth a progressive moral agenda more in line with current postculturalist research.

Baumrind chose the title for her paper from a passage in which she distinguishes herself from Habermas. She writes:

> Unlike Habermas, I am not skeptical of Engel's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: 'The philosophers have interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it,' so that human beings may more fully realize their capabilities. To take the moral point of view means that one affirms an obligation to act in accord with one's stated principles and values, that is to go from 'ought' to 'is' even when it is inconvenient, uncomfortable, unpopular, or one's views are controversial and assailable.

It is untrue that Habermas is skeptical of Engel's thesis in the way that Baumrind seems to indicate. There is nothing in her statement with which Habermas would disagree. He would, however, add to her statement. Taking the moral point of view cannot mean simply acting on one's stated principles and values. If this were our only criteria for the moral point of view, we would have no leverage in distinguishing the depraved moral point of view of members of the Ku Klux Klan (who sincerely believe that they are fighting the good fight) from Baumrind's progressive moral agenda. We cannot go unproblematically from 'ought' to 'is' without an examination of whether *our* 'ought' really ought-to-be. Baumrind implicitly justifies her 'ought' via a loosely specified theory of human needs, and then moves directly to a material ethics from it. But this move is deeply problematic on Baumrind's own terms.

Baumrind roots her position in standpoint theory, but she has no account of her own standpoint and its limitations. She seems to be stuck in a dilemma. Either she admits that her standpoint is merely *her* standpoint among others and she is willing to act on it whether or not it is 'controversial or assailable' (in which case it is not clear how she differs from the culturalists), or her stance claims to have transcended standpoints (a view from nowhere?) through an objective Marxian analysis, which is at least as universalistic as any neo-Kantian has ever been.

The obvious response to this dilemma is for Baumrind to claim that her standpoint is not *merely* her standpoint, but neither is it an uncontroversial or unassailable account of *the* truth of the moral world. Rather, Baumrind might argue that she could defend her point of view against rival accounts of oppression and of the right thing to do about it.

She might cite the fact that she has familiarized herself with people who seem to be suffering, listened to their point of view, and spent time reflecting on what is causing that suffering – analyzing it along with other scientists and philosophers and discussing it with fellow citizens – and thus feels that while her interpretation is fallible, she is nonetheless justified in making a claim to the truth and normative legitimacy of her account. Indeed, we take something like this to be the implicit intent of her article in the first place. She is trying to convince us of the adequacy of her view.

If we are right, however, then the positions taken by Baumrind and Habermas are more compatible than she allows for. Like Baumrind, Habermas' 'reconstructive' approach wants us to be able to go from 'ought' to 'is', but it begins from an analysis of how we get to valid 'oughts' in the first place (i.e., a reconstruction of the assumptions implicit in our day-to-day claims to validity). Thus his approach may be usefully described as going 'from is to ought then back to is'. In order to see how Habermas' theory can help Baumrind to achieve her goal, we must examine her analysis of Habermas' position and identify some key points at which she seems to be misinterpreting him.

Pluralism, Consequentialism and Realism in Habermas

As we saw above, if standpoints are unbridgeable, then it is not clear how we are to ascertain what the standpoint of the oppressed would even mean, nor how we could ever be motivated to act in accordance with it. If standpoints are monadic, then the cultural relativists have won and the whole story is over. Presumably, then, different people can, to varying degrees, understand different standpoints and they can adjust their moral judgments according to the understandings that develop when they do. Thus, we are led to the concept of impartiality. There are two possible readings of impartiality, one negative and one positive. The negative one which Baumrind attributes to Rawls is that when we strip ourselves of a large part of our identity and information, we can achieve the impartial point of view, such as in the original position. While we do not think that this is an entirely fair reading of what Rawls intends, it is *certainly* not Habermas' model. Rather, impartiality involves *expanding* our perspective to include the standpoints of others. Furthermore, expanding our perspective requires that we actually talk to other people – armchair moral imagination will not suffice. Thus Habermas implicitly accepts standpoint theory, but tries to offer a solution to the moral problems that it raises. Rather than simply saying that anything goes (culturalists) or that we must dogmatically side with those that we think deserve our support, Habermas gives us a principled method for bridging standpoints.

Baumrind criticizes Habermas for several philosophical shortcomings: (1) that he has an idealist epistemology which leads him into trouble; (2) that his theory is so formalistic that it becomes empty; (3) that Habermas' distinction between the moral and ethical excludes existential considerations, and creates an unbridgable gap between the ideal and the real; (4) Habermas does not adequately engage the depth and breadth of pluralism in the world; and (5) that his model is naive and empirically false. We will address each criticism in turn.

To be sure, Habermas describes a procedure with idealizing assumptions, but this does *not* align him with idealist epistemology, nor does it follow that he is stuck with an empty formalism. Habermas' epistemology is based upon pragmatism, which is a cou-

sin to the materialism that Baumrind advocates, but it provides an explanation for how we come to know the outside world rather than just asserting things about it, and it also allows for the possibility that ideas and reasons can influence the material world as well as vice versa.

Habermas' theory is not empty for two reasons: first, it generates a broad set of important and substantive rights which he outlines in his new political work, *Between Facts and Norms* [Habermas, 1996]. Second, the content of the discourses that Habermas advocates centers around the 'needs, wants, and interests' of the participants. Thus vital issues of distributive justice, material oppression, and political power are brought into the moral realm by the oppressed themselves. In cases where the oppressed may have been so oppressed as not to even know their own interests, Habermas' theory allows for representation and advocacy. It is simply false that his theory is empty.

In addition, Habermas' theory in *Between Facts and Norms* provides an explanation for how private and public liberties (the rights of the individual and the rights of the community) are logically interdependent, and thus solves the main problem that Baumrind sees in Rawls' liberalism without having to arbitrarily privilege the other side.

Habermas does indeed separate out the moral from the ethical. But this does not lead to an exclusion of ethical and existential considerations from the normative realm. He simply does not make them binding on all rational agents. Thus, contrary to Baumrind's assertion, Habermas *can* make room for cultural and individual ethical diversity while universally opposing oppression. Confusion on this point might arise from Habermas' technical use of some of his terms. Ethical discourses are *not* the same as discourses of application, as Baumrind seems to imply. There are moral discourses of justification and application, and ethical discourses of justification and application. Thus her assertion that Habermas 'does not and cannot successfully bridge the gap between justification and application', is either a misunderstanding, or an unsupported assertion for which there is ample evidence to the contrary. One need not show that moral discourse always leads to perfect solutions, only that it sometimes leads to better ones.

As to Baumrind's assertion that moral disputes cannot appeal to generally recognized norms of practical discourse when these too are in dispute, we have to be careful as to what is precisely intended here. One reading is that cultural pluralism runs so deep that there are *no*, even minimal, principles that cut across cultures. Baumrind cites studies showing that Eastern peoples feel it less necessary to accept the principle of noncontradiction. Now as a matter of training the mind, it might be a useful exercise to recognize that what we take to be a matter of 'A or not-A' is at a deeper level a matter of 'A or B' and thus not a real contradiction. If it is intended in its stronger sense, then Baumrind is caught in a performative contradiction. The principle of noncontradiction is a precondition for our understanding what we are doing when we make arguments, and Baumrind is manifestly making an argument. Similarly, Habermas' minimal language analysis claims to be a minimal precondition to make sense of ourselves when we make normative claims.

Finally, as for the claim that Habermas' model does not correspond to social reality, it must be said that he is not so naive as to believe that there is no such thing as power in the world and that if we could all just get together to talk, nobody would exercise their power. Habermas does claim, however, that his theory provides the outline for what it would mean to justify oneself to another without recourse to power. Furthermore, such claims to justification frequently do affect people's behavior. Baumrind, on the other hand, seems to waver between a cognitivist view in which reasons and

justifications matter, and a noncognitivist position in which one's moral position amounts to an assertion that the standpoint one adopts is 'objectively progressive.' On the noncognitivist reading, claiming 'female genital mutilation is wrong' is exactly equivalent to saying 'I disapprove of female genital mutilation' – no more, no less. Thus one is not giving one's interlocutor any reason to change her mind unless she happens to value your opinion.

Moreover, Baumrind's assumptions of social reality are such that she takes the rather cynical stance that rational persons act only in their own strategic self-interests. She writes, 'It may be more altruistic, but it is not more rational for the more powerful adversary to agree to a communicatively level playing field.' Thus, Baumrind seems to accept the modernist arbitrary restriction of rationality to strategic rationality, and thereby unintentionally renders her position normatively impotent in just the way that she seeks to avoid. The capitalist valuation of individual self-interest has been replaced in Baumrind's neo-Marxist calculus by the utilitarian maximization of group interests, but the strategic structure of outcome-based argumentation remains the same. Communicative rationality, in itself, may not make the exploiter stop his exploitation, but it does give him a reason not to do so, and a rationally grounded warrant for those who would oppose him. It is not simply a matter of 'choosing our gods and demons' and then fighting for them as Baumrind seems to suggest. No doubt she offers us reasons for the side that she picks, but without embedding them in a deontic communicative framework, she robs those 'reasons' of any rational force.

Yet, as we have noted, Baumrind seems to want to claim that we should define atrocities such as female genital mutilation as oppressive, and furthermore that oppression is wrong. The question then is, on what basis does she make those claims? It seems as if Baumrind's use of 'objective' has simply replaced the words 'universalist' and 'impartial' without changing how they function in her argument. This is the tension that leads us to the conclusion that Baumrind has staked out an unstable middle ground between relativism and universalism. What we are suggesting though, is that she has nothing to fear of a particular brand of universalism. Positions such as that developed in Habermas' theory of communicative discourse ethics provide a flexible and minimalist universalism which can make ample room for personal and cultural difference, while retaining internally consistent grounds on which to identify and condemn oppression.

Conclusion

Scholars and researchers in the field of human development may well regard the decade of the nineties as a period in which attention to culture assumed primacy. In the past, culture too often served simply as a backdrop for studies attempting to demonstrate the universality of various developmental stages and sequences without particular attention to variations in responses easily dismissed as content [Dasen, 1977]. To the extent that attention to culture has moved the study of human development away from myopic misapplications of structuralism, to the meaningful exploration of human development in context, the focus on culture is all to the good. In her article, Diana Baumrind acknowledged the important contribution that attention to culture can make, but she also identified some of the limitations of the culture construct, and the problems which arise as a result of its misapplication. Cultures are not monolithic, and heterogeneity within cultures are in many ways as significant as differences between cultures.

Thus, we cannot simply parse human societies into nonoverlapping categories or types in which humans from one community have nothing in common with those of another. Nor can we reduce the ethical dimension of human existence to the contextualized norms expressing the dominant ideology of a particular society. Baumrind's recognition of internal societal contradiction, variation, and conflict provides her with the tools to argue for a mechanism for non-arbitrary social change. Her postculturalist stance, coupled with a neo-Marxist version of utilitarian ethical theory allows her to stake out a pluralist vision of social progress rather than a mere description of cultural variation.

In our view, Baumrind's postculturalist stance is on the mark, and reflects the direction that the field of developmental research is heading. But, her efforts to construct a complementary ethical theory fall short. As we have pointed out in this essay, her position suffers from internal contradictions. We have argued that her project can be salvaged by accommodation with elements of communicative discourse theory as articulated by Habermas. It is not our contention that Habermas has *the* answer to questions of ethics, but rather that Baumrind's goals can only be met by some accommodation with neo-Kantian ethical theory. Only then will we be able to go from is to ought and back again.

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