FILOZOFIA
Volume 80, Number 6, 2025

DOI: https://doi.org/10.31577/filozofia.2025.80.6.1

The Right Use of Reason in the Moral Theories of Aristotle and Habermas

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ÁRNASON, V.: The Right Use of Reason in the Moral Theories of Aristotle and Habermas
FILOZOFIA, 80, 2025, No 6, pp. 761 – 779

The Aristotelian distinction between technical and moral reason, production and interaction permeates Habermas's thought. But in moral theory, Habermas's main emphasis is on the decontextualized justification of moral norms, while Aristotle's focus is on contextualized judgment. The paper argues that Aristotle's theory of practical wisdom could be instructive for discourse ethics. Habermas has not been open to this possibility because he has appropriated the neo-Aristotelian interpretation of Aristotle, in which practical wisdom is subordinated to traditional norms, an interpretation that neglects the role of reason in moral deliberation. Moreover, the contemporary *ethos* is impregnated with universal moral demands which, it is supposed, should guide our moral judgments. It is further argued that there are elements in Habermas's theory of moral and social development which can serve a role comparable to that of teleology in Aristotle. The paper maintains that a possible way to strengthen discourse ethics by incorporating practical wisdom is to tease out the implications of the fact that both Habermas and Aristotle build their views on the human capacity for speech and reasoning.

Keywords: application – discourse ethics – justification – neo-Aristotelianism – moral reasoning – practical wisdom

Introduction

The moral theory of the German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas gives a detailed account of the formal conditions of argumentation about the general validity of moral norms, but it largely ignores the practical situations from which moral norms arise and where they are applied (Árnason 2000). One

reason for this is the emphasis that Habermas has placed on distancing himself from Aristotle, or more correctly, from the interpretation of Aristotle's theory that has been labelled *neo-Aristotelianism* (Schnädelbach 1986). Clearly, Habermas draws heavily on Aristotle, and it is my contention that Habermas could learn more from Aristotle's theory if he did not uncritically accept the neo-Aristotelian interpretation. In doing so, he loses sight of the potential inherent in Aristotle's theory of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) as the right use of reason (*logos*) rather than respect for custom (*ethos*). By interpreting Habermas in the light of Aristotle, we can contribute to bridging the divide between advocates of neo-Aristotelian views and those who embrace Kantian ideas. This divide has hampered moral theory, especially in the mediation of situational analysis and universalist demands.

My main idea in this article is that Habermasian discourse ethics can be strengthened by taking more heed of Aristotelian ethics. The relationship between Aristotle's moral philosophy and that of Habermas has been neglected in the literature. For example, in many overviews of Habermas's moral theory, Aristotle is either not, or is only slightly, mentioned. Aristotle is more likely to play a role in critical discussions of Habermas, especially from the camp of those who identify with neo-Aristotelianism.

I will argue that several fundamental themes that I believe are useful for a critical analysis of the contemporary world are common to the philosophies of Habermas and Aristotle. One of these is that the Aristotelian distinction between moral and technical reason, interaction and production, may be seen to permeate all of Habermas's thought. Another is that Habermas's main task has been to provide a foundation for the moral purpose that underlies Aristotle's philosophy of human action. And a third is that both thinkers draw on the argumentative and linguistic competence that humans need to use properly in their efforts to live a good life and achieve social justice.

To demonstrate these points, I compare some important features in the theories of Aristotle and Habermas. Clearly, such comparison can only be made by an ahistorical abstraction of key notions in the conceptual network and the dynamic of reasoning in Aristotle's ethics. But this is a precondition for bringing Aristotle into contemporary discussions about morality in a useful way. It must also be acknowledged that the contemporary moral context is shot through with quite different norms than the ancient Greek *ethos*. This has important implications for interpreting the role of reason and moral perception from an Aristotelian perspective.

I proceed in the following way: First (in section I), I discuss Habermas's interpretation of the classical legacy of political philosophy and its consequences in the history of ideas. This discussion demonstrates Habermas's effort to restore the distinction between technical and moral reason that is fundamental in Aristotle's philosophy. I also compare Habermas's division of three kinds of sciences with Aristotle's tripartite division of knowledge. Next (in section II), I analyze Habermas's Kantian understanding of the concept of morality wherein the distinction between ideas of the good life and universal moral norms is in focus. This leads to a discussion of how Hans-Georg Gadamer uses Aristotle's ethics in his hermeneutic theory, in particular the interaction between general moral reasoning and situational judgment. Gadamer's argument is indicative of the neo-Aristotelian understanding to which Habermas himself subscribes and which leads him to ignore the interpretive possibilities inherent in Aristotle's ideas about human reasoning.

This calls for a discussion (in section III) of the role of moral sense in Aristotle's works and the possibilities that his ideas offer for strengthening Habermas's discourse ethics. I propose two arguments relevant to these purposes: A substantive argument that emphasizes aspects of the contemporary *ethos* and a procedural one which draws upon Aristotle's view of man as a linguistic creature. I also argue that aspects of Habermas's theory can play a role analogous to Aristotle's teleology, which strengthens the theoretical guidance for moral reasoning in a world devoid of both a metaphysical *telos* and established custom. I then (in section IV) discuss the relationship between justification and application in Habermas's theory and evaluate it in light of Klaus Günther's and Albrecht Wellmer's ideas on this issue. In this context, I make an attempt to formulate an interpretation that offers a connection to Aristotle's practical wisdom. Finally (in section V), I briefly summarize my argument and conclusions.

I. Theoretical and Practical Knowledge

In an important article on the development of political philosophy, Habermas (1974b) argues in the spirit of Aristotle for the importance of restoring the connection between ethics and politics, which was transformed along with the progress of modern science. The background to this is Aristotle's distinction between three kinds of knowledge and corresponding three domains of reality. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes between theoretical knowledge of the invariable, and deliberative reasoning about things that are "capable of being otherwise" (Aristotle 1980, 139 [1139a]). People do not decide on the

subject of knowledge but demonstrate both their skill and prudence through practical reasoning that takes into account the different subjects and goals of these intellectual virtues. Art (*techne*) "is a state concerned with making, involving a true course of reasoning" (Aristotle 1980, 142 [1140a]), while practical wisdom (*phronesis*) "is a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regards to things that are good or bad for man" (Aristotle 1980, 142 [1140b]). The goal of *techne* is to make things for our benefit and pleasure, while the goal of *phronesis* is to create conditions for good interaction and a prosperous human life, whether we consider private life, work, or the political sphere.

In Habermas's analysis, the emphasis is both on the importance of the distinction between production and interaction which highlights the difference between technical skill and moral, practical wisdom, and separating these from the field of theoretical knowledge. From Habermas's perspective, the main lesson of Aristotle is the close connection between ethics and political philosophy, both of which aimed to shape the conditions for good human life: "politics was always directed toward the formation and cultivation of character; it proceeded pedagogically, not technologically" (Habermas 1974b, 42).

The theoretical backbone for this thinking was a comprehensive teleology, which the new sciences undermined and created serious challenges for moral-political thought. The main premise, that is, the idea of the well-being of man who lives in accordance with his proper function, contradicted the understanding of reality of the new sciences, where goals become the objects of human desire. The fate of morality becomes theoretically unclear when "the general," i.e., ideas about the good life, are not properly separated from individual views about what contributes to their happiness. This is also one of the main reasons why the distinction between technical production and moral action became unclear and instrumental reasoning made its way into moral thought.

The development from the modern age onwards was characterized by the fact that law-governed sciences went into the service of technical thinking, which aimed to gain control over things and bend them to human needs. Political science could now build on the anthropology of the new sciences and seek to take a technical grip on its subject matters. This is most clearly seen in Hobbes's theory of political technique "for the correct establishment of the state" (Habermas 1974b, 42) that keeps the vital forces of man in check, and in Machiavelli who "reduces the practical knowledge of politics to a technical skill" (Habermas 1974b, 59). More generally, the question of how to ensure the moral aims of the state gives way to the question of how citizens are governed and made manageable: "This separation of politics from morality replaces

instruction in leading a good and just life with making possible a life of well-being within a correctly instituted order" (Habermas 1974b, 43).

While this development erased the difference between creation (*poiesis*) and action (*praxis*) in Aristotle's sense, it also radically changed the relationship between technical skill and theoretical knowledge (*theoria*). In line with Bacon's view that scientific knowledge was useful power, scientific laws had to be harnessed for the benefit of human needs. *Techne* as artistic creation based on experience then gave way to scientifically based technology that is applied to improve the human condition. Human behavior also became a technical subject matter based on the physics of human nature. Since the goal is to gain control over subject matters, the development of modern science suited technological thinking well, but when this goal is transferred to the field of human behavior and communication, it undermines the conditions for practical wisdom, moral and political action.

> Theory, which in its scientific structure is designed for technical application, fails to relate properly…to the praxis of citizens who deliberate and act.… For, unlike the technical application of scientific results, the translation of theory into praxis is faced with the task of entering into the consciousness and the convictions of citizens prepared to act (Habermas 1974b, 77; 74 – 75).

A key point in Habermas's argument is that "the technological domination of nature is in principle a solitary and silent act" (Habermas 1974b, 75) and does not require the dialogue and agreement that are the main features of communicative practice. This idea feeds into Habermas's theory of three kinds of epistemological interests, which it is interesting to briefly compare with Aristotle's distinction between theoretical knowledge, practical skill, and moral wisdom. Habermas (1974a, 8) seeks to uncover the roots of knowledge in the natural history of the species and distinguishes between three "anthropologically deep-seated interests, which direct our knowledge." These interests are related to basic human needs for survival, interaction and liberation, which are channeled according to different historical and social conditions (Habermas 1971).

Habermas thus rejects Aristotle's sharp distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge. From his perspective, there is no such thing as seeking knowledge for its own sake or simply to gain a better understanding of reality. The search for knowledge is linked to cognitive interests which are made manifest in human efforts to gain control over objective processes (technical science) and to gain understanding of the symbolic reality of human

interaction (hermeneutic science). A major condition for both is liberation from unjust power relations, distorted communication, and oppression (critical social science). Behind all this effort, however, lies theoretical knowledge of general natural laws, of social actions and institutions, of economic and political forces, as well as of the developmental or evolutionary processes that are at work in the history of both individuals and societies.

Although Habermas rejects the separation of the theoretical and the practical in Aristotle's theory, he considers his division of practical knowledge into technical and moral to be of major significance. It recognizes that production is subject to different laws than human interaction. The technical knowledge in the processes of production involves a different logic than the moral knowledge that is needed to establish a just order in human relations. This distinction between instrumental rationality and communicative reason is the basis for Habermas's intention to provide a solid foundation for a critical theory of society. In his theory of communicative action, Habermas (1984) distinguishes between several types of reasoning, which are subject to different logic depending on the orientation. While theoretical argumentation aims to examine the truth of statements, practical reason has three different functions "depending on how the problem is conceived" (Habermas 1993a, 8). This tripartite distinction is in the spirit of Kant and shows clearly the limits of Aristotelian ethics from Habermas's perspective.

II. Values of the Good Life and Moral Norms

Habermas's theory of morality is marked by two distinctions that provide a suitable framework for my discussion: the distinction between *ethics* and *morality*, and the distinction between *justification* and *application*. The former distinction concerns the understanding of the question "what should I do?" which invites three different types of practical reasoning. When the question concerns how I should act in order to fulfill certain desires or achieve particular goals, the answer concerns effective ways to achieve those goals. Here we are therefore in the domain of instrumental (goal-oriented) or pragmatic reasoning, akin to imperatives of skill in Kant's sense (Kant 1993, 25 [415]). When the question concerns how I should live, it calls for a discussion of what kind of person I am and want to be, what my values and self-image are, as well as general ideas about ways to achieve happiness. These questions concern Kant's (1993, 26 [416]) imperatives of prudence and are the main subject matter

of ethics in the sense of Habermas: "Since Aristotle, important *value decisions* have been seen as clinical questions of the good life" (Habermas 1993a, 4).

Such questions of the good life, however, are not exhaustive for moral discussion after Kant. In contrast to questions of the good life, which are tied to a particular life history, moral questions, in Habermas's analysis, involve a requirement to submit to impersonal arguments about what it is right – or what one *ought* – to do. Kant linked this to the imperative of morality, which determines the will "not by subjective causes, but objectively, i.e. on grounds valid for every rational being as such" (Kant 1993, 24 [413]). The subject matters in question here are general moral norms that are necessary for fair and peaceful human interaction. Such moral questions are therefore subject to a different standard than questions of the good life. The latter are inevitably linked to personal life plans, or values that are relative to civilization and forms of life.

In Habermas's view, disagreements about ideas of good conduct, on the one hand, and about moral norms, on the other, call for different responses. In the latter case, disagreements lead to an examination of whether the moral norm carries with it universal interests and thus *deserves* our recognition or not. From Habermas's perspective, this would be inappropriate in the former case, since the main task is to examine the strong value judgments (see Taylor 1985) of the person in question and to evaluate the consistency between his words and actions. At the same time, insight into the problems that the person may be facing needs to be explored, as well as his willingness to change in order to become a whole person. Habermas (1984, 21) therefore speaks of a debate aimed at this goal as a "*therapeutic critique*." This resonates well with the thought expressed in the following passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle (1980, 35 [1105b]) urges readers to affirm moral virtue in action:

> It is well said...that it is by doing just acts that the just man is produced, and by doing temperate acts the temperate man; without doing these no one would have even a prospect of becoming good. But most people do not do these, but take refuge in theory and think that they are being philosophers and become good in this way, behaving somewhat like patients who listen attentively to their doctors, but do none of the things they are ordered to. As the latter will not be made well in body by such a course of treatment, the former will not be made well in soul by such a course of philosophy.

Aristotle describes here a flawed relation between a person's character and his moral sense, which is a key point in his ethics. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1980,

155 [1144a]), he succinctly states this relation: "for virtue makes us aim at the right mark, and practical wisdom makes us take the right means." What he calls *moral virtue* is shaped by habitual actions formed through upbringing and socialization. The intellectual virtue, *practical wisdom*, on the other hand, is "a reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human goods" (Aristotle 1980, 143 [1140b]). Practical wisdom includes both general knowledge about the prerequisites for a successful life and the correct assessment of how virtues apply in individual situations. With important exceptions, (see, e.g., Höffe 1992; Tugendhat 1987, Korsgaard 1996), the possibilities involved in complementing universalist ideas in the style of Kant with situational judgment in the spirit of Aristotle have been neglected by most expositors. This interaction of the general and the particular in the moral judgment of situations is also the main problem when it comes to comparing Aristotle and Habermas.

A slice of the Gadamer – Habermas debate can be instructive here (cf. Bleicher 1980). In his hermeneutic theory, Gadamer drew upon the fact that Aristotle's ethics is a fine example of the use of general knowledge in particular situations. His wording is interesting in this context: "It is true that Aristotle is not concerned with the hermeneutical problem…but with the right estimation of the role that reason has to play in moral action" (Gadamer 1975, 278). Gadamer (1975, 279) argues that moral knowledge in Aristotle's approach consists in seeing what should be done in individual situations in light of what is generally required of man. What is "generally required of man" is not determined by fixed moral laws but by the customs of society that change over time. Gadamer also draws on Aristotle's admonition to expect "precision in each class of things just as far as the nature of the subject admits" (Aristotle 1980, 3 [1094b]). The role of ethics is not to provide a set of pre-determined answers but to serve as a general guide in the moral consciousness of those agents who are in particular situations and must themselves assume responsibility for how they respond to them.

In contrast to Gadamer's situational approach, Habermas has distinguished himself sharply from neo-Aristotelianism that, in his view, hinders the free use of reason by giving tradition and customs a strong moral weight. Habermas has placed the main emphasis on the general and "decontextualized" justification function of philosophical ethics. Although the norms of moral action are always derived from our cultural background, the subject of practical reasoning is to answer whether these norms are *worthy* of being recognized or not (Habermas 1990b, 61). Such reasoning does not arise unless there is a dispute about the validity of the norms, and the role of discourse

ethics is to outline an informed and unconstrained procedure for resolving such disputes. As a result, his theory has been criticized both for giving moral reason too much prominence and for providing no guidance for moral judgment in individual situations. Habermas summarizes his position in the following section:

> Like any moral theory, discourse ethics cannot evade the difficult problem of whether the application of rules to particular cases necessitate a separate and distinct faculty of *prudence* or judgment that would tend to undercut the universalistic claim of justificatory reason because it is tied to the parochial context of some hermeneutic starting point. The neo-Aristotelian way out of this dilemma is to argue that practical reason should forswear its universalistic intent in favor of a more contextual faculty of judgment.…
> In contrast to the neo-Aristotelian position, discourse ethics is emphatically opposed to going back to a stage of philosophical thought prior to Kant (Habermas 1990c, 206).

III. Morality, Reason, Language

It is an interesting question how Aristotelian ethics can be thought of after Kant's time. This requires, among other things, that we must rethink both the position of morality and reason as well as the conceptual system that describes their interaction. It is typically believed that teleology was replaced by scientific knowledge in the modern age and can no longer serve as a guide to reason. But Habermas has relied heavily on theories that analyze rationality in both the processes of social evolution and of human development, which are indicative of increased autonomy and maturity (Habermas 1979a, 1979b). In this way, rational purpose is, as it were, projected into history in a Hegelian manner and finds its way into forms of consciousness and institutions.

Another important point in this context is that civilization (*ethos* in Aristotle and *Lebenswelt* in Habermas), which provided moral guidance in traditional societies, has been "colonized" by instrumental action and market forces (Habermas 1987, 318 – 331). This creates social pathologies by eroding communicative practices and social bonds. This calls for strengthening the conditions for moral reason in these areas and resisting technocracy and other forces undermining conditions for communicative action. Interestingly, Gadamer, who considers it inevitable that morality be based on traditional norms, echoes this critical analysis. He believes that the conditions of social rationality are threatened by the greatly increased technocracy in politics and

public opinion, where communication techniques are increasingly used to manipulate the human mind (Gadamer 1981, 72 – 73).

While these are important and increasingly relevant criticisms, it should also be noted that Western civilization is permeated with demands for moral equality and human rights that imply universal standards for moral judgment. These standards create the basis for internal criticism, asking whether the promises of modernity, such as the equality of citizens, are being fulfilled. Contemporary approaches in the spirit of Aristotelian ethics must be considered in this light. The perception of what is right in contemporary situations requires understanding of universal ethical demands, such as those embodied in human rights. Gradually, these have become "the equities…common to all good men in relation to other men" (Aristotle 1980, 152 [1143a]).

In addition to this substantive instruction for "intuitive reason" in our moral culture, it is also important to consider whether moral theory can receive procedural guidance from Aristotle's practical wisdom. As Habermas argues, this is in line with modern ideas about reason:

> Modernity is characterized by a rejection of the substantive rationality typical of religious and metaphysical worldviews and by a belief in procedural rationality and its ability to give credence to our views in the three areas of objective knowledge, moral-practical insight, and aesthetic judgment (Habermas 1990a, 3 – 4).

If Aristotelian ethics were to be considered in this spirit, Aristotle's theory of practical deliberation and human linguistic ability would play an important role. This focuses on the use of language, as Aristotle does in a key chapter of the *Politics* (Aristotle 1988, 3 [1253a]):

> [M]an is the only animal who has the gift of speech. And whereas mere voice is but an indication of pleasure and pain … the power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and unjust. And it is characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust, and the like, and the associations of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state.

It is interesting to compare this passage with Habermas's words in a lecture he gave at his inauguration as a professor at the University of Frankfurt in 1965:

> What raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we can know: *language*. Through its structure, autonomy and responsibility are posited for

> us. Our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus (Habermas 1971, 314).

The linguistic being is the rational animal, and in this context it makes no crucial difference whether the idea is rooted in metaphysical teleology or in a quasi-transcendental theory of the use of language. The main point is how it is employed in the effort to strengthen the premises of moral reason in the present.

Habermas's task in discourse ethics can be described as outlining the "right use of reason" in a world devoid of the guidance of both teleology and established custom. From Habermas's perspective, it is an important aspect of Aristotle's ethics that it assumes that man can only realize his nature and become successful in the specific form of life of the city-state (Habermas 1993b, 123). This is neglected by neo-Aristotelianism, which seeks to formulate general ideas of flourishing in modern pluralistic society without having a basis in Aristotle's "metaphysical biology." But modern pluralistic society requires that moral dialogue extends to all those who are capable of speech and action. This process yields "the moral point of view", under which all subjects must come to an agreement on moral norms in order to regulate their common life. In this task, they find no common ground in the *telos* of the species or in the *ethos* of society. As Habermas (1993b, 124 – 125) writes:

> Without a metaphysical backing, what Aristotle called *phronesis* must either dissolve into mere common sense or be developed into a concept of practical wisdom that satisfies the criteria of procedural rationality.

In light of this, it is tempting to say of the latter option, to borrow Aristotle's words in the *Politics*, that one must then by "the power of speech…set forth… the just and unjust." In this context, one can recall Elizabeth Anscombe's words about moral theorists who reject basing moral arguments on facts about human beings. She considers the alternative of accounting for moral obligation without entering into a divine covenant:

> Just possibly, it might be argued that the use of language which one makes in the ordinary conduct of life amounts in some sense to giving the signs of entering into various contracts. If anyone had this theory, we should want to see it worked out. I suspect that it would be largely formal (Anscombe 1958, 14).

Anscombe is not suggesting that an Aristotelian procedural ethics can be developed along these lines, and Habermas does not go that route either:

> [I]f we wish to remain faithful to the Aristotelian conviction that moral judgments is bound to the ethos of a particular place, we must be prepared to renounce the emancipatory potential of moral universalism and deny so much as the possibility of subjecting the structural violence inherent in social conditions characterized by latent exploitation and repression to an unstinting moral critique (Habermas 1993b, 125).

In line with the prevailing interpretation of neo-Aristotelianism, Habermas subordinates right reason (*orthos logos*) to custom (*ethos*). Schnädelbach (1986) argues that neo-Aristotelians interpret custom in terms of Hegel's theory of *Sittlichkeit*, which refers to the custom and civilization that form the background of morality in a given social context and set the limits for the critical morality of individuals.

It is my contention that this position underestimates the role of reason in Aristotle's theory of virtue. Aristotle writes:

> [I]n the moral part of the soul there are two types of virtue, natural virtue and virtue in the strict sense, and of these the latter involves practical wisdom....Whenever people now define a virtue, they all say what it is called and what its objects are, and then they add that it is a state in accordance with right reason. [N]ow right reason is reason that is in accordance with practical wisdom. Everyone, then, seems in some way to divine that such a state, in accordance with practical wisdom, is a virtue. But we must go a little further. For the state must not merely be *in accordance with* right reason but must imply *the involvement of right reason* to be a virtue; and practical wisdom is right reason about such matters (Aristotle 1980, [1144b – 1145a]).[1]

Practical wisdom includes linguistic ability (*logistikon*) which does not grow from custom alone but from the correct application of reason. This ability is inherent in man and universal as such, although it is always practiced in a specific social and cultural context. This main point in Aristotle's ethics has not been sufficiently well conveyed.

[1] This passage is difficult to translate into clear, natural-sounding English. I have in this paper generally relied on the translations of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* by David Ross, but in this case, so that the reader will more easily understand Aristotle's position, I have provided a more lucid translation than Ross provides, by incorporating elements of other translations, in particular that of Roger Crisp (Cambridge University Press, 2004) and by weighting lucidity more heavily than literal correctness. I do not believe that I have in any way distorted Aristotle's message. The emphasis is added.

If morality is limited to finding out what is appropriate to do in light of what is accepted in a given society then practical wisdom loses its status as an *intellectual* virtue. As John McDowell (1996, 31) has argued, moral reasoning which is "the result of habituation" is a primitive, unreflective form of practical reasoning. *Phronesis* requires *moral reflection*: to consider the reasons that justify our actions and to explain why it is right to do what we are accustomed to doing (or to stop doing it if we find that it is not right). McDowell (1996, 22) rightly points out that for Aristotle practical wisdom, as "excellence at the right kind of deliberation," always involves an assessment of the situation. Korsgaard (2008, 207) sees this as inherent in the notion of reason as the "*active* aspect or dimension of the mind" which is never merely receptive of generally accepted truths. In contrast to this, in Habermas's account, Aristotelian judgment merely "illuminates the life historical horizon of a customary *ethos*" (Habermas 1993a, 10). This misses Aristotle's point.

IV. Justification and Application

To discuss this further and better understand Habermas's position, we need to turn to his distinction between justification of general moral norms and their application in particular situations. This is related to the post-Kantian requirement that moral reason should not "forswear its universalistic intent in favor of a more contextual faculty of judgment" (Habermas 1990c, 206). He writes:

> Valid norms owe their abstract universality to the fact that they withstand the universalization test only in a decontextualized form. But in this abstract formulation, they can be applied without qualification only to standard situations… (Habermas 1993a, 13).

By referring to "standard situations," Habermas indicates circumstances that do not differ in important respects from what is assumed in the general presentation of the moral norm. This assumes, for example, that the moral norm does not clash with another weighty moral norm, as happens in morally complex situations. Habermas's statement also presupposes that the question of the general justification of both moral norms has already been answered.

> It is only when it has to be established which of the prima facie valid norms is the most *appropriate* to the given situation and the associated conflict that a maximally complete description of all the relevant features of the particular context must be given (Habermas 1993c, 154).

In this connection, Habermas praises Klaus Günther's (1993) elaboration of the logic of application in discourse ethics in the form of "a principle of appropriateness." That is, in addition to the general justification of a given moral norm, this entails an examination as to whether the norm applies in a specific situation that calls for the interpretation of certain relevant factors. This is therefore a two-step process in which the validity of a general moral norm is first tested in a discourse of justification and then examined whether it applies to a given situation. Günther (1993, 187) argues that this involves a rejection of *phronesis* as conceived by Aristotle, which combines justification and application. For Aristotle, "virtuous action guided by practical wisdom perpetuates the ethos of a form of life in individual situations" (Günther 1993, 180). This shows that *phronesis* presupposes "the given validity of an ethical life" (Günther 1993, 188) rather than harboring a moral judgment informed by "the modern principle of impartiality" (Günther 1993, 184).

The subtitle of Günther's book is "Application Discourses in Morality and Law," and his description of the relationship between justification and application seems to be suitable for legal procedure. First, laws are made following debates on legislative bills in parliament, in the administration, and in society in general. And then, after they have been approved and legal disputes arise, it is up to the courts to apply the laws to individual cases. Albrecht Wellmer (1986, 117) argues that general moral imperatives are too deeply rooted in our history, moral consciousness, and society for us to confront them in the same way as a legislative assembly confronts legal norms that it may approve or reject. Habermas does not assume that practical discourse creates moral norms; it arises when there is disagreement about their validity. Although such a disagreement can be about both the rightness of general moral norms, such as gender equality, and their specific implementation, such as the use of gender quotas, it may be difficult to make a sharp distinction between justification and application. This, Wellmer writes (1986, 134), is because "the norms themselves carry, so to speak, a situation index which binds them to the situations in which they have their origin."

Disagreements about general moral imperatives without reference to the context in which they are situated are therefore not fully eligible for ethical debate. Difficult moral disputes usually arise because the situation to which they are meant to be applied is morally complex, involving two or more generally valid moral norms that conflict and cannot all be heeded. In such a situation, justified exceptions must be made to some of these norms, and this cannot be debated in a rational way except by examining and comparing

examples of situations in which the norms conflict. A justification argument about a moral norm without any connection to the situation to which one means to apply it would be pointless. For Wellmer, a justification argument is thus also an application argument, because it requires a precise analysis of the circumstances to which the norm is a candidate for application.

For these reasons, Wellmer argues that the justification problem bears the characteristics of the application problem:

> [I]n the case of morality the problem of grounding has the character of a problem of application; what moral discourse is concerned with is the "application" of *the moral point of view*, whether to concrete social problem areas or to the situations in which individuals act (Wellmer 1986, 136).

Wellmer (1986, 123) formulates the main task of ethics as a mediation of particular actions and the general moral point of view in morally complex situations. Wellmer thus conceives moral debate as concerning the validity of actions and decisions rather than the justification of general moral norms (Wellmer, 1986, 131). Moral judgments should be guided by a negative version of Kant's categorical imperative in order to refrain from actions that we cannot will to be universal laws. Günther (1993, 45 – 58), however, argues that Wellmer's argument doesn't really go beyond neo-Aristotelianism because Wellmer rejects the claim for justification of moral norms as a process "over and above appropriate application in a situation" (Günther 1993, 54). Only in that way, Günther maintains, would it be possible to reach the level of impartiality which is independent of any particular context of application. But an impartiality claim is built into "the moral point of view" that for Wellmer guides contextual moral judgment. Günther's (1993, 139) worry of "contextual relativism" feeds on the false belief that morality can be "anchored in an Archimedean point outside any actual discourse," Wellmer (1986, 100) argues.

A further discussion of this interesting disagreement would lead us too far astray from the goal of this paper. The important question to ask in this context is whether Wellmer's Kantian interpretation offers a connection to Aristotle's practical wisdom that would be of interest for discourse ethics. In Wellmer's account, moral reasoning is brought into concrete situations where "practical reason realizes itself in moral judgment" (Kelly 1993, 583). Reflection on situational moral judgments, or questions of behavior, is most urgent when there is a disagreement about the assessment of morally complex situations and decisions about what to do. For Aristotle, in order to see what, in each situation is the right thing to do, a correct assessment of the situation is essential.

Contemporary culture is permeated with moral norms that provide guidance to perception and enable us to expose "structural violence inherent in social conditions … exploitation and repression" that Habermas (1993b, 125) rightly believes must be subjected to "unstinting moral critique." While such norms provide guidance to perception, they do not *as such* provide justification for actions according to Aristotle, although they form the main premises in the deliberations that appear in justificatory arguments for action. This task involves a test for the reasoning ability of the rational being, who must justify his action by setting forth "the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and unjust" (Aristotle 1988, 3 [1253a]) in light of the circumstances.

When circumstances call for deliberation and reflection, *logos* must complement and even replace *ethos* to inform morality. For while customs shape people morally and often contain the material for practical discourse, their validity is determined by the right use of reason. Charles Taylor (1989, 89) may well be right that this emphasis on a fair procedure is a sign of the supervalues of modernity. But this value does not simply arise from Western customs – although they meet the moral perspective "halfway," as Habermas (1990c, 207) has put it – but rather lies in the very logic of language and the capacity for argumentation that marks the uniqueness of man according to both Aristotle and Habermas. It is then appropriate to outline the general aspect of morality in light of the idea of a rational creature who seeks to resolve disputes peacefully in rational debate.

V. Conclusion

Both Aristotle and Habermas are preoccupied with reason and its different manifestations and applications to theoretical, technical and moral issues. In this respect, Habermas's effort to recover Aristotle's important distinction between technical and moral sense, the significance of which was widely rejected in the modern era, is of major importance. This distinction and Habermas's modern revision of morality are the cornerstones of his efforts to provide a moral basis for a critical theory of society. At the same time, this effort leads him away from Aristotle's moral theory, mainly because he uncritically accepts supposedly "neo-Aristotelian" accounts in which the power of critical reason is questioned and subordinated to accepted truths. But neither the neo-Aristotelians nor Habermas emphasize the importance of the fact that contemporary moral world is permeated by moral demands that provide the kind of guidance that ethics "after Kant" requires. At the same time, Habermas is caught up in a Kantian legacy that has underestimated the role of situational morality.

Habermas's main emphasis is on decontextualized justification of moral norms, while Aristotle's focus is on contextual judgment. Günther's attempt to develop a discourse of application in the spirit of Habermas explicitly rejects any affinity with Aristotle's theory, while Wellmer's attempt, which is arguably consistent with the spirit of Aristotle, makes no reference to his theory of practical wisdom. Strengthening Habermasian discourse ethics through positive comparisons to Aristotle's ethics is thus an uncompleted and challenging ask, but in this article I have tried to open an interpretative path based on their common emphasis on the reasoning capacity of man.

Another main point that at first glance seems to hinder a comparison between Aristotle and Habermas is that the conceptual system of ancient Greek ethics is embedded in a teleological worldview that is widely thought to be incompatible with modern ideas. However, it seems to me that the reconstructive theories that Habermas employs in teasing out the logic inherent in social and personal development can potentially form a modern analogue here. These theories show the increased ability of individuals and societies to tackle tasks fairly and to resolve differences through reason instead of force. Habermas believes this shows the progress of a communicative rationality that is subject to different laws than instrumental reason and uses this to support his theory of procedural reasoning. Whether there is a point here in comparison with modern procedural ethics in the spirit of Aristotle, which preserves some teleological features, is a complex topic that requires separate research. However, it seems clear to me that in such a study, Aristotle's and Habermas's common view of human linguistic ability and its cultivation in argumentation should be kept in focus.

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This paper is based on a lecture which I presented at a seminar on Aristotle's philosophy at the annual Humanities conference at the University of Iceland in 2016. Proceedings of the seminar are printed in: Sigurdsson, E. S. – Svavarsson, S. (2018): Hugsað með Aristótelesi [Thinking with Aristotle]. Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press. I thank my colleague Mikael M. Karlsson for very useful comments on this paper.

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