

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

Adult Education Research Conference

2009 Conference Proceedings (Chicago, IL)

Dewey and Habermas: Re-reading Ethics for Adult Education

Davin Carr-Chellman

Pennsylvania State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Carr-Chellman, Davin (2009). "Dewey and Habermas: Re-reading Ethics for Adult Education," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2009/papers/15>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Dewey and Habermas: Re-reading Ethics for Adult Education

Davin Carr-Chellman
Pennsylvania State University, USA

Abstract: The relevance of Dewey and Habermas's ethics for adult education is grounded in epistemology and learning, in particular delineating the centrality of ethics -- normative conceptions of right and wrong -- to how we come to know and understand the world, generate meaning, and hence, learn.

There has been interesting and important research into how we learn *about* ethics: from Kohlberg to Brookfield. An important corollary to this scholarly pursuit, and one of particular interest to adult education, focuses instead on the ethics of learning: understanding better what happens when we learn, while also fleshing out the relevance of ethics for the quality of that learning. My argument is that the heart of the relationship between ethics and learning is intersubjectivity and the moral demands that flow from that intersubjectivity -- an ethics of intersubjectivity, perhaps. Dewey and Habermas both have ethical theories that are grounded in epistemological intersubjectivity, or the notion that our knowledge of the world and ourselves is social in origin, the upshot being that our capacity and opportunities to learn are directly tied to the nature of our social relations. Learning, then, is clearly important to ethical development in that we do learn how to be ethical. What we should also consider is how the ethical character and quality of our intersubjectivity directs our learning. Theorizing learning in this way has implications for the moral and emancipatory potential of our social institutions.

The initial entry into the nexus of Dewey and Habermas' ethics and adult education is intersubjectivity. "It is this that is Hegel's great idea since it reveals how ethical life matters independent of any particular moral norms, laws, ideals, principles, or ends. Ethical life is not, in the first instance, about moral principles, but about the ways in which both particular actions and whole forms of action injure, wound, and deform recipient and actor alike; it is about the secret bonds connecting our weal and woe to the lives of all those around us" (Bernstein, 2003). Intersubjectivity is a core notion in late 20th - early 21st century social theory, perhaps *the* core notion (Lotz, 2006). Questions at the heart of this inquiry into intersubjectivity include, for example, 'who is the other?,' 'What is the other?,' and 'Does the other precede me?,' and any serious approach to social philosophy must reckon with the content of this area. The argument around which these questions revolve declares that concepts such as consciousness, self, and subjectivity only make sense if they are viewed as social concepts: the colloquially solipsistic characteristics of consciousness, i.e. I have consciousness of the turkey dinner in front of me; self, i.e. I understand my-self as an empathetic creature; and subjectivity, i.e. I have subjectivity because my interpretation of events is most powerful in my world view; are only useful and ameliorative to society if understood as primarily generated *through* other things. For Dewey and Habermas, experience -- generated through other things -- is mediated (not immediate), causing Copernican turns in our epistemological foundations. In other words, coming to know things about ourselves (consciousness) and coming to know things about the world requires an-other to read back to us the meanings of our actions. The common thread between Dewey and Habermas is Hegel and the mediated nature of self-consciousness that he outlines in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1979). This common thread constitutes the ethics of intersubjectivity. For Habermas, the Hegelian influence of the dialectic of intersubjectivity is well-documented and foundational to his approach to communicative rationality and ethics as a direct antidote to

instrumental rationality. J.M. Bernstein, a prominent scholar of Habermas and Critical Theory, makes this apparent,

Whereas the validity of rules of instrumental action has an empirical backing, the validity of social norms 'is grounded in the intersubjectivity of the mutual understanding of intentions and secured by the general recognition of obligations.' In the domain of instrumental reason, then, the world is constituted in terms of a polarity of subject and object, where what makes something an 'object' is precisely the application of instrumental rules and reasoning to it; while in communicative action there is always an assumption of reciprocity between self and other, ego and alter-ego. . . According to Habermas, all human subjectivity, that is, all experiences by individuals of themselves as distinct persons, is grounded in intersubjectivity. Self-awareness does not arise through isolated, private acts of introspection or self-reflection. Rather, one begins to see oneself only through becoming aware of how others see one. This complex accomplishment occurs above all through language. The framework of communicative action is that within which human beings are constituted as self-conscious subjects (1995, 42-43).

As opposed to Habermas, Dewey was not part of the tradition of critical theory that guided Habermas, and he did not inherit the notion of identity thinking and instrumental rationality as a primary ethical problem. Another important difference is that, while Habermas and Dewey share a common intellectual forebear in Hegel, Dewey struggled throughout his long professional life to become an anti-dialectical thinker, working to overcome dualities rather than engage them. Consequently, the intellectual relationship between Dewey and Hegel, and also Dewey and Habermas is more complicated. But the relationship is there, and does carry significant potential for theorizing emancipatory adult education. There exists a common phenomenological beginning -- Hegel's *Phenomenology* -- which highlights the Hegelian movement at the heart of Dewey and Habermas' ethics: the causality of fate which pushes ethics into the primary position -- ethics as first philosophy. This means that what Hegel had to say about knowledge, reason, and objectivity, for example, must be read through the dynamics of ethical life. The Hegelian causality of fate lives on in Habermas and Dewey via the central notion of the intersubjective construction of self-consciousness.

John Dewey's ethical theory, often maligned as narrowly instrumental and consequentialist (Aiken, 1962, p.83), provides remarkably provocative and fertile ground on which to base a fresh interpretation of the learning transaction such that human subjectivity is enhanced rather than diminished. "The problem," says Dewey, "of restoring integration and cooperation between man's (sic) beliefs about the world in which he lives and his beliefs about the values and purposes that should direct his conduct is the deepest problem of modern life. It is the problem of any philosophy that is not isolated from that life" (Dewey, 1960a, p. 255). At an important juncture in his development as a scholar, Dewey fell under the influence of William James' *Principles of Psychology* (1952), marking the final point of departure from Hegelianism. James showed that all mental activity is purposeful, originating in and guided by the efforts of a living creature to adapt to changing environmental conditions. For Dewey, this marks the beginning of his mature ethical philosophy in which a detailed analysis of the actual processes of inquiry lead to the formation of particular moral judgments. The ultimate goal for Dewey was to conceive of ethical theory, indeed all theory, as something generated from within practice and in response to practice. He wished to illuminate the human situation as *radically experiential* such that the inherent resources and constraints of such experience could be located and utilized. The result would be individuals and communities better equipped to solve their own problems. As such, theory is no longer imposed on practice from the outside, but becomes instead a genuine part of the means for the intelligent amelioration of practice. Dewey's prescription is that one cannot determine what an adequate ethical theory will be without examining what kind of moral theory works better in our actual lives. Dewey did not prescribe universal moral imperatives,

rather he elucidated and explained forms of behavior most beneficial to human beings in coping with problematic situations. "To find the guidance for rectifying a particular situation, it is necessary to give up looking for a universal theoretical formula and get on to the difficult task of studying, 'the needs and alternative possibilities lying within a unique and localized situation' [Dewey, 1930, p. 196]" (Pappas, 1998, p. 105). Dewey thus advocated an approach to moral decision-making that may be termed 'situational.' The implication is not that we ignore or deny any ethical knowledge or guidance (because experience *is* intellectually cumulative -- there are stabilities in experience, something Dewey referred to as *continuity*), but that this prior experience alone does not have normative force: it must meet the demands of the current problematic situation. Pappas characterizes Dewey's ethical theory as advocating a moral life that is intelligent because it educates itself, aesthetic because it proceeds in a meaningful mode of engagement, and democratic because it engages a certain kind of community and communication (1998, p. 116). The ultimate goal for Dewey was solving the genuine problems of human beings by increasing opportunities for growth: "The central factor in moral judgment is the growth of the self: the cultivation of habits and dispositions that will sustain the capacity for intelligent choice" (Johnstone, 190). Conduct is understood as a product of the self. "The real moral question is what kind of a self is being furthered and formed. And this question arises with respect to both one's own self and the selves of others" (Dewey, 1960b, p. 159). Johnstone goes on to explain the moral imperative of Dewey's notion of 'the growth of the self':

The self is formed, Dewey argues by the choices it makes and by the experiences that flow from them. ... Choice also forms the self by determining the nature of the experience to which it will be led by its own acts. On this view, *any* choice can give formative impulse to the developing self, and thus can have moral import. When we attempt to remake the world in ways that will institute our values, we remake ourselves. Because growth is the 'only moral end,' the obligation attending any attempt to respond to the problematic in life is to look for methods of doing so that will respect the demand for growth (Johnstone, 190).

The moral imperative of growth, as it is pursued through inquiry and the method of intelligence, is also inescapably social: problematic situations are by nature social situations. Dewey, especially in his educational writings, constantly emphasizes that the growth of the personality and the generation of the conditions most conducive to that growth is fundamentally a social quest: "Morality is social [because] the formation of habits of belief, desire, and judgment is going on at every moment under the influence of conditions set by men's [sic] contact, intercourse, and association's with one another" (Dewey, 1930, p. 295). Clearly Dewey's radical empiricism necessarily entails intersubjectivity, but we can really see it working in the social nature of morality. Intersubjectivity *is* the mutual constitution of subject and object on the social level. Implicit in Dewey's understanding of experience as radically empirical is the mediated and social formation of intelligence. The upshot is that Dewey focuses on communication as necessary to maximizing our potential as learners, and, consequently, as ethical creatures. This characteristic, with remnants of the Hegelian dialectic, had direct influence on George Herbert Mead. In turn, Mead and American pragmatism carried great influence on the ethics of Jurgen Habermas.

Jurgen Habermas is arguably the most influential philosopher and social theorist of the last 30 years. His ideas, particularly the notion of communicative rationality and ethics, have been adopted by scholars in nearly every sphere of the human and social sciences. In the field of adult education, his influence on Mezirow's theory of transformational learning has been prominent, but, in the last decade or so, Habermas's influence has moved beyond transformational

learning -- even as that focus within adult education has also broadened significantly -- to other scholars seeking to open pathways to emancipatory education. Perhaps the most well-known and representative product of this Habermasian movement in adult education is Michael Welton's edited text, *In Defense of the Lifeworld: Critical Perspectives on Adult Learning* (1995). Welton's own essay in the text offers some explanation of Habermas' significance to adult education: "Habermas' work is of central importance for critical educational theory and practice. Of all contemporary theorists, Habermas is the one person who has consistently and consciously placed individual and social learning processes at the core of his massive project" (p. 136). Writing more recently, Stephen Brookfield argues that adult learning is an integral part of Habermas' move beyond Marx in reconstructing society in the twenty-first century, "Here the centrality of learning -- particularly adult learning -- clearly emerges. If a distinguishing characteristic of humans is their capacity to learn, then social science and educational theoreticians need to focus much more centrally on how adults learn to create a more moral, just democracy" (2005, p. 223). Characteristically, Welton makes this notion more concrete by arguing that, "Habermas' sociological theory (his dualistic model of the system and the lifeworld) and theory of rationalization (his view of the historical unfolding of learning potential in modernity) provide us with the necessary boundary frame and constituent conceptual elements for the study of social learning processes" (1995, p. 134). Not to be confused with Bandura's social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), Welton's notion of social learning is very Deweyan/Habermasian in scope: "The new, or emergent social learning paradigm, would construct the boundary of the field as wide as society itself, and would include everything that forms the outlook, character, and actions of communicative agents in space and time. All of society is a vast school" (1995, p. 134).

Accordingly, much like Dewey, ethics is central to Habermas' entire philosophy, which makes it both difficult to tease-out, and also tremendously important to adult learning. "For Habermas, then, 'a critical theory of society can no longer be constructed in the exclusive form of a critique of political economy' [quoting Habermas, 1970, P. 120]. It must broaden its concern to investigate matters of morality and communication and how a democratic society might organize itself to promote the fullest and freest communication possible among its members. . . This has led him to engage with American pragmatism. . ." (Brookfield, 2005, P. 224). Sounding very much like Dewey, it has also led him to affirm the possibility of reestablishing reason to serve the creation of humane democracy. "In *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (Habermas, 1992b, p. 114), he states as his aim, 'to defend and make fruitful for social theory a concept of reason that attends to the phenomenon of the lifeworld and permits the consciousness of society as a whole. . . to be reformulated on a basis of a theory of intersubjectivity. . . Habermas' view of critical theory ' retains a concept of reason which asserts itself simultaneously against both scientific mutilation and existentialist downgrading, and which is furthermore also critically applied to itself' (Habermas, 1992a, p. 55)" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 227). Using a theory of intersubjectivity, Habermas develops his communicative rationality and discourse ethics as the primary method of rescuing the 'lifeworld' from the deadening force of instrumental reason.

Interestingly enough, it is precisely the 'call and response,' 'pitch and catch' characteristics of communication that Habermas identifies as the motive force in individual moral development: the development of the Habermasian "moral point of view" -- largely coterminous with Kohlberg's third and final stage of moral development called post-conventional interaction (Kohlberg et al., 1983) -- describes individuals capable of recognizing the fallible nature of their convictions even as they continue to act on them, always enlightening their own self-understandings with the perspectives of others. This is the very same intersubjective core

operating in Dewey's ethics, resulting in a very strong sense that, for Dewey and Habermas, to the extent we are able to act with a constant reference to mutuality, recognition, and reciprocity in our communication, we will learn/grow most effectively.

Welton and Brookfield each point to Habermas as opening doors for truly emancipatory institutions within a more moral democracy. I argue that Dewey, properly interpreted and creatively applied, stands shoulder-to-shoulder with Habermas in this work. To illustrate more precisely *how* their ethical theories open these doors and why adult learning is the engine driving the process, let's look at an ethical problem; an ethical problem that is, at the same time, a learning problem. As adult educators, I will argue that this ethical problem is among the most pernicious and debilitating of any we currently face -- the broadly experienced *ignorance or avoidance of acts of genuine human subjectivity*.

Genuine human subjectivity is risky, and our efforts to avoid it are well documented. The stakes are high: denial of this risk is at the very source of the dehumanizing tendencies so prominent in late modern or post-modern existence, as exemplified by the bureaucratic rationalization and commodification of nearly every slice of contemporary life. "The world is not made up of certainties (2003, p. 361)," Freire says, but the urge to harness and tease some certainties out of our uncertain human raw material -- the urge to eliminate the risk of living a human life -- brings us to a blind reliance on science, technology, and statistics (for example), as well as an uninformed dispassionate acceptance of existing, reified power structures. Maybe this drive to overcome human entropy is ingrained in our DNA, but I don't think so. Certainly, we are constantly striving to better understand the world, to make sense of the apparently arbitrary events that happen to us, e.g. a bout with cancer, a car accident, or even a student's refusal to engage classroom material. But this honest striving to understand has morphed into deterministic scientism, creating for us lives and social contexts that, while appearing entirely rational, in fact only serve to alienate us from each other and ourselves. Walker Percy describes this alienation saying, "science cannot utter a single word about an individual molecule, thing, or creature insofar as it is an *individual*, but only insofar as it is *like other individuals*" (1975). Put another way, he means that your cancer is only understandable and, thus, treatable, to the extent that it is statistically like other episodes of cancer. Your *particular* and *individual* cancer is meaningless. This logic has useful results for some things and purposes, but certainly not all -- or even most -- things and purposes, and most certainly not most human things and purposes. This logic represses the idiosyncratic nature of the best of what we call human, performing a dangerous ideological violence on all upsurges of genuine individuality or genuine subjectivity. Never mind that it attempts to overcome a fundamental reality of human existence: change, uncertainty, risk, or what Freire describes when he says that "the world is made of the tension between the certain and the uncertain" (2003, p. 361). This logic is called instrumental rationality, and, while it has generated economic wealth and scientific advances, it has done so at great cost. At the risk of overstating the case, in this situation, the irrationality we associate with something like fascist totalitarianism is already present within the action of subjective rationality and self-expression. Genuine subjectivity is impossible because we are all already subsumed by ideological subjectivity, which consequently, precludes forms of reason that empower individuals to imagine deep notions of democracy and justice. This is an ethical problem with an educational solution.

Those of us curious about what might be called an emancipatory adult education practice need to understand this important ethical challenge to learning, theorize the learning transaction in a way that recognizes and seeks to ameliorate the ethical challenge of instrumental rationality, and develops practices that reassert the uncertainty of human existence. Freire has coined an apt phrase for what kind of learning must happen: we must "learn to read the world before learning to

read the word" (Freire, P. & Macedo, D., 2003). By learning to read the world, we can make explicit the history of cultural production and reproduction that has arbitrarily constructed a particular social position based on race, class, gender, or sexuality. Reading the world in this way communicates a sense of agency to those who have been arbitrarily, yet systematically, disempowered by the reified social structures created by enlightenment rationality.

The work of Habermas in developing communicative rationality -- as opposed to instrumental or enlightenment rationality -- has been the primary theoretical move to locate 'a more encompassing reason grounded in being.' In this way (and in many others), Habermas remains a product of the Frankfurt School, an intellectual heir to Horkheimer and Adorno, and a (perhaps *the*) luminary in contemporary Critical Theory. But Habermas has also moved in broader directions to aid his search for a new type of rationality: appropriately enough, he came to the new world for a fresh theoretical perspective, relying on a Chicago Pragmatist as foundational to his vision -- George Herbert Mead. Consequently, the groundwork has been set for a strong ethical antidote to our fear of genuine human subjectivity. Through the interstices of Deweyan and Habermasian ethics we can arrive at a Freirean emancipatory adult education: it is precisely a Freirean "reading of the world," that Dewey and Habermas' ethics can help us approach. In this direction, a solid beginning point is the recognition that emancipatory education is about communication. Freire's pedagogy of freedom is an elegant and humane form of communication that seeks to provide some substance to our claims of emancipation. For Freire, critical, emancipatory pedagogy is both a producer and a product of democracy, while communication is the *modus operandi* through which the dialectic of "learner" and "teacher," and "subject" and "object" operates and constructs the genuine subjectivity required for substantive democracy to be realized. Freire says, "To think correctly implies the existence of subjects whose thinking is mediated by objects that provoke and modify the thinking subject. Thinking correctly is, in other words, not an isolated act. . .but an act of communication. . .something that belongs essentially to the process of co participation" (1998, p. 42).

Communication understood this way involves us constantly in a "permanent process of social and historical construction and reconstruction" (Freire, 1998, p.38). This process *is* critical self-reflection, and, accordingly, its participants understand that it can only be realized, not simply through other people, but through other people necessarily regarded and respected as 'subjects,' equal participants in the creation of knowledge and the educative experience. The ". . .mutual adjustment and coordination whereby a vague or indeterminate situation becomes clearer," as Alexander paraphrases Dewey, is the product of a critical and emancipatory pedagogy; the very same pedagogy that Freire calls a pedagogy of freedom. The designation 'freedom' is earned when the participants in this process can look back on their pedagogical *intersubjective transaction* and see that they have made the world better by communicating in a non-authoritarian, mutually beneficial way; a way that, by default, recognizes and respects the deeply contextual nature of learning. This pedagogy of freedom can't help but add some substance to our formal democracy, chipping away -- perhaps -- at the ideological edifice of instrumental rationality.