

Motives for Consensus: Habermas and Kitcher on Ethical Deliberation

With the aim of proposing a practically effective approach to the problem of moral justification, I combine two different proposals, namely, Jürgen Habermas's discourse ethics and Philip Kitcher's pragmatic naturalism.

In the first part of my paper, I offer a critical analysis of Habermas's system of moral justification. In Habermas's view, justification must not be understood as a procedure based on logical inferences, but as emerged from practical deliberation in such a way that normative claims are conceived of as the result of a *consensual* agreement among those affected by a situation of conflict. With this, Habermas proposes to abandon the old ambition of grounding ethical argumentation on ultimate principles to focus instead on the communicative practices as they occur in everyday life. Even though I consider Habermas's proposal valuable in that it puts forward a formal procedure of justification that is compatible with the principles of pluralism, I regard it as problematic in that it places consensus at the center of moral justification, when consensus is, I claim, neither as usual in real life, nor as easily attainable as he seems to presuppose. Additionally, I call into question the capacity of consensus to guarantee, on its own, the validity of normative claims. Very often, the weight of tradition, social pressure, and the particular power relations that operate within a community lead its members to accept and observe ethical rules that, in reality, do not contribute to their well-being and ful-

fillment, but just the opposite. The fact that a normative claim is consensually accepted is, in summary, a necessary but not sufficient condition for it to be valid.

As a solution to these two problems, I turn to Kitcher's pragmatic naturalism, an alternative approach to ethics in which the notion of altruism plays a fundamental role. There are evident similarities between Kitcher's and Habermas's proposals, for both suggest that ethical norms are the result of a consensual agreement that arises from collective deliberation. Their views concerning the role such a cooperative endeavor plays in social life are, however, different. Habermas conceives of moral argumentation as a means by which to resolve social disagreements. Kitcher, however, regards it as oriented toward a different, broader, goal, namely, the restoration of the capacity for altruism.

Kitcher's proposal provides, I claim, valuable resources toward the resolution of the problems I identified in Habermas's theory. First, I propose to consider the potential of normative claims to promote altruistic responses as a mark of validity—as an additional criterion on the basis of which to decide about their justifiability. My proposal consists, in other words, in accepting as valid only those norms that are endorsed by all those to whom they might affect *and* whose application promotes altruistic responses. Second, I emphasize the importance of the notion of altruism in order to render consensus appealing to those in a situation of disagreement by making explicit the benefits that the promotion of altruistic responses provide to individuals.