

Theories of memory and a modified approach to discourse ethics:

Rick Russo
Department of Political Science
University of Toronto
rrusso@sympatico.ca

First Draft – comments welcome.

Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association at York University in Toronto, Ontario on June 1-3, 2006 .

Introduction

For Habermas, philosophy should seek to reveal the significance that can be found in everyday experience and articulate elements of universal significance in a way that is sensitive and open to the validation potential of empirical science. Rather than seek a post-metaphysical resolution to the modern conflict of ethical life and morality on its own, philosophy should rather act as a ‘stand-in’¹ for the empirical sciences and search for theories with “strong universalistic claims”.²

The bulk of this paper will represent a critical evaluation of Habermas’ moral philosophy with respect to the mediation of morality and ethical life. Polycentric societies comprised of different ethical perspectives inevitably prompt disputes over societal norms. These disputes typify issues that bring forward what Habermas characterizes as distinctly ‘moral’ issues that require participants to enter a ‘post-conventional’ level of moral consciousness. I will outline Habermas’ theory of moral consciousness and in particular his grounding of it in psychological accounts of moral development.³ In doing so, I will highlight the implicit dependencies within Habermas’ justification of ‘discourse ethics’ to the particular theories of cognitive development upon which he relies. I will then discuss the critiques of discourse ethics and its cognitivist approach to morality provided by Gilligan and Murphy⁴ and Iris Young⁵. Both these critiques will serve to highlight the practical difficulties that result from the level of abstraction required by Habermas’ idealization of discourse aimed at reaching an understanding on moral issues.

I will then introduce the concept of “autonoesis”, as defined by Endel Tulving⁶, and its grounding in the differentiation of episodic versus semantic memory. Rather than relying exclusively on cognitive theories of moral development, I will attempt to show how interlacing these theories with an understanding of how lived experiences relate to memory can provide an enhanced psychological account of moral development. When the reconstruction of the process of moral judgment is adjusted to account for these changes, I will demonstrate how discourse ethics can be recast to place a greater weight on personal and idealized narratives. The goal of my analysis is not to negate the procedural elements of discourse ethics per se, but rather to question, through Habermas’ own method of utilizing a dialogue between philosophy and empirical science, the value in use of his requirement for a participant to decontextualize issues of moral justification.

This analysis will provide the grounding for an alternative conception of moral development that rejects the ‘linear’ development of socio-cognitive apparatus implied by

¹ J. Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1990), p 15.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. - in particular the chapter of the same title (pp. 116-195).

⁴ C. Gilligan and J. M. Murphy, “Moral Development in Late Adolescence and Adulthood: A Critique and Reconstruction of Kohlberg’s Theory,” *Human Development* 23 (1980).

⁵ I.M. Young, “Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy”, in S. Benhabib ed., *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, (Princeton: Princeton Press, 1996), pp. 120-135.

⁶ E. Tulving, “Episodic Memory and Autonoesis: Uniquely Human?” in *Metacognition: The missing link*, eds., H.S. Terrace and J. Metcalfe (New York: Oxford Press, in press) – many thanks to Dr. Tulving who has provided an advance copy of this paper which summarizes, in an approachable manner, a lifetime of innovation in the study of memory.

Habermas. This alternative conception of moral development will attempt to rehabilitate a less one-sided view of moral judgment that is subject not only to the linguistic force of better reasons, but that also recognizes the psychic nexus of rationality, emotion, and motivation. This nexus is, at least in its totality, not linguistically determined, but rather *autonoetically re-experienced*.

Ethical Life and Morality

Pre-Enlightenment ethical life is characterized by Habermas as reflecting an “encompassing societal ethos”⁷ within which virtually all social norms are regulated. The values inherent to a specific culture largely overlapped with the motives of most of its inhabitants. In Habermas’ terms, the background networks of intersubjectivity within which each individual defines her identity were ethically consistent with those of her society as a whole. In classical terms, particular shared conceptions of the ‘good life’ and ethical conduct consistently shaped both personal and societal motives and provided for the mediation of conflict. The Enlightenment brought cultural traditions under the “pressure of reflection” and gradually “received practices and interpretations of ethical life were reduced to mere conventions and differentiated from conscientious decisions that passed through the filter of reflection.”⁸ This process is interpreted by Habermas as the ‘rationalization of the lifeworld’⁹ and refers to a process by which a culture becomes ‘reflexive’ and thereby consciously appropriates the traditions it wishes to continue through a process of intersubjective reflection.

Ethical life, previously grounded in “exemplary instructions in the virtuous life and recommended models of the good life”, now assumes a distinctly subjectivist flavour.¹⁰ Habermas refers to a line of thinkers beginning with Rousseau who point to the need for a “conscious, self-critical appropriation” of an individual’s own life project. The result is a society characterized by both an increasing individualism as well as a pluralism of collective identities. Consequently, contested norms can no longer be legitimated with reference to shared ethical practices. This problematization of metaphysical or religious grounding leads to the increasing need for *moral discourses*. For Habermas, these are discourses aimed at the “impartial evaluation of action conflicts” freed from the ethical constraints of participants’ lifeworlds and within which all participants maintain a moral viewpoint “of equal respect for each person and equal consideration for the interests of all.”¹¹

Habermas’ general characterization of a valid moral discourse obtains from Kant the moral point of view of an individual abstracted from her life history and reliant on the ‘pure fact of reason’. Yet the individual monologically reflecting on Kant’s categorical imperative lacks the information necessary to ensure the decision reached lies equally in the interest of all. What is required is for each person to be accorded the opportunity to

⁷ Habermas, “Private and Public Autonomy, Human Rights and Popular Sovereignty”, p 57.

⁸ Ibid., p 58.

⁹ Lifeworld is the background within which actors learn through actions (including speech acts) for which they are accountable and is comprised of the traditions and relationships within which the actor is socialized.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p 59.

participate in the discussion of contested norms, and for each, under the dialogical force of better arguments versus that of coercion, to strive for an understanding that could meet with the agreement of all affected. Habermas views the substance of moral justification as embedded within the discursive process of reaching an understanding concerning contested moral norms. In order for the agreement reached through rational discourse to be valid it should be achieved through the adherence to a 'discourse ethic' that seeks an impartial judgment through the unforced consent of all participants.

Moral Consciousness and Discourse Ethics

To this point I have only sketched the general nature of what Habermas views as a moral discourse that can legitimately bind its participants when considering contested norms. I will next review Habermas' derivation of the legitimacy of this form of discourse and its relation to cognitive theories of moral development. Prior to this, an important nuance within the perceived 'universalist' nature of Habermas' thought should be clarified. Habermas clearly sets the goal of moral philosophy lower than that of Kant. His objectives, even in their most idealized forms, aim to reach no 'ultimate truths' but rather an 'ultimate procedure' through which moral truths applicable to specific historical circumstances and specific participants can be ascertained and justified. In addition, the role of philosophy within this limited ambit is to reveal and build upon the presuppositions inherent to everyday life. As such, philosophically grounded theories should be open to empirical and scientific validation and reflect, as per Rousseau, "men (and women) as they are."¹²

Another defining element of Habermas' moral philosophy is its focus on language and communication and their relationship to action. Participants in a discourse rely on different socio-cognitive tools depending on what type of proposed action is being discussed and what perspective structure exists between participants.¹³ Action in this sense is meant in the broadest sense of anything requiring the coordinated input of participants. As participants mature they become engaged in increasingly complex conflicts related to action both requiring and prompting an expansion in their socio-cognitive inventory. The evolution of socio-cognitive inventory to meet these demands can be described through theories of moral development. Habermas' builds off Kohlberg's seminal analysis that distinguishes six stages of moral judgment which are further grouped into three levels of analysis:¹⁴

Level A, pre-conventional level:

Stage 1, the stage of punishment and obedience

Stage 2, the stage of individual instrumental purpose and exchange

Level B, conventional level:

¹² J.J. Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, edited by Roger D. Masters, (Bedford: St Martins Press, 1978), p 46

¹³ Habermas provides a summary of the intersections of these elements of discourse analysis and their relation to moral development on pp 166-167 in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*.

¹⁴ Taken from Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, p 123. Habermas summarizes Kohlberg's views as found in L. Kohlberg, *Essays on Moral Development*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1981).

Stage 3, the stage of mutual interpersonal expectations, relationships, and conformity
Stage 4, the stage of social system and conscience maintenance

Level C, post-conventional and principled level:

Stage 5, the stage of prior rights and social contract or utility
Stage 6, the stage of universal ethical principles

There are two crucial elements in Kohlberg's analysis for Habermas. The first is that it requires *learning*. The child or adolescent needs to rebuild the cognitive structures she had in earlier phases in order to meet the challenges of the next in a consensual manner. In simple terms, each stage implies an appeal to 'higher ground' that requires a more advanced stage of moral reasoning. The second element is that the stages form a hierarchy within which "a higher stage dialectically sublate(s) (the cognitive structures) of the lower one, that is, the lower stage is replaced and at the same time preserved in a reorganized, more differentiated form."¹⁵ In other words, Kohlberg's analysis implies there is a *logic of development* inherent to the moral consciousness of a human being.

Habermas then goes on to ground this *logic* in the evolution of speaker-hearer perspectives within the development of the child/adolescent. As children we define our interests in relation to the authority of others, but as we grow we begin to recognize other participants as possessing their own set of interests. As conflicts emerge we look to satisfy our own interests while strategically dealing with those of others. Eventually we begin to recognize our interactions with others as embedded within a larger social world in which certain social roles are accepted or rejected. We begin to internalize these roles and appeal to them when dealing with conflicting representations of norms. As we become increasingly aware of conflicts, we adapt our perspective to one that seeks to justify norms from principles that reach beyond our social world.

Throughout this development, the language skills and forms of argument utilized increasingly rely on the implicit recognition of a 'third party' perspective among participants. Appeal to this 'third party' perspective becomes increasingly abstract as participants move from justifying action with relation to norms to justifying norms themselves. Each stage of development provides the cognitive tools with which participants can reach the next. What is 'just' at each point in this evolution, according to Habermas, "springs directly from the reorganization of the available socio-cognitive inventory, a reorganization that occurs with the *necessity of development logic*."¹⁶ As we move from normatively regulated action to discourse about norms we effect the moralization of our social worlds. This requires our form of social interaction to become increasingly abstract leading to the development of the "naturalistic core, so to speak, of moral consciousness."¹⁷

We use language to interact with others in every day life. We develop in a "web of communicative action"¹⁸ which presupposes that we, through the use of language, attempt to influence, and are influenced by, the judgment of others. We provide and are

¹⁵ Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, p 127.

¹⁶ Ibid (my italics), p 170.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p 100.

convinced by reasons. When attempting to justify contested norms without resort to coercion we must provide reasons, and by doing so we imply we are appealing to an impartial judgment. To argue against this is to engage in a ‘performative contradiction’ – that is to provide reasons as to why we do not need to provide reasons.¹⁹ Since contested norms imply the lack of an agreed upon ethical basis for resolution, Habermas then derives the need for the resolution to warrant the unforced consensus of all affected – this is the only impartial judgment that ensures the decision reached is moral. He summarizes this concept in his ‘principle of universalization’ or (U):

“For a norm to be valid, the *consequences and side effects of its general observance for the satisfaction of each person’s particular interests* must be acceptable to all.”²⁰

To ensure that all perspectives are effectively represented, Habermas also provides rules of argumentation to ensure that each participant can contribute freely to the discourse. Habermas modifies Kant’s categorical imperative to reflect this discursive reality and derives his principle of discourse ethics or (D);

“Every valid norm would meet with the approval of all concerned if they could take part in a practical discourse.”²¹

Rather than attempting to monologically determine the validity of a norm, we need to reach this validity dialogically in concert with all affected participants through a process of ‘*ideal role taking*’ that motivates us to abstract from the particularities of our own differentiated lifeworlds and jointly seek solutions that have the *appeal* of ‘universal’ validity. The role-taking implied in (D) is ‘ideal’ since it implies that for the norm to be valid, each participant would need to accept it not on her own terms, but on the force of better arguments when considered from a perspective abstracted (that is willing to question all elements of) from her own lifeworld. This is why Habermas eventually concedes that discourse ethics can only function in cases where participants come from lifeworlds that have begun the process of being rationalized – that is from perspectives that can meet discourse ethics “halfway”.²² Yet Habermas is also aware of the dangers to societal order as lifeworlds are *increasingly* rationalized. The answer cannot be to revert back naively to accepted norms since this would imply the coercion of those who contest them. What instead is required to stabilize the lifeworld is that newly agreed-upon norms be re-integrated effectively and become part of everyday life.

Discourse ethics and Habermas’ moral philosophy begin with certain intuitions experienced in everyday life related to the communicative use of language. Habermas then attempts to translate these ‘presuppositions’²³, through philosophy and the empirical

¹⁹ Habermas utilizes this argument in detail in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* pp 89-91.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p 197 (my italics – I will discuss later the problematic nature of this aspect of (U) within post-conventional thinking).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p 121

²² See Habermas’ discussion of Hegel’s critique of Kant in *Ibid.*, pp 207-208.

²³ If the presuppositions he articulates are convincing on their own, Habermas does not feel he needs to explain the need for ethical life to pre-exist in order for his moral philosophy to succeed.

sciences, into concrete motivations that can withstand contestation outside a specific form of ethical life. Below I provide a summary of my discussion of Habermas' views on moral consciousness and discourse ethics for clarity and for relation to the critique that follows:

- a) Discourse ethics has as its goal contingent solutions to moral conflict that are made valid by a 'universalist' procedure.
- b) This procedure is derived from the 'presuppositions' inherent to language aimed at communicative action – language that takes place always and everywhere through the fact of social relations.
- c) The appeal to impartial judgment that begins with the appeal to social norms implies a reciprocity in speaker-hearer perspectives that ultimately leads to the *principle of universalization* (U) as a basis for impartial judgment when dealing with contested norms.
- d) The critical advance (for discourse ethics) into 'post-conventional' thinking (the moralization or principled discussion of norms) relies on the logical development of the socio-cognitive inventory of a mature individual who has been socialized within a (at least partially) rationalized lifeworld.
- e) In order for a valid resolution to be located, each participant cannot rely on the authority derivative of a particular 'way-of-life'. Rather the participant must find reasons that can be supported by all. This necessarily requires a form of 'ideal role-taking' in order to reach consensus.

Critiques of Discourse Ethics

I will focus on two critiques of discourse ethics that together serve to highlight a fundamental issue within the requirements of 'post-conventional' thinking and, as such, penetrate the core of discourse ethics. The first critique is captured well by Iris Marion Young²⁴ in her general discussion of deliberative democratic concepts, and relates to the exclusionary potential of Habermas' proceduralist solution. Since Habermas explicitly relies on the 'force of better arguments', his solution implicitly favours those who are more experienced with, as well as more comfortable participating in, an active and necessarily conflict-ridden debate. Young claims this puts certain groups, such as minority cultures and women who tend to rely less on "dispassionate and disembodied"²⁵ speech, at a disadvantage. In addition, Young claims these "differences of speech privilege correlate with other differences of social privilege"²⁶ resulting in a reinforcing disadvantage related to the evaluation of speaker expertise. As well, the consensus-oriented focus of deliberative discourse often privileges a vision of the "common good" which discounts the perspectives of marginalized minorities. Young suggests

²⁴ I.M. Young, "Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy" – see footnote 8

²⁵ Ibid., p 124.

²⁶ Ibid.

deliberative models, such as that of Habermas, should be opened up to different forms of discourse and allow for the greater use of emotive language as well as personal and idealized narratives. This would serve to ‘level the playing field’ (in terms of participation potential) of discourse and ensure that the perspectives of marginalized groups and women were better represented.

Habermas’ response to this type of critique is less than compelling. While never explicitly discounting the inclusion of narratives or emotive language, he does not recognize them as contributing *directly* to the sphere of everyday communicative action within which moral discourses take place. Narratives are seen as a form of poetic or rhetorical language belonging primarily to the sphere of art and literature and serving the purposes of “world-disclosure”. This is contrasted to discourses “tailored to a single validity dimension (truth or normative rightness)” and which rely on “problem-solving capacities” that are embedded within everyday communications and in relation to which the world-disclosing power of interpreting language has to *prove its worth*.²⁷ For Habermas, speech acts aimed at world-disclosure need to be translated in order to subject the reasons they supply to the force of rational argumentation. Emotive language as well must be deconstructed to isolate the reasons it provides from the motivational appeal of the speaker. For both narratives and emotive language to be effective in moral discourse the reasons obscured within them must be rationally revealed to other participants, and it is these reasons alone that ultimately must be evaluated by all participants.

Yet even if one were to accept the possibility of the effective (non-distorting) translation Habermas’ argument implies, discourse ethics itself does not address the issues of privilege raised by Young. While the universalization principle provides for the opportunity for all to be heard, it does not make allowances for differences in the ability (or predilections emerging from different patterns of socialization) of individuals to advance their claims within the paradigm of discourse ethics.

The second critique focuses on the socio-cognitive grounding of discourse ethics and questions whether individuals are generally capable of post-conventional thinking. If not, then the normative point of reference of moral development (stages 5 and 6 above) may not be correctly chosen given that it relies on the socio-cognitive inventory of a limited number of participants. This critique is advanced by Gilligan and Murphy²⁸ and is directly addressed by Habermas.²⁹ Gilligan and Murphy review empirical studies based on Kohlberg’s stages of moral development and determine that more than half the mature population of the United States could be situated at a stage below the post-conventional level.³⁰ In addition, those who initially show evidence of post-conventional thinking often, on further analysis, appear to revert back to conventional positions. Gilligan and Murphy claim that what is seen as a reversion in Kohlberg’s model may actually be a progression. Having reached the stage wherein their lifeworld is moralized

²⁷ J. Habermas, “On the Distinction Between Poetic and Communicative Uses of Language (1985)” in M. Cooke ed., *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1998), p 391-6.

²⁸ C. Gilligan and J. M. Murphy, “Moral Development in Late Adolescence and Adulthood: A Critique and Reconstruction of Kohlberg’s Theory,” *Human Development* 23 (1980).

²⁹ Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, pp 175-184.

³⁰ This finding is even more significant when one considers that the U.S. would clearly represent for Habermas a polity consisting largely of rationalized lifeworlds.

an individual turns away from the pursuit of abstract moral ideals and instead concerns herself with judgments that are ‘closer to home’:

“This *relativistic ethics of responsibility* deals with real moral dilemmas, not merely hypothetical ones, it takes the complexity of lived situations into account, it joins justice with caring and with responsibility for those under one’s care, and it presupposes a more inclusive concept of a mature personality that goes beyond the abstract notion of autonomy.”³¹

Gilligan and Murphy point the way to a stage of moral development they refer to as “contextual relativism” within which individuals are aware of the uncertainty that ultimately underlies the norms that guide their actions, but they nevertheless act on them with conviction. Evidence of the stability of individuals resident within this stage would confound the “logic of development” which Habermas believes guides the irreversible progress of the individual to a post-conventional moral standpoint. Having become aware of the contingency of background certitudes previously relied on; the individual (according to Habermas) should seek to reconstruct, at the level of basic principles or concepts, the regulative norms his new awareness has destroyed. If the individual, without becoming disoriented, is instead content with adhering to norms informed by “contextual relativism”, the specific reconstruction of psychological moral development upon which Habermas relies is weakened.

Habermas’ response in this case is again questionable. Habermas begins by recognizing the overwhelming impact socialization within a specific lifeworld has on an individual’s identity and the consequent threat posed by moral discourses that rationalize the otherwise certainties within it. Yet Habermas reiterates that moral issues do not arise spontaneously, but rather are raised by individuals seeking guidance as a result of a failure in, or a conflict between, views of concrete ethical life. The loss of validity sustained by a participant’s pre-existing views of ethical life through the process of moral discourse can only be compensated for if solutions attained through discourse ethics are reinserted into the lifeworld and made a part of concrete ethical life. Habermas claims that Gilligan and Murphy confuse the desire and need to be sensitive to situation-specific considerations when *reinserting moral decisions* into different lifeworld contexts with the *process required to reach these decisions*. As a result, Habermas maintains that Gilligan and Murphy conflate the “cognitive problem of application and the motivational problem of the anchoring of moral insights.”³² Universal commands arising from successful moral discourse can tell us only what we ‘ought to do’ in general terms and must also rely on prudence and experience (summarized as hermeneutic guidance), as opposed to reason alone, for their application to specific contexts. Habermas thereby attempts to distance himself from the appearance of ‘moral rigorism’ that is implied in Gilligan and Murphy’s critique, while salvaging the privileged place of reason and rationality in discourse ethics.

Despite Habermas’ responses, both these critiques point to potential issues in the socio-cognitive theory of moral development Habermas relies on to buttress his moral philosophy in a scientific view of humanity. For Habermas, the presuppositions revealed by the use of language in everyday situations is partially confirmed by a psychic theory

³¹ Habermas summarizes the view of his critics in *Ibid.*, p 176

³² *Ibid.*, p179.

of moral development that yields a privileged universal role for rationality and intersubjective reason in resolving moral conflict. Gilligan and Murphy's attack on the empirical validity of this theory of moral development provides the basis for an alternative reconstruction of human moral development. For Gilligan and Murphy, individuals are in a fundamental sense incapable of removing themselves completely from the context of lived reality and experience. Young's critique, beyond the difficulty it highlights in Habermas' approach to dealing with poetic language generally, points to the exclusivity of the force of rationality for Habermas as the only valid source for valid arguments. This validity is linked inextricably to the presupposition that all reasons supplied for consideration in moral discourse must be revealed by, or through, the language exchanged between participants within successive attempts to clarify better arguments. These arguments are to be considered from a position removed from each individual's experiential context. Participants are not encouraged to imagine moral dilemma from the perspective of the other, but are confined to the rational evaluation of the 'face value' of the arguments exchanged. This reconstruction appears to ignore the everyday practice of considering moral dilemma from the perspective of the other not through the abstracted process of ideal role taking, but through the attempt to 'walk in another's shoes' through the consideration of undistilled speech acts aimed at world-disclosure.

In the next section, I will investigate if shifting the focus from the descriptive psychic theories of moral development relied upon by Habermas to psycho-physical theories of memory, can provide a scientific foundation for the critiques I have highlighted. This shift expands on the theoretical fragments Habermas employs and also includes issues of the neuroscientific (as opposed to purely descriptive) construction of the psychic faculties of moral development as well as their evolutionary role.

Episodic Memory and its Relationship to Moral Reasoning

“Remembering past events is a universally familiar experience. It is also a uniquely human one. As far as we know, members of no other species possess quite the same ability to experience again now, in a different situation and perhaps in a different form, happenings in the past, and know that the experience refers to an event that occurred in another time and in another place. Other members of the animal kingdom can learn, benefit from experience, acquire the ability to adjust and adapt, to solve problems and make decisions, *but they cannot travel back into the past in their own minds.*”³³

The ability to recall experiences from one's personal past *as they were lived* can be intimately related to a conception of the 'self'. These experiences, as demonstrated by Tulving and others that followed in his footsteps,³⁴ are 'stored' in a distinct way and represent what is referred to as *episodic memory*. This type of memory system is differentiated from *semantic memory* which handles information that is “representational

³³ E. Tulving, *Elements of Episodic Memory*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p 1 (my italics).

³⁴ See E. Tulving, “Episodic Memory and Autonoesis: Uniquely Human?” for a review of the evolution of the theory of episodic memory.

and can be, even if it need not be, described in propositional format.”³⁵ Semantic memory contains ‘knowledge of the world’ both basic (propositional) and as derived from the complex inferences that can be drawn from the interrelationship of various cognitive inputs (generalizations and rules for generalizations). In order for information to be encoded in episodic memory, it must first pass through semantic memory. Our past experiences, while ‘stored’ separately, can be seen as intimately linked and in a way ‘indexed’ to the semantic knowledge we derive from them.

The differentiation and relationship between episodic memory and semantic memory has been established primarily through the study of individuals with brain damage. These individuals, for example, “are capable of acquiring (complex) knowledge about the world even if they cannot remember or ‘autonoetically recollect’ anything of their own past lives.”³⁶ Autonoetic consciousness refers to the ability to *re-live* previous experiences in one’s mind versus the ability to simply have knowledge that these experiences occurred. We ‘see’ these experiences, unmediated by language, and we re-live them, thereby re-experiencing the emotions, motivations, and rational evaluations that they contain.

These studies also highlight that episodic memory is necessary for individuals to project themselves into the future. Individuals who were incapable of remembering their past (autonoetically) were also incapable of responding to questions that asked them to imagine themselves in the future. While semantic memory can provide the basis for the construction of possible future worlds, without the autonoetic capability linked to episodic memory it would not allow the individual to mentally travel into her own personal future.³⁷ In effect, an individual with damaged episodic memory can anticipate the impact of decisions made today on the nature of the world tomorrow, but cannot *imagine themselves within this hypothetical world*.

Tulving also speculates that episodic memory, and the autonoetic awareness it supports, may be essential to moral reasoning. If a moral being, (here Tulving borrows from Darwin) “is one who is capable of reflecting on his past actions and their motives – of approving of some and disapproving of others”³⁸ then such a being would require features central to episodic memory. This hypothetical connection has not been thoroughly explored, but related research that analyzes the interaction of semantic and episodic memory in other complex societal tasks provides some insight.

Klein et al.³⁹ explore the relationship of semantic and episodic memory to the appraisal of personality traits. Their findings point to the conclusion that individuals rely primarily on generalizations retrieved from semantic memory (i.e. if a person is seen to act a certain way they likely possess a certain trait), but individuals also retrieve elements of episodic memory simultaneously to place “boundary conditions on the scope of the generalization.”⁴⁰ In other words, an individual would not retrieve all the episodic memories that were consistent with the generalization, but only those that highlighted

³⁵ Ibid., p 10.

³⁶ Ibid., p 12.

³⁷ Ibid., p 17.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ S. Klein, L. Cosmides, J Tooby, S. Chance, “Decisions and the Evolution of Memory: Multiple Systems, Multiple Functions” *Psychological Review*, Vol 109 No. 2, 2002, pp 306-329.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p 1.

exceptions to the rules that comprise the generalization. Klein et al. believe this interrelationship between episodic and semantic memory is a function of “evolutionary efficiency”.⁴¹ Our minds, rather than needing to consider all our experiences at once in order to gauge a complex characteristic such as a personality trait, rely instead on the most efficient combination of both semantic and episodic memory to prevent error. It is considered plausible by Klein et al. that this skill would have been beneficial in supporting the interaction of humans as they became highly social. It is therefore also speculated that this ability to selectively ‘prime’ trait-inconsistent episodes, together with episodic memory itself, is a fairly late-developing evolutionary outcome. Klein et al. also speculate that multiple priming patterns coexist given the potentially different efficient relation between generalizations and exceptions within different domains:

A system that is well engineered for navigating the social world might be designed to prime different kinds of episodes, depending on the type of social negotiation at hand. *By analyzing such contexts, one should be able to make principled predictions* about the circumstances under which both consistent and inconsistent episodes will be primed.⁴²

Consequently, how memory systems relate to other complex tasks is not necessarily equivalent to the interaction postulated within personality trait recognition.

Episodic memories generally also facilitate the reevaluation of judgments as experiences accumulate. Without a store of episodic memories independent of generalizations formed, it would be more difficult to evaluate when to adjust summary judgments based on new information. If the characterization of an individual as ‘friendly’ is supported by 30 consistent episodes, the awareness of one inconsistent act may be relatively unimportant. In contrast, if the characterization is supported by only one previous episode, the revision of the summary judgment in light of the current inconsistent act may be warranted. Therefore Klein et al. speculate “(w)ithout the original database (of episodic memories), it is difficult to know whether new, inconsistent information should change one’s summary judgment and, if so, by how much.”⁴³

How the design of memory systems interact with other cognitive tasks remains very much a speculative (although progressing) science. As per Klein et al. above, the careful analysis of social contexts can provide the principled predictions necessary to construct theories which then can be empirically validated. I would like to speculate, consistent with Habermas’ view of the philosopher acting as ‘stand-in’ for the empirical sciences,⁴⁴ as to the role of memory systems in the psychic process of moral judgment. This speculation is partially shaped by the weaknesses discussed above and framed by my overview of the socio-cognitive model of moral development Habermas relies on. My goal is to create the initial sketches of an enhanced psychic model that points to revisions in Kohlberg’s analysis that adapt it to address the criticisms discussed earlier in a more direct manner than is provided by Habermas’ responses. I will begin by outlining

⁴¹ S. Klein, et al., p 320-324.

⁴² Ibid., p 324.

⁴³ Ibid., p 314.

⁴⁴ Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, ch. 1..

two elements of the human memory system that intuitively appear relevant to the domain of norm-guided behaviour and moral consciousness.

The first element recognizes the intuitive correlation between the structure of memory as described and the reality of everyday norm-regulated behaviour. It is clear that many (if not all) norms are subject to contextual variations. While the essence of the norm may be revealed through philosophical inquiry and its variation across contexts made rationally consistent, this is unlikely the relation of norm to context that exists within memory systems. The goal of the relation across semantic and episodic memory is not philosophic consistency, but the efficient recognition of the appropriate regulative activity prescribed by a concrete situation. The socialization and ethical insight provided by our lifeworld is represented in semantic memory in the form of generalizations, but it is done in a manner that aims at cognitive efficiency. Rather than construct increasingly complex semantic generalizations to handle all possible norm-guided behaviours, our memory system seeks to optimize the mix of norms and boundary conditions it need access to prompt the appropriate conduct. These relations are built up through experience and form the indexed database upon which individuals depend for norm-guided behaviour. The feedback provided by the social interactions experienced within the lifeworld either reinforces these relations or prompts their reevaluation.

The second element concerns the relation of auto-noetic consciousness to moral reasoning. As mentioned earlier, the recall of episodic memory, if not intentionally initiated within a nostalgic sense, can otherwise be primed externally. When immersed in a moral discourse, even as prescribed by the rigor of discourse ethics, it is conceivable that many elements of the discussion may initiate the auto-noetic re-living of past experiences. The nature of contested norms that form the basis of moral discourse suggests that prior semantic generalizations have lost their unquestioned motivational force. The individual is then required to re-experience the episodes that supported this generalization in light of new moral insights that question the rationality with which these generalizations were formed. The otherwise rational discourse framed by discourse ethics then results in the individual re-living past events auto-noetically and thereby exposing herself to all the emotive and motivational content resident within these events.

Taken together, these elements point towards a reconstruction of human moral development that is markedly different from the adaptation of Kohlberg's descriptive model upon which Habermas relies. For instance, the paradigm shift inherent within the learned move to a post-conventional level of moral reasoning within Kohlberg's analysis would demand, potentially, the complete reorganization of semantic generalizations gleaned from lived experiences. The storage and indexing of these relationships suggests they do not lend themselves easily to wide-scale restructuring. In one sense then, this form of reconstruction of moral reasoning would appear to lend support to Habermas' prediction that the individual for whom the certainty provided by ethical insights has been revealed as illusory, risks disorientation if moral norms are not rebuilt through an appeal to basic principles. Yet acceptance of this relies on the generally linear model or "logic" of development upon which Habermas constructs the relation between conventional and post-conventional levels of moral judgment. Alternatively, these levels can be collapsed and the intuitions that support their distinctions reevaluated.

As Habermas himself clarifies, the socio-cognitive tools necessary for the consideration of ethical insight (the third-party speaker-hearer perspective) are already

available within the conventional level. The appeal to reasons within conventional discourses is limited to the clarification of norms in relation to ethical guidance whose certainty is presupposed. The move towards a hypothetical attitude with respect to the normative context of the lifeworld is seen as one in which the social world which was “naively habituated and was *unproblematically* accepted, is *abruptly* deprived of its quasi-natural validity.”⁴⁵ Yet no ethical framework, no matter how complete, can substantiate the proposition that it provides for an *unproblematic* acceptance in the strict sense. Instead of viewing the lifeworld within the conventional level as unproblematic and as purely hypothetical within the post-conventional level, one could instead focus on the degree of problematization within any lifeworld and collapse the two levels. The recognition of the problematic grounding of ethical systems as a whole, does not necessarily endanger the individual’s commitment to a norm, for instance, that has been reinforced through lived experience. Collapsing the two levels makes room for the recognition of the independently grounded *personal* certainty accumulated through lived experience guided by ethical life.

Within this reconstruction, ethical life provides a framework with which to build initial generalizations. In other words, it provides the rules that support the initial construction of generalizations that guide norm-related behaviour. To accomplish this, the framework of “certainty” initially provided by ethical life must be translated into specific generalizations that can provide for norm-guided conduct within the real world. What is potentially validated through the feedback provided by the adherence to norms so constructed is not only the initial rules (ethical guidance) upon which they were based, but also the *specific generalization an individual has constructed to guide action in the real world*. When the illusion of certainty is removed from the ethical guidance provided by a lifeworld, the specific generalization an individual has constructed is still supported by the positive feedback resident in lived experiences and stored as episodes. The re-living of these episodes and the emotive and motivational content they contain, stands as an independent basis for the norm in question. The reasons supplied within the discourse over contested norms must overcome the influence of the experiential content stored and re-experienced autoethically within episodic memory. This experiential content is not invalidated ‘holus bolus’ (unless perhaps you are a moral philosopher) by the recognition of the general uncertainty characteristic of any and all ethical lifeworlds.

The move to a purely post-conventional moral standpoint would then be equivalent to an unveiling of reasons that cast all of the content of an individual’s lived experience into doubt. This would correspond to a life lived according to an ethical code that was inherently and deeply deficient so as to provide little reinforcing experiential content that could resist the forces of rationalization. The hermeneutic nature of extant ethical codes would appear to rebel against this possibility.

Generally, a theory of moral development sensitive to the nature of episodic and semantic memory systems would seem to be more consistent with Gilligan and Murphy’s views than with those of Kohlberg and Habermas. The progression they suggest towards a “contextual relativism” that is post-conventionally aware in Habermas’ terms, but nevertheless takes the “complexity of lived situations into account” is consonant with the

⁴⁵ Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, p 126 (my italics).

psychic structure of moral development I have sketched above. The fact that the empirical data they collect appear to support this reconstruction provides further support.

Kohlberg's own attempt to adapt to the empirical reality of respondents that prove difficult to score within his own categories of moral development is also informative. His depiction of a "transitional level" that is post-conventional but not yet principled⁴⁶ bears noting in full:

Content of transition: At Stage 4 1/2, choice is personal and subjective. It is based on emotions, conscience is seen as arbitrary and relative, as are ideas such as "duty" and "morally right."

Transitional social perspective: At this stage, the perspective is that of an individual standing outside of his own society and considering himself an individual making decisions without a generalized commitment or contract with society. One can pick and choose obligations, which are defined by particular societies, but one has no principles for such choice.⁴⁷

This transitional level is not dissimilar to that which I have represented as a collapse of the conventional and post-conventional categories. What appears "arbitrary and relative" to Kohlberg and leads him instead to develop a transitional stage may be a function of the testing procedures inherent to his experimental paradigm. These procedures rely on the enunciation of principles in order to qualify a respondent as having graduated from one level of moral development to another. Yet if the model I have sketched is correct, the reasons supporting an individual's choice may be difficult to linguistically relay without resort to poetic or world-disclosing language. The individual at this stage for Kohlberg recognizes the uncertainty of the ethical principles upon which their choice has been shaped, and chooses for arbitrary reasons to continue to adhere to this choice. Within a reconstructed model of moral development, this choice flows consistently from the resiliency provided by lived experiences as a psychic nexus of emotions, motivations and rationalizations and which can be autoethically re-experienced, but are difficult to linguistically relay. Sharing these experiences effectively relies on the world-disclosing possibilities of what Habermas refers to as "poetic" language.

⁴⁶ Habermas rejects this depiction in favour of one that casts this level as relating to the failure of the adolescent to follow one of two paths of moral development initiated by the hypothetical attitude towards conventions. The path leading toward a post-conventional moral standpoint requires that the adolescent attempt to restore the de facto normative validity of existing norms in terms that satisfy rational justification. The alternative path is one of moral skepticism that views all pre-existing norms as reflecting strategic motive. *Ibid.*, p 185-7.

⁴⁷ Kohlberg, p. 411.

The Use of Personal and Idealized Narratives within a Modified Discourse Ethics

The discussions outlined above which attempt to reconstruct moral development and moral reasoning through an awareness of the structure of human memory systems are admittedly only suggestive. Yet even my preliminary inquiry can provide some constructive criticism for use in reshaping the discursive content of a discourse ethics aimed at reaching an understanding on moral issues. If in fact a more accurate reconstruction of human moral development elevates, rather than transcends, the role of experiential content, then discourses aimed at reaching an understanding on moral issues should place more emphasis on the world-disclosing use of language. Poetic language such as is provided in compelling personal narratives ('stories worth telling' in Habermas' terms) provide access to the experiential content which motivates norm adherence within the narrator. In addition, while we are never able to re-live these memories as the same psychic nexus experienced by the narrator, we can autoethnically travel into an imagined future shaped by the poetic input of the story. This effort to 'walk in another's shoes' brings us closer to an understanding of the experiential rather than purely rational bases for their adherence to a norm. The same process can be extended to dialogues between cultures through the use of idealized narratives or parables that provide poetic insight into the equivalent of the experiential bases for ethical cultures as a whole.

The attempt to reach an understanding on contested moral norms does not need to end with the revelations provided by world-disclosing dialogues. Principled arguments can and should still be raised, exchanged and reflected upon. The process of reflection within a modified approach to discourse ethics however, attempts to experience rather than abstract the complexity of lived experiences that vary across individuals and cultural contexts. The suggestion that a greater emphasis be placed on the use of world-disclosing language such as narratives and stories is not a new one, as Young's analysis discussed above makes clear, but few (if any) analyses have attempted to effectively ground this suggestion with reference to psychological theories related to mind and memory. The speculative analysis I have provided above suggests that further research into the interaction of episodic and semantic memory with moral reasoning appears warranted and may well provide a fuller view of this grounding.