Discussing Morality and Democracy:

Focusing on Discourse Ethics

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Abstract

This paper re-examines discourse ethics from the perspective of the democratic public sphere, with a focus on its implications for moral education. By analyzing the relationship between discussion activities and democratic will-formation, it highlights the importance of cultivating solidarity alongside moral justice. The study argues that discussion itself should be understood as a form of democratic practice and calls for a reconsideration of moral education based on the local contexts of each community.

Key words: moral education, discourse ethics, democratic public sphere, will-formation, solidarity

Introduction

How can moral education be transformed into democratic education? To consider this question, I examine Jürgen Habermas's discourse ethics, which is referenced in research on communication-based moral education in Japan. This paper investigates the democratic aspects of communication in moral education by rethinking discourse ethics and clarifying the relationship between the activities involved in communication and the democratic public sphere

1. Discourse ethics as a moral universalism sensitive to difference

To explore the theoretical framework of discourse ethics, I will refer to the essay "A Genealogical Analysis of the Cognitive Content of Morality" from *The Inclusion of the Other*. Its content can be summarized as follows. The understanding of morality in

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Europe can be traced back to the religious world of Catholicism, in which values and norms became concretely persuasive. The moral imperative was the Bible. The relationship between God and believers is characterized by two moral relations: the solidarity of the community of believers and the justice as "a unique person individuated by his life history" (Habermas, 1999a: 10). However, as it gradually became increasingly difficult to derive the validity of moral imperatives from a religious foundation, and as the foundations of post-metaphysics were sought, a direction emerged to reconstruct morality from "the reason and the will of its participants" (Habermas, 1999a: 12). After explaining this shift in moral understanding, Habermas turns his attention to communication as a discourse on norms, which has been viewed as a function that "every moral system provides a solution to the problem of coordinating actions among beings who are dependent on social interaction" (Habermas, 1999a: 16‑17).

Three characteristics can be observed in this understanding of morality. First, while recognizing the significance of moral emotions, Habermas distinguishes between "the better reasons" and "the more impressive expressions of feelings," stating that agreement based on feelings is not sufficient (Habermas, 1999a: 18‑20). Second, he makes an important distinction between the concepts of "justice" and "the good," arguing that "without the priority of the right over the good one cannot have an ethically neutral conception of justice" (Habermas, 1999a: 28). The third point concerns the understanding of solidarity with strangers as a matter of justice. While equality—where everyone is equally recognized—may be achievable through ethical goodness, it is only through understanding the universalist content of morality as justice that we can explain the moral obligation to "take responsibility for another" (Habermas, 1999a: 29). This understanding of morality represents an attempt to "project a universally binding collective good on which the solidarity of all human beings—including future generations—" (Habermas, 1999a: 28) can be grounded. The community here is conceived from "the enlarged first person plural perspective of a community that does not exclude anybody" (Habermas, 1999a: 30).

This understanding of morality expresses the position of "a moral universalism sensitive to difference" (Habermas, 1999a: 40). This position is based on the idea that "the equal respect for everyone else" takes "the form of a *nonleveling* and *nonappropriating* inclusion of the other *in his otherness*" (Habermas, 1999a: 40), and that "the missing of a 'transcendent good' can be replaced in an 'immanent' fashion only by appeal to the intrinsic constitution of the practice of deliberation" (Habermas, 1999a: 41).

As we have seen thus far, discourse ethics attempts to address the difficult problem

of deriving principles for the reconstruction of morality from a postmetaphysical perspective. In discourse ethics, morality is concerned with procedures that secure the legitimacy of moral norms rather than prioritizing any particular content. In other words, instead of determining and promoting specific values, discourse ethics emphasizes higher-order principles through which such values can be assessed, suggesting a shift toward reevaluating these principles as constitutive of morality. In this sense, discourse ethics seeks to understand morality within a universalist framework, while recognizing the importance of individual value communities and affirming the moral significance of sustaining both dimensions.

2. Moral education based on discourse ethics

If we base our thinking on the idea of discourse ethics, the only moral principle is the principle of universalization. This principle, known as (U), states: "Unless all affected can *freely* accept the consequences and the side effects that the *general* observance of a controversial norm can be expected to have for the satisfaction of the interests of *each individual*" (Habermas, 1999b: 93), the norm cannot be considered morally valid. Habermas argues that the principle of universalization is an "intuition" tacitly presupposed by anyone who participates in discourse (Habermas, 1999b: 92‑93).

Given this distinction between theoretical and practical discourse, it is clear that a norm acceptable to all without coercion does not presuppose an external truth. Since the central idea is that moral norms are generated through reflection in practical discourse, Habermas formulates the following discourse principle (D): "Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in a practical discourse" (Habermas, 1999b: 93). This explanation demonstrates that all participants are assumed to have access to the discourse. The reason for universalism is that a valid norm is one that all individuals can accept without coercion. Furthermore, it reflects a consistent understanding of justice—one that values not only the particular good of each community but also justice itself and the ideal of an open, inclusive community.

Habermas argues that certain conditions must be met for a successful discussion. He identifies the following four conditions, all of which must be present: "(i) Nobody who could make a relevant contribution may be excluded; (ii) that all participants are granted an equal opportunity to make contributions; (iii) that the participants must mean what they say; and (iv) that communication must be freed from external and internal coercion

so that the "yes" or "no" stances solely by the rational force of the better reasons"(Habermas, 1999a: 44).

Discussions satisfying these conditions are expected to lead to social integration through their outcomes, thereby contributing to the conceptualization of a democratic society. As Habermas explains, "Deliberative politics acquires its legitimating force from the discursive structure of an opinion-and will-formation that can fulfill its socially integrative function only because citizens expect its results to have a reasonable *quality*" (Habermas, 1998: 304).

In this sense, moral education based on discourse ethics involves contacting the values and formation of morality by emphasizing discussion activities related to morality; from a classroom perspective, it entails being a practice that leads to the conception of a democratic society. This practice does not rely on externally imposed standards of rightness; rather, teachers and students collaboratively determine the validity and goodness of norms through discussion. In Japan, aspects of this moral lesson research have been introduced and discussed by scholars in the field of the philosophy of education. Drawing inspiration from previous studies, the following joint research project on moral lessons was developed.

3. Research on moral education classes

For several years, I have been collaborating with teachers to revitalize discussion-based activities in moral education classes in junior high schools. Specifically, I have engaged in an ongoing dialogue with the moral education department at one such school to deepen our shared understanding of the challenges surrounding moral education, and since last year, we have been working together to design classes that enrich students' discussion experiences. A request to consider the types of questions that could be used in moral education classes emerged during a meeting with junior high school teachers. In response, I proposed the following three types of questions: (1) questions that encourage students to examine their own opinions based on underlying reasons, (2) questions that promote group consensus building, and (3) questions that guide the class toward the development of more comprehensive (holistic) perspectives and opinions. To prevent discussions from turning into personal attacks, students collaboratively established discussion rules, such as respecting the opinions of their peers, and we took steps to create a classroom environment conducive to calm and thoughtful dialogue. Joint research was conducted by first administering a pre-survey to students, implementing and recording moral lessons

using the specially designed questions, and finally, conducting a post-survey. The key findings of this process are outlined below.

Students' interest in moral education lessons was found to be closely related to their sense of psychological safety toward the teacher. Furthermore, psychological safety within the discussion groups increased after moral education lessons that incorporated the specially designed questions[1]. In addition, students who reported higher psychological safety in the pre-survey tended to demonstrate a stronger attitude toward comprehensive consensus building in the post-survey. However, no significant change was observed in the students' general attitudes toward consensus building or in their discussion participation behaviors between the pre- and post-surveys. In their written reflections, some students mentioned not only forming their own opinions but also deepening their understanding of others' ideas and considering what is most important. However, there were no comments reflecting the value of the discussion activity itself or the process of verbalizing one's thinking.

These findings highlight both the significance of efforts to create moral values and reconcile differing views through discussion, and it is difficult to get a grip on such activities. Therefore, it is necessary to consider how the experience of discussion can be further enriched within moral education. In light of this collaborative research project, let us revisit the relationship between discussion and democracy.

4. Rethinking discourse from the perspective of democratic public sphere

One issue that emerges from research on moral education is that students may not fully engage with the public dimension of discussion activities—activities with the potential to generate shared moral values. This suggests the need to further explore the educational value of discussion in moral education and pursue an approach that reflects the democratic process of opinion formation, as emphasized in discourse ethics, rather than confine learning to the private sphere.

Axel Honneth's concept of the democratic public sphere is crucial here. This sphere encompasses individuals' practical actions; it is not only of historical significance but also offers important insights for addressing contemporary issues. The concept of the democratic public sphere is understood as the need "to include everybody affected by decisions about the future political order in the free process of will-formation" (Honneth, 2014: 288). This notion emphasizes that the democratic public sphere entails continuous effort toward achieving equality. Central to this idea is the cultivation of "a culture of

democratic inclusion" (Honneth, 2014: 304). From this perspective, this can be seen as an expanded interpretation of Habermas's notion of accepting the other, framed within the broader context of democratic inclusion.

From the perspective of political culture, "the motive for such commitment to the public good in modern democracies generally springs from the binding force of solidarity among citizens, which obligates the members of society to feel responsible for each other and make the necessary sacrifices" (Honneth, 2014: 292). According to Honneth, these "feelings of solidarity" are "revitalizing the democratic public", however, today, "the national basis of solidarity among citizens is in the process of dissolving" (Honneth, 2014: 293). We are now confronted with the challenge of conceptualizing civic connectedness in terms of abstract solidarity.

In light of the challenge of redefining civic connectedness through abstract forms of solidarity, it is necessary to reconsider the role of moral education from the perspective of the democratic public sphere. When re-examining moral education in terms of discourse ethics within this framework, several key issues emerge.

First, because discourse ethics adopts "a concept of the individual as essentially socialized" (Habermas, 2001: 60), it must be reconstructed with attention to the educational process of children and young people who are still in the midst of becoming socialized. Second, people's actions and commitments to discursive activities must be sustained over time. In this respect, discourse ethics, as a form of universalism sensitive to differences, must place greater emphasis on democratic behavior as a moral sentiment that fosters solidarity. Third, since opinion formation entails "participation in the process of will-formation" (Honneth, 2014: 288), educational practices must aim to create opportunities in which students come to value the very act of collaborative engagement.

In general, discourse ethics values the formation of inclusive perspectives that incorporate everyone involved in the process of opinion formation without excluding anyone. However, such inclusivity does not arise spontaneously; rather, it must be actively realized through practice. The idea of including all people in their diversity, along with the practices necessary to achieve this, must be regarded as foundational. In other words, activities in which people work together to form a collective must be emphasized. From this perspective, discussion is not simply a communication tool but a distinctive practice through which moral values and opinions are generated. Therefore, each specific moral education lesson requires not only an analysis of the diversity among students but also consideration of the unique conditions that shape the classroom as a whole.

Concluding Remarks

This study, by re-examining discourse ethics from the perspective of the democratic public sphere, demonstrates that discourse places value on discussion as a crucial component in sustaining both morality and democratic will-formation. In particular, the need to recognize solidarity as an essential element alongside moral justice has come to the fore. To realize these aims, it is necessary to develop a mode of thinking that regards deliberation not merely as a tool for refining one's own ideas but as a form of democratic behavior in itself. In other words, the future direction of moral education is to incorporate solidarity as part of the democratic process of will-formation and to rethink practices from the specific local contexts of each community.

Note

1 Note that this study was a longitudinal investigation conducted in a single classroom without a control group. Therefore, the observed increase in psychological safety may also be attributed to growing familiarity or closer relationships among group members over time rather than solely to the intervention itself. For a detailed analysis, see Kayo FUJII, Mizuho SHINADA, and Masami SHIGEHIRO, "Research on Discussion in Moral Lessons at a Junior High School," *Journal of the College of Education, Yokohama National University. The Educational Sciences,* no. 8 (2025) : 252–266.

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