

OUR PURSUIT OF A COLLECTIVE UTOPIA

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6/3/18

Introduction

On or off, good or bad, alive or dead. Two options. The most important questions often come down to two options. A validity claim, a question where one can respond either with a yes or no (Leeper, 1996, p.136) Do you love me? Is God real? Am I happy? Am I good? Even our agency to choose comes down to two options, will I or won't I. This binary thought process governs most of our functions, evolution and even our existence. More (yes) or less (no) emotion, effort, force, proteins, molecules, mutations, atoms or quarks. Man kind has taken this idea of yes or no, and revolutionized it into to allow or transform, create or let be; developing it through constant discourse into ideas, concepts, theories, organizations and institutions. Even taking this simple notion of yes or no, and dividing it into a sometimes blurred concept of good or bad. The philosopher Habermas built upon this idea by proposing discourse ethics as the solution to this blurriness and to achieving a truly just and 'good' modern civil society (Cohen, 1988, p. 1). One that realizes true "privacy, property, publicity, free speech, association, and equality before the law" (Cohen, 1988, p. 1). Discourse ethics is an idea which calls for equal participation in public conversation on disputed norms and values (Cohen, 1988, p. 1). In recent and past political spheres, liberalism and democracy have been seen as opposing one another. Advocates of liberalism often consider democracy, a concept of majority rule and participation, as a threat to existing liberties. (Cohen, 1988, p. 1), While, supporters of democracy, denounce liberalism as a barrier to attain true participatory democracy (Cohen, 1988, p. 1). This essay aims to demonstrate that it is rather through discourse ethics as proposed by Jurgen Habermas and the further democratization of modern society that the expanse of freedom and liberty can truly be achieved. This will be done by first giving a short introduction to the Enlightenment period and it's ideas,

by specifically focusing on the works of Emmanuel Kant and Georg Hegel, and the Jurgen Habermas's work on discourse ethics.

The Enlightenment

Before the Enlightenment religion and/or God determined “the rational justification of the world” (Dupre, 2004, p. 3). During the end of the seventeenth and the eighteenth century the enlightenment thinkers, a group limited to “the well-born, the articulate and the lucky” (Gay, 1969, p.4) changed this by simply questioning everything that was considered to be absolute truth. They accomplished this through the process of philosophical reason (Israel, 2001, p. 3).

This brought about a change in the way science was practiced and understood, and was thus fittingly coined “the scientific revolution” (Israel, 2001, p. 4) The Enlightenment thinkers brought about this change despite the fact, that during this period, society was still primarily shaped and governed by lawyers and theologians, who determined what was right and wrong and influenced public and intellectual spheres of discourse (Israel, 2001, p. 10). Conversely, it was due to ‘public spheres’ out of the reach of the public authority, where philosophers could converge in openminded and safe environments, to influence intellectual discourse and openly speared their ideas without fear repercussions (Calhoun, 2008, p. 75).

Emmanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, enlightenment thinkers, like Immanuel Kant believed that by simply using our own understanding, reason and good will, we can achieve our duty (Kant, 1785, p. 430). Kant's definition of duty differs to that of modern day society, in the sense that there is no negative or obligatory connotation to it. To achieve this duty Kant believed all that is needed is freedom (Kant, 1784, p.2) and “the courage to use their own understanding.

Sapere aude!” (Kant, 1784, p. 1). He attributed this apparent lack of courage to use one’s own understanding, to a “self-incurred immaturity”. Kant believed the Enlightenment brought about man’s emergence from this immaturity and understood this emergence to be a longterm rational process (Kant, 1784, p. 1). A process which should allow enlightened individuals the ”freedom to make public use of one’s reason in all matters” granting them the ability and the courage to publicly and critically question every aspect of life (Kant, 1784, p. 1) Although, Kant considered courage and freedom as fundamental features of man’s emergence from immaturity (Kant, 1784. p. 1). He also suggests that individuals should feel compelled to follow what he calls “Moral law”, an idea that insures freedom as autonomy, or freedom from our own desires. According to Kant, desire is “negative freedom” (McCarty, 2015) and should not be considered a free choice, as we cannot autonomously determine our desires.

Kant believed that freedom must be inlined with a principle that determines how we act and behave, he incorporated this idea into his categorical imperative; “I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law” (Kant, 1785, p. 420). Suggesting that individual agents should not contradict, or come into conflict with each other. He considered individuals to be autonomous actors, capable of attaining their end in harmony with others (Guyer, 2006). In Grounwork of the Meaphysis of Morals (1785), Kant proposed that these individual actors should never consider one another as means to an end, but rather as their own ends. He further describes this in his idea of the categorical imperative: “So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” (Kant, 1785, p. 429). Demonstrating that there is no contradiction between thinking for oneself and following moral law.

Georg Hegel

Although Hegel and Kant did not agree on everything (Sedgwick, 2012, p. 2), Hegel's work can be seen as a continuation of Kant's. Like Kant, Hegel also had an interest in freedom, he believed freedom to be "the worthiest and most sacred possession of man" (Hegel, 1820, P. 174).

However, Hegel found Kant's categorical imperative flawed and ineffective in determining ones distinct duty (Sedgwick, 2012, p.2). According to Hegel, one must be able to deduce from any moral law, that societal norms and values facilitate the exhibition of freedom (McCumber, 2014, p.166). He concluded that the institutions such as the family, civil society, and the state actualize freedom, by providing guidance on determining our duty and how to act as a 'good' members of society. Moreover, Hegel believed the good to be synonymous with "the right", a comprehensive term that encompasses all that is just and moral. According to Hegel, the Spirit, which materializes "the right" or human good as a whole, is where freedom comes from (Wood, A., 2011, p.300).

Hegel opposed the notion that the state, laws and norms inhibit freedom. He maintains that freedom does not occur naturally, and that the state (institutions), limits not freedom, but primitive desires, and that this process is essential for achieving true freedom (Wood, A., 2011, p. 304).

Furthermore, Hegel divided this 'right' or good into a subjective and objective good. The self-awareness of social order, actualized through action and social customs determined the subjective good. While a combined effort and shared rational social order produced the objective good. Hegel describes this process of subjective and objective good as incapable of being self sufficient or self-maintaining. He believed, the components, political principles and ideas of the

state hold this process together and to be the embodiment of the Spirit. Hegel defines the presence of free will, expressed through a rational social standard as ethical life (Wood, A., 2011, p.301). The State supports freedom by providing an external order or framework for ethical life. Hegel adds that Ethical life consists of three institutions. The modern family, which is the expression of the love and unity of the man, 'the bread winner', and the woman, 'the caretaker'. Civil Society, as the market where individuals convene to achieve their own duty or self-interest, of which is made possible through the right of property. Additionally, it provides a way for people to relate in economic life, and be regulated by each other. Establishing the modern conception of the individual, which consists of "universal standards of arbitrary freedom, property and mutual recognition"(Wood, A., 2011, p.301). Lastly, Hegel describes the State as an externalized conception of the Spirit constructed through the expression of freedom and will (Wood, A., 2011, p.302-303). For Hegel, the state allows the subjective and objective good to coexist harmoniously.

Finally, Hegel and most philosophers of the enlightenment believed freedom, achieved through reason, will guide us to a society where everyone's personal concerns "are in harmony" (Singer, 2001, p. 53) with the rest. Hegel believed this could only be accomplished through a "dialectical movement" (Singer, 2001, p.102), a back-and forth debate on the future of society.

Habermas Discourse Ethics

Habermas agrees with Hegel and further develops this idea of a back and forth discussion into his theory of discourse ethics. Discourse ethics makes it possible to participate in a practical conversation or debate that arrives at "valid, rational, consensus on social norms (Cohen, 1988,

p. 2). It achieves this by formulating rules and communication postulations to aid this discourse process (Cohen, 1988, p. 2). Habermas states that discourse ethics serves as “the standard for distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate norms” (Cohen, 1988, p. 2). Furthermore, he states that this standard is composed of two fundamental principles. Firstly, the necessary conditions must be met to achieve a legitimate rational agreement, and secondly the contents of the agreement must be formulated. Prompting that a norm is to be deemed legitimate only if all those concerned, participate and reach an agreement that the norm should remain or be enforced. However, determining what is a rationally motivated agreement can have some challenging conditions. To assure that all involved have an “effective quality of opportunity to assume dialogue roles”, an unrestricted shared and reciprocal acknowledgment of all claims made by concerned participants must be achieved. Additionally, the discourse must be a public process, and not be restricted by any political or economic power. Moreover, it must be accessible to anyone capable of speech and action. In addition to this framework, participants must also be able to alter the level of discourse and progressively radicalize argument at all levels” (Cohen, 1988, p. 2). Nothing should be disregarded or taboo. To summarize, this process to arrive at a consensus on the legitimacy of a norm incorporates “symmetry, reciprocity, and reflexivity”(Cohen, 1988, p. 2).

Habermas maintains that a real conversation must be held, rather than a virtual one, as “only actually carried out discourse allows the exchange of roles of each with every actor and hence a genuine universalization of perspective that excludes no one.” (Cohen, 1988, p. 3) Arguing that only then can we truly know if we all collectively agree on the same thing. It is here that Habermas revises the categorical imperative. “Instead of prescribing to all others as valid the

maxim which I will to be a general law, I have to offer my maxim to everyone with the aim of discursively testing its claim to universalizability. The emphasis has shifted from what each and every individual can will without contradiction be a general law to what each and every one will recognize in consensus as a universal norm” (Cohen, 1988, p. 3). Suggesting that the categorical imperative lacks a dialogue, where interpretations, needs and interests of all concerned are heard, and a decision is made on whether there is a common interest that can be established as a norm.

An immediate question that comes to mind is how can we possibly put this to practice, and know if a consensus is valid or if a particular norm truly represents everyone. Although I personally cannot fully answer these questions or concerns, permit me to give that of Habermas.

He suggests that these questions fail to realize that all consensus are purely empirical and are based on verifiable observations and experiences, rather than theory and have thus been tested. To discredit rational and empirical consensus achieved through discourse, opposes the equality and the rationality of those involved (Cohen, 1988, p. 3).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Habermas work aims to provide a discourse theory based off of Kant’s work on ethics. Habermas tries not to renounce the Kant’s theories but rather tries to redirect it. Both Kant and Habermas promote a universalistic approach. However, Habermas aims to shift ‘literarily’ the conversation from a solitary categorical imperative, to that of a communal/collective dialogue. In short the categorical imperative or universal maxims cannot be determined alone. The universality of norms can only be achieved through an open and unrestricted discourse. Ethical Discourse: a simple discussion on how we want to live, and be treated. Accompanied by the agency to choose not to do so. This choice is often also seen as a temptation, one that is a

constant fight not to give in to. However, as a collective, history has shown, that we tend to choose 'the good'. As a collective we've pushed forward through unbelievable boundaries. We've transformed and created a world of wonder and good, with a constantly evolving pursuit to eradicate "the bad". Slowly improving upon every aspect of life through discourse and experimentation. Once upon a time, the idea of a free world seemed unattainable, the trust and partnership unachievable. But the enlightenment changed that, It brought forth an idea. A good for all. One that pursues equality, and respect. One that believes that knowledge is power and that it is our duty to speak up! Over centuries these idea has progressed into the democratic society that we now live in.

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