

Werner Ulrich's Home Page: *Ulrich's Bimonthly*
Formerly "Picture of the Month"

September-October 2013

The Rational, the Moral, and the General: An Exploration
Part 1: Introduction; Discourse Ethics



- HOME
- WERNER ULRICH'S BIO
- PUBLICATIONS
- READINGS ON CSH
- DOWNLOADS
- HARD COPIES
- CRITICAL SYSTEMS
HEURISTICS (CSH)
- CST FOR PROFESSIONALS
& CITIZENS
- A TRIBUTE TO
C.W. CHURCHMAN
- LUGANO SUMMER SCHOOL
- ULRICH'S BIMONTHLY
(formerly *Picture of the Month*)
- COPYRIGHT NOTE
- A NOTE ON PLAGIARISM
- CONTACT
- SITE MAP

Introduction In the early 21st century we find ourselves living in a world that is so increasingly diverse, complex, and dynamic – so technologically advanced, culturally pluralist and rapidly globalizing, but also facing almost intolerable socio-economic disparities along with huge environmental challenges and political difficulties – that one needs to be bold to even ask the question: How can we still hope to think and act rationally in this current world of ours? How in a world of conflicting needs and values do we know what we ought to do? What skills would we need to learn so as to better understand situations and ways to improve them? How can we judge whether and to what extent others in whom we trust, citizens, decision-makers and professionals at all institutional levels, master such skills? Even at an individual level, how can each of us still seriously claim to get our facts and values right and to act accordingly, and what would "right" mean in the first place?

This is the sort of "impossible" (because impossibly big and difficult) questions that I currently face within the limited scope of my ongoing "Reflections on reflective practice" series and specifically with a view to an ethical grounding of the quest for good and rational practice. How else if not on the basis of such considerations can I hope to arrive at an adequate assessment of discourse ethics (one of the topics on which I have recently focused) and also to develop useful ideas as to where we might go from here?

Rationality today: can we bring the moral idea back in? It may well be that the intellectual legacy of the 20th century does not equip us particularly well for dealing with the challenge. This is why I found it useful, in the early parts of the "Reflective practice" series, to travel back in time and examine whether the tradition of practical philosophy that began with Aristotle might

◀ Previous | Next ▶

For a hyperlinked overview of all issues of "Ulrich's Bimonthly" and the previous "Picture of the Month" series, see the [site map](#)

[PDF file](#)

Note: This is the first part of a series of short exploratory essays on the role of general ideas, such as particularly the moral idea, in rational thought and action as seen from different vantage points. At least three or four more short essays will be offered in the coming year, beginning with the *Bimonthly* of January-February 2014.

supply, in adequately developed and pragmatized form, a "third pillar" of the quest for good and rational practice; a third pillar, that is, along with the two currently prevailing pillars of "applied science" and "reflective practice" (see Ulrich, 2008a, b). This is the job that I have been pursuing in many of my bimonthly essays of the past five years or so, within and outside the "Reflections on reflective practice" series.

Within the "reflective practice" series, the focus has been on some major approaches to *rational ethics* – the idea that right action and right thought are inseparable. Inasmuch as in the tradition of practical philosophy, "right" means "morally right," this idea does not enjoy wide currency now. In the wake of the last century's neopositivism – ranging from the rise of logical positivism (e.g., Schlick, 1918; Carnap, 1928; Reichenbach, 1938) via critical rationalism (Popper, 1959, 1968, 1972) to neopositivist philosophy of social science (e.g., Rudner, 1966) – this is an understandable but not necessarily rational state of the matter. The aftermaths of neopositivism continue to be effective in many ways, and they have tended and still tend to discredit the idea of a "rational" approach to the normative core of human affairs. To mention just a few major symptoms, scientism (the identification of the limits of rationality with those of science) is still widespread, as is a questionable (but largely unquestioned) belief in the "primacy of theory" for sound practice (cf. Ulrich, 2006d, 2007a). Vain claims to "objective science" and "value-free" professional expertise are still widely accepted or are even expected from "competent" researchers and professionals (cf. Ulrich, 2011a). Some careful observers of contemporary society have unsuccessfully admonished us of an overall tendency towards "institutionalized counterproductivity" (Illich, 1971, 1975), towards a growing "legitimation crisis" and "new obscurity" (Habermas, 1975, 1990a), and even towards "organized irresponsibility" (Beck, 1992, 1995). And finally, of most immediate concern to my current work, an ethical grounding of the prevailing concept of reflective practice (Schön, 1983, 1987) – admittedly a difficult undertaking – is still largely missing. Indeed, it seems to me that the lack of a clear and arguable notion of how the rational relates to the moral is a shared core difficulty underlying all these symptoms (or diagnoses) of a contemporary rationality crisis. *How can we bring the moral idea back in?*

Relating the rational to the moral, and vice-versa I do not have the answer, to be sure. What is obvious, I think, is that new patterns of thought about rational practice are needed. There is a need for understanding "practical discourse" – read: application-oriented discourse on normative questions – in ways that are more practice-focused than are contemporary moral theories and models of moral argumentation. Likewise, there is a need for better embedding such models in democratic processes of collective will-formation and decision-making. This explains my continuing interest in discourse ethics, despite early and increasing doubts about its practicability. Its discursive orientation is basically pointing in the right direction, I think.

Even so, Habermas' outline of a discourse-theoretical foundation of moral *theory* is not to be confused with the different undertaking of outlining a practicable framework for moral practice. My current, uncompleted review of discourse ethics (Ulrich, 2009c, d; 2010a, b; 2013a) has once again made it obvious, I think, how far away contemporary practical philosophy, despite many new impulses, still is from being able to support moral practice. Clearly, we have a long way to go towards a *practicable* framework for ethically grounded practice.

My own modest attempts in this direction make no exception. I find myself struggling more, now that my focus is turning towards the future, than in the early parts of the series, when I could still look back and learn from some of the most outstanding practical philosophers about the demands and difficulties of moral thought.

Some intermediate reflections, and a major excursion In an attempt to enlarge my universe of discourse and to gain some distance, I decided to make a virtue of necessity and to undertake an unplanned excursion into Eastern thought, more precisely, into ancient Indian philosophy, in a hope to find new ways of seeing the matter. Given that such an excursion means exploring new and unfamiliar territory, I cannot anticipate what may come out of it. Further, it is clear that such an excursion takes some preparation. There will be three, relatively short, preparatory parts in which I offer some rather divergent "intermediate reflections"; intermediate, that is, on my path from reviewing the ideas of major practical philosophers of the past to

outlining new ideas for the future. There will then be a longer fourth or alternatively two shorter final parts, in which I report on my excursion into ancient Indian philosophy, an ongoing adventure that absorbed a lot of my time in recent weeks and which thus explains why the present *Bimonthly* comes late.

In the present introductory part, I sum up some of the conjectures that made me postpone my original plan, of writing the fourth and last part (= the second half of the third part, technically speaking) of my review of the practical philosophy of Habermas, in favor of engaging in the present "intermediate reflections." The advantage of this format is that it allows me to articulate conjectures of a more tentative nature than I have allowed myself in the "Reflective practice" series, and to pursue broader, exploratory lines of thought. In addition, this first part will look a bit closer at the difficulties that the general in the moral causes us in the case of discourse ethics, as a major example of rational ethics. I will benefit of the opportunity to recap where we stand in our discussion of discourse ethics, with special regard to the role of general ideas.

The second part will focus on Kant's (1786, 1787, 1788) penetrating analysis of the nature and role of general ideas (including, of course, the moral idea) as *ideas of pure reason*. Kant's understanding is perhaps the profoundest of all "Western" contributions to the topic of which I am aware. He explains both their deep-seated, indeed unavoidable role in human cognition and their problematic sides. In short, he teaches us why the general ideas of reason are rational and what sources of error are involved. So Kant's analysis is of great interest in itself; in addition, due to its fundamental nature, it might also better prepare us for later appreciating the role of general ideas in ancient Indian thought.

In the third part I will try to outline, in broad and tentative terms, some basic ideas on how we might try to pragmatize Kant's transcendental framework of rational ideas. My hope is that the different reflections of Parts 1-3 will suggest some new lines of thought, and will also prepare us to recognize and appreciate whatever new ideas (new as compared to Western rational ethics) we may subsequently encounter in ancient India. Whether this will indeed be so, I have no way of telling at this stage. Nor can I tell now whether the

excursion into Eastern thought will in the end make a significant difference to our current discussion of "Western" rational ethics, apart from certainly being a worthwhile adventure for its own sake. Regardless of whether it will indeed make a difference, I trust it is always meaningful and enriching to familiarize oneself with different traditions of thought.

One of the exciting aspects of an intellectual life is that everything one explores and comes into contact with provides new *food for thought*. But, to stay with the picture, good food requires careful preparation and serving. The proof of the famous pudding comes only when the work in the kitchen is finished and the main meal has been enjoyed. At this time I find myself still working intensively with kitchen utensils and apron. I know I have kept the guests (you, the readers) waiting, yet I can only just begin to offer a few small appetizers, in the form of the following, rather fragmentary "intermediate reflections." I hope you will find them sufficiently appetizing to stay, although they probably cannot and are not meant to satisfy your hunger.

***First intermediate reflection:
On the general in the moral***

I understand discourse ethics as an effort to answer the fundamental question mentioned at the outset, of how under contemporary conditions we might still hope to achieve rational practice, whereby "rational" practice would consider the normative no less than the instrumental dimension of practice. Discourse ethics seeks to answer this question by reformulating it in more precise terms, basically as follows: How can normative conflicts (or ethical clashes) be resolved *argumentatively* rather than by recourse to non-argumentative means? This is what morality, discourse-ethically framed, is all about.

Understanding the ties between the rational, the moral, and the general
Settling a conflict "argumentatively" means that all those concerned can agree on their own free will, on the ground that they find themselves treated fairly or justly and also find the overall result acceptable on both moral and utilitarian grounds. Discourse ethics, like all rational ethics, sees the essence of such fairness and rightness in *impartiality*, that is, in the search for and

reliance on guiding principles or, as moral theorists like to say, "norms of action" that would not privilege anyone's particular concerns but would treat everyone equally, that is, with equal respect for people's personal integrity and rights. *Reasoned* (or *argued*) impartiality and a thus-grounded claim to the acceptability of the norms relied on to *everyone* concerned is accordingly what the *moral* point of view (Baier, 1981) is all about. Rationality, generality, and morality thus come together.

A core difficulty is obviously how to *make sure* everyone's concerns are properly considered. Who *is* "everyone" in the first place, what concerns, needs and interests do those identified as belonging to "everyone" have, and how can they be met in practice? These are questions that can partly be answered on an empirical basis, but they also reach beyond the empirical, in two ways. They imply a theoretical basis for rationally anticipating the consequences of actions, and a moral basis for rationally evaluating them. Anticipation of effects can be complex in our interconnected world, and moreover the future is boundless, that is, there is an element of general, unbounded thought involved. The general includes the (whole) future. At the same time, a moral point of view for evaluating identified consequences entails the idea of putting ourselves in the place of all those possibly concerned, not only here and now but also elsewhere and in future, which again points to an element of unbounded, generalizing thought. The moral, because it entails the general in the sense of equally considering "everyone" concerned, also includes the future. Accordingly difficult it is (except perhaps in purely local or private action with no external effects in space and time) to foresee who will or may be affected and what their specific concerns might be, considering people here and there, those living now and those not yet born or unable to voice their concerns for other reasons. The only way to "make sure" one doesn't leave out anyone's concerns is by thinking and arguing globally, universally. This is why, at bottom, the methodological core idea of moral theory, as we have seen in our discussion of rational ethics, consists in the requirement of *moral universalization* – the idea that a normative claim is morally justified if and only if the norm of action that informs it could serve as a *general norm* or *principle* of action for everyone facing a similar situation.¹⁾

So there we again have the three elements of ethically grounded practice mentioned in the title of this essay: *the rational, the moral, and the general*. I suppose that ultimately, at least from a perspective of rational ethics, the rational is indeed philosophically (though not always practically) congruent with the general in moral practice, in the sense that we cannot define either rationality or morality without *some* reference to the general – to generalizable kinds of conjectures, arguments, attitudes, principles, or standards, that is. This expectation is consistent with the close links between the moral and the rational that we earlier identified in our review of Kant's rational ethics, and the way we found these links explained in Kant's work (Ulrich, 2009b; cf. 2011c). But there are, of course, different ways of explaining why, to what degree, and how exactly the moral is linked both to the rational and to the universal, to mention just a few:

- A language-analytical perspective, for example, may observe that moral obligations are often expressed by "must" or "ought" statements, which grammatically stand for a general, whether deontic or logical necessity; but, the argument goes, "there cannot be any necessity ... unless there is some law-like, universal proposition which holds" (Hare, 1981, p. 8). (A parallel observation could be made in the realm of theoretical reason for statements such as "everything heavy must fall" or "it should rain tomorrow," where the grammatical form expresses a natural necessity and accordingly some law-like principle of nature; but our focus here is on practical reason.) From such a perspective, the *grammar of moral claims* (their confronting us with "must" kind of statements or unconditional "ought's") tells us as much about their generalizing nature as a lot of elaborate and sophisticated moral theory does (cf. Tugendhat, 1993, pp. 35-f).
- In Aristotelian virtue ethics, which is a precursor of rational ethics rather than belonging to it (but it provides a relevant example inasmuch as it does assign a role to reason and rational deliberation), the general character of moral virtues originates directly in their source, the tradition of the community. It teaches us the nature and value of virtues and of conforming ways of conduct through example, education, and habituation. Although they flow into *praxis* through the agent's prudent deliberation and insofar have indeed a rational side,

Aristotle thus locates their general nature (i.e., their obliging force for all) in the *community of citizens* rather than in reason. Accordingly they embody virtues of character rather than of thought: "We cannot be intelligent without being good." (Aristotle, 1985, VI.12, 1144a36; cf. Ulrich, 2009a, p. 10)

- From a Kantian perspective of rational ethics, on the other hand, the general in moral reasoning derives from the *intrinsic requirements of reason*, among which consistent thought is the most fundamental one. A key conjecture in our earlier analysis (Ulrich, 2009b) is that consistent reasoning about moral questions does not permit agents to claim for themselves exceptions from the principles they expect others to respect. General principles hold not only for others but also for the one(s) who stipulate(s) them. That is why we find it so appalling if people exempt themselves from moral expectations everyone else respects, for example, if members of parliament – law makers – do not observe the laws they make for the people and instead treat themselves to particular rules. Counter to a frequent but uninformed objection against Kantian ethics, his universalization principle, as we also noted before, is thus far from amounting to a bloodless rationalistic principle that would be remote from practice, quite the contrary, it captures strong and very real moral sentiments and expectations: "We cannot demand from others what we refuse to respect. It is a practical impossibility." (Mead, 1934, p. 381)
- From a discourse-ethical perspective, finally, there is an intrinsic reference in moral claims to the *general pragmatic presuppositions of discourse*, presuppositions that we cannot avoid assuming whenever we enter into argumentation. We have discussed these presuppositions in detail before and there is no need to do it again. They translate into the two methodological core principles of discourse ethics, the discourse principle (D) and the universalization principle (U); the former embodies the rational core and the latter the moral core of the general presuppositions at work. Moral theory thus becomes a particular, *moral* application of a *general* theory of argumentation, or as Habermas (1990b, p. 44) puts it, a "special theory of argumentation." And moral practice, we might add, becomes a special case of promoting *rational* discourse – the basically simple (but in its implementation complicated) core idea of discursive ethics.

One can appreciate the value of each of these different perspectives, and I do. All have a true and relevant core. My personal preference, though, probably still leans towards Kant's universal, emancipatory, and cosmopolitan concept of reason, which for me continues today to be one of the most powerful foundations of, and calls to, critical and moral reasoning (cf. Ulrich, 2011c). This preference is a practical rather than theoretical one; it is motivated less by an assessment of the theoretical merits of these different perspectives (none is without its difficulties) than by the different potentials I see in them for supporting moral practice, including the development of individual moral competence in the sense of Kohlberg (1981) and of discursive moral competence in the sense of Habermas (1990b, 1993). In the terms of my current "Reflections on reflective practice" series, I tend to see in Kant's understanding of moral reason an untapped potential for critical pragmatization (i.e., for translation into tools of critical practice) that reaches further than the contemporary language-analytical and discourse-ethical perspectives.

In any case, regardless of the particular understanding of the general in the moral towards which one may lean, it is clear that knowing and arguing "the general" is not given naturally to humans. Ordinary human experience, knowledge, and reasoning is unavoidably fragmentary, conditioned as it is by a limited, always only partial grasp of the infinitely rich and diverse world in which we live. Both anthropologically and theologically speaking, one might argue that the general is the prerogative of gods and saints. Which is to say, the playing field of humans is the particular. It will be interesting to see what the sages of ancient Indian thought have to say on the issue, but that is for later.

*Second intermediate reflection:
On discourse ethics, or talking rationally
about the general in the moral*

Moral theory, although it talks about practice, is usually a lofty affair. After what we have observed thus far concerning the role of the general in the moral, it should not surprise us that this is so. It is therefore one of the interesting and innovative features of discourse ethics that it proposes to

change this state of the matter. It proposes to *situate morality in the social practice of argumentation* rather than in the philosophers' ivory tower. This is what – at least initially – the *communicative turn of ethics* was all about, or more precisely, what it *could* have meant.

Unfortunately, I fear the subjunctive mood is indicated here. As innovative as discourse ethics is in theory, as little it has changed in practice. The philosophical shift of focus from the theory to the practice of moral reasoning has been postponed. Yet there is indeed an imperative need for such a shift of focus. Moral reasoning is about responsibility, but theory cannot ultimately take on responsibility for practice. Practice itself, rather than some theory *about* practice, has to attend to its moral implications and hence, to the role of the general in the moral. Which is to say, not philosophers but the people concerned are the proper instance (or, speaking with Kant, the court of appeal) for "universalizing" normative claims.

There is, then, a need for supporting the discursive turn of moral practice *in* moral practice. The basic idea of discourse ethics should remain on the agenda – also on the agenda of moral theory, if only it would indeed begin to give priority to the *social* practice of moral argumentation over the philosopher's own argumentation. If moral theory is not to miss its aim, it needs to abandon (or at least, expand) its quest for theoretically perfect models of moral argumentation in favor of less perfect but practicable models. Not only the practical but also the theoretical interest of reason requires such a shift of focus. For strictly speaking, if it were indeed possible to design and implement a theoretically sufficient model of moral justification, it would leave no meaningful room for actual moral practice. If the philosophical experts have all the answers, what point is there in having ordinary people formulate theirs? Moral theory has indeed got it wrong thus far: its aim of telling us how morality can be secured theoretically is not only impractical, it is also undesirable. It is not only hopelessly ideal, it also pursues the wrong ideal. Rather than contenting itself with the vain and undesirable search for perfect models of rational justification, moral theory will be well advised to try and help ordinary people in *approximating* a communicative turn of ethics in practice, whatever (hypothetical) loss of theoretical perfection it may imply.

Discourse ethics: yes, but... We might then try to *approximate* (not to say, simulate) the "general" element in moral reasoning through real-world discourses to which all those concerned are admitted, and the "rational" element by the ways we organize and conduct such discourses. After some 30 years of discourse ethics, this is hardly a new idea, but it remains a neglected idea. It remains what a well-understood discursive turn of our understanding of morality *would* aim to do. I have no choice but putting it this way, I fear, given that I don't see discourse ethics doing it. Discourse ethics for me remains a challenging theoretical framework, in the twofold sense that it could potentially make a real difference out there in the world of practice, if it were properly pragmatized, but also that discourse ethics thus far has not been able to point the way (or better, several ways) to such pragmatization, and perhaps also does not lend itself to it at all, given that it has remained fraught with, and consequently focused on, enormous internal difficulties. So much so that I had to conclude, at the preliminary end of the analysis undertaken thus far, that its attempt to reconstruct moral justification as a social practice of argumentation *breaks down* when it comes to actual practice, and more specifically that its universalization principle (U) cannot carry the burden of justifying moral practice that discourse ethics assigns to it (Ulrich, 2013a, p. 38f).

A brief summary may be useful for those readers who have not or not recently read the previous analyses (see Ulrich, 2009c, d; 2010a, b; 2013a). Discourse ethics proposes an insightful *discourse-theoretical* framework for the moral justification of disputed norms of actions. It develops to this end an argumentation-theoretically grounded model of practical discourse, to which I have referred as the *Toulmin-Habermas model of argumentation*. So far, so good. I have learned quite a lot from this framework, theoretically speaking. Regrettably though, this framework never gets *discourse-practical*, despite talking so much of "practical discourse." Its account of practical discourse remains a theoretical explanation of the concept of moral justification; a sophisticated but impractical piece of moral theory. In effect, it identifies rational *argumentation* about moral questions with *justification* of moral claims. Given the importance of the general in the moral, we are in for trouble!

... *but moral justification is impractical* From what we have learned about the connection of the moral with both the rational and the general, it is clear that we cannot expect plain sailing from discursive moral theory to discursive moral practice. In its attempt to do justice to the universalizing element in moral justification, discourse ethics proposes an approach to discursive moral *theory* that makes discursive moral *practice* fall by the wayside. Discourse ethics is so ambitious as a theory that it ends up with a concept of moral discourse that is exactly that – a "perfect" (and, I fear, also "perfectly") theoretical concept that is accordingly removed from the world of practice. In this concept, the initial intent of taking moral justification efforts from the philosophy books to the social life-world of practical people – the practical ambition – got lost.²⁾

To do justice to Habermas, I would argue that it is the nature of the problem of moral justification itself – the way in which moral theory traditionally ties moral practice to perfect justification of norms – that is the stumbling block, rather than poor theorizing by Habermas. One might wonder though why he did not seek to renew this theoretical tradition so as to give the practical ambition a better chance. The methodological demands of moral universalization are simply too high. The problem, then, is not Habermas' discursive turn of moral theory as such but rather, the assumption that moral practice can (and should) be grounded in moral theory as it is traditionally understood. At the bottom of this assumption lies what I am tempted to call a specific version of the *primacy of theory* tenet of logical positivism and critical rationalism (see Ulrich, 2006d and 2007a). A majority of moral theorists appear to have tacitly adopted the view that practice depends for its proper grounding on theory. The tenet is even more doubtful in the field of practical reason (ethics) than it is in the field of theoretical reason (science); for what is the value of moral theory if it is not conducive to improving moral practice? After all, moral practice constitutes both the subject and the aim of moral theorizing. It is moral practice which provides the touch-stone for moral theory and not the other way round.

Theoretically sufficient justification of practice poses demands to which practice cannot live up. The way moral theory traditionally formulates the problem, as the question of how norms of action can be shown to hold

generally (or universally – the terminology we use makes no difference to the substantial issue) turns the problem into a *mission impossible*; there will, in practice, be no such norms at all. A thus-conceived moral justification is not practicable. The only moral principle that can thus be justified is the moral idea itself, which is what discourse ethics (more or less) achieves; but the question remains of how the moral idea can be translated into specific norms of action. Human practice has to work with the *particular*. To vary the earlier, slightly ironic statement, according to which the general is the prerogative of gods and saints whereas the playing field of humans is the particular, we might now be tempted to say: the general is the prerogative of *theorists*, while the playing field of *practitioners* is the particular. But of course, that would mean to get it wrong. Clearly, if there are such close ties between the moral and the general as I have suggested, practice has to come to terms with the general or it will fail to adequately handle its own normative core.

The essential theory-practice gap We probably need to become a bit more precise. The problem of moral justification has both a theoretical and a practical dimension, whereby we need to understand its "practical" side both in the philosophical and in the everyday sense of the word. In its philosophical sense, the practical (normative) entails claims related to the general; in its everyday sense, the practical (applied) is limited to the particular. The crux of the matter is how to bring these two sides together. There is a *tension between the general and the particular* in moral practice that I think is really constitutive of the problem of moral justification. That is what makes it so difficult to handle. The moral justification problem *is* the question of how we can claim a *general* (or "universalizable") character for *particular* norms of action, norms that would tell us what to do and what not in specific empirical situations. Leave away either the particular or the general and you have no moral problem at all.

It follows that the problem with the moral theories we have considered in the "Reflective practice" series is not that they would need to throw over board their central principle – the principle of moral universalization – but only, that they would need to understand and use it differently. As I see it, the principle explicates the meaning of the general in the moral, for instance, in

the form of the ancient Golden Rule, or of the Categorical Imperative, or of Mead's (1934) notion of "universal role-taking." No more, no less. That is, it tells us what moral claims *would* mean if they *could* be justified. It gives us the diagnosis of the problem we face. The flaw is, all these theories assume that the principle not only describes the problem but also supplies the solution. They confuse the diagnosis of the problem with the therapy! Thus it comes that they misunderstand moral universalization as a *method* of justification. This is precisely what Habermas does when he introduces the moral principle (U) as a "rule of argumentation" (1990c, pp.86 and 95; cf. Ulrich, 2013a, pp. 35-38). But it is not a method of justification, it is a theoretical ideal. As such it explains the ideal but it cannot make it real; if it could, it would not "really" embody an ideal. Either you have a theoretical argumentative ideal or a practical argumentative device, but hardly both. Therein I see the essential theory-practice deficit that discourse ethics has inherited from previous approaches to rational ethics: due to a one-sidedly theoretical orientation, they all take the general in the moral so seriously that there remains no room for moral practice. Whether we pursue, with Habermas, a discourse-theoretical or, with Kant, a transcendental concept of justification – that is, practically speaking, whether we rely primarily on a communicative ("dialogical") or self-reflective ("monological") approach – makes little difference in this regard. A considerable theory-practice gap is preprogrammed in both cases. The essential shift of focus required is not just one from self-reflection to discourse but rather, from one-sided attention to the demands of moral theory, at the expense of moral practice, to a systematic attempt at striking a balance between the two.

In discourse ethics this gap (or lack of balance) shows itself in many ways, I mention only the three examples of (i) the ideal character of its "general pragmatic presuppositions" of discourse – their amounting to an ideal speech situation, a phrase that Habermas now tries to avoid (cf., 1984, pp. 25 and 34; 1990c, pp. 82, 85-88, 93; 1998, p. 44; 2009, Vol. 2, p. 266); (ii) the consensus-theoretical underpinnings of its identification of moral practice with rationally secured, that is, justified and true, moral agreement (a rare resource); and (iii) the rather vague and cursory manner in which Habermas foresees the argumentative use of the moral principle (U) within the Toulmin-Habermas model of argumentation as an "auxiliary warrant" or

"bridging principle," as if it were an operational principle that could actually warrant inferences from particular to general normative statements (cf., e.g., 1990c, pp. 57, 63 and *passim*). I do not wish to enter into these difficult details now, as I will return to them in the final part of my review of discourse ethics (in preparation).

Summing up – four preliminary conclusions We are reaching the end of this first, introductory part, which is basically a recapitulation and reflective consideration of where we stand in our review of rational ethics. To prepare what comes after, it seems useful to try and summarize our considerations in the form of four essential, although still somewhat tentative (because incompletely argued), conclusions.

1. Constitutive of the *problem of moral justification*, and of the difficulties of discourse ethics in providing a practicable answer to it, is the tension between the philosophically-practical and the everyday-practical demands of morality. The former require that we do justice to general ideas, and the latter, to particular circumstances. As far as I can see at this stage, an adequate handling of the tension cannot consist in giving priority to either side. Doing so means to beg the question. Inasmuch as the tension is constitutive of the very problem of arguing moral claims, we either learn to do justice to it or we will fail to achieve any progress. Striking a balance is key, even if it means that discourse practice will need to live with conditions of imperfect (rather than theoretically ideal) rationality.
2. The *break-down of discourse ethics* as a framework for practice (the conclusion with which the last essay on discourse ethics ended) is caused not so much by its innovative side, the discursive turn of moral practice, but by its not so innovative side, the continuing, one-sided focus on a theoretical ideal of justification that it inherited from its predecessors. The more this focus is made the main concern, the more it tends to undermine the potential of a discourse-*practical* approach ("practical" in both the philosophical and the everyday sense) for managing the mentioned, crucial tension and the more internal difficulties will consequently come up, despite (or rather, due) to its enormous theoretical effort. The situation in which discourse ethics finds itself reminds me of Mark Twain's heroes, Tom Sawyer and

Huckleberry Finn, who recall one of their adventures in a rowing boat on the Mississippi River: "When we lost sight of the goal, we doubled our efforts."

3. The principle of *moral universalization*, despite the difficulties that it apparently causes us, is not the main problem. It is the messenger rather than the origin of the bad news. The origin lies in the ideal and thus, "unrealistic" character of moral justification that is due to its (unavoidable) generalizing thrust. There's no point in blaming the messenger for the bad news. Accordingly, the conclusion is not that we should throw the principle over board but rather, that there is a need for rethinking its role within a framework of critical pragmatism.
4. I suggest a similar conclusion holds for the basically meaningful notion of *discursive* moral practice. The point is not that we should abandon the idea of a discursive framework but rather, that we need to bring it to bear on the key problem of *managing the tension* between the general (a theoretical idea) and the particular (a practical reality) in the moral, in rationally defensible ways.

In sum, there is a need for pragmatizing moral discourse so that it can deal productively and critically with the general as an element of the rational and moral. Clearly, then, we need a broader understanding of the nature and role of general ideas such as, in particular, the moral idea (or the principle of moral universalization) and the idea of communicative rationality (or of rational argumentation on practical questions); broader, that is, than our review of classical moral theories (including discourse ethics) has afforded it thus far.

(To be continued)

Notes

- 1) I do not follow here Hare's (1981, p. 41) distinction between "general" (unspecific) and "universal" (specific but universalizable) norms or principles. The reason is not that I would disagree with the substance of Hare's point, according to which the morally universal may (sometimes, at least) be highly specific rather than general; it is simply that we do not need such a distinction here, and that I find it to some extent linguistically arbitrary, if not confusing. For me the *morally general* is defined by the *morally universalizable* rather than by a lack of specification. No useful norm of action is "general" in Hare's sense of being "unspecific." Conversely, it makes little sense to say that a useful norm, because it is well specified, is not general. An adequate norm is one that is both specific (it tells us what to do or not to do) *and* general (widely applicable). We would not say that a natural law is not general just because it clearly specifies the natural phenomena to which it applies; this is its task. Likewise, it is obvious that moral norms of action have to carefully specify the practical circumstances to which they apply; again this is their

very task as law-like, general statements. Thus seen, it seems a bit arbitrary or at least, against ordinary use of language, to say that moral norms are universal but not general. In ordinary language, "general principles" are principles that have a wide range of application, in that they are meant to apply to each and all of a defined class of situations, whether they stand for natural laws and moral norms. Which is precisely what moral principles are all about.

Again, I agree with the substance of Hare's point, and this is why I am careful to always distinguish clearly between the moral *idea* as a general idea on the one hand and specific *norms of action* on the other hand; but I would not go so far and deny to widely accepted norms of action their general character, in the above-specified sense (sic). It is clear that useful norms of action are *specific* norms, as distinguished from the moral idea in general. The point that is important to me is this that as I see it, the *tension between the specific and the general* (or the particular and the universal) is built into all validity claims, in morality as in science; it is indeed constitutive of what we call the "problem of practical reason" in the field of morality, just as it is constitutive of the "problem of induction" in the field of empirical research. Specification *or* generality is not a genuine alternative here. Where the degree of specificity is at issue, it seems sufficient and indeed more clear to directly describe proposed norms of action (or nomological hypotheses, in the case of science) in terms of how specifically or unspecifically they are formulated, that is, how exactly they specify the situations to which they apply or are claimed to apply. By contrast, to say that they are "universal" but "not general" would be of little practical help, as it would not make such explicit specification redundant. [\[BACK\]](#)

2) I will examine the reasons for this failure in more depth where I need it, in the next and last planned essay on discourse ethics (Ulrich, 2014, in prep.). For the present "intermediate reflection" a few summary hints as I offer them here should be quite sufficient. [\[BACK\]](#)

References

- Aristotle (1985). *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated, with Introduction, Notes, and Glossary, by Terence Irwin. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Baier, K. (1958). *The Moral Point of View: A Rational Basis of Ethics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. Abridged edn., New York: Random House, 1965.
- Beck, U. (1992). *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage.
- Beck, U. (1995). *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Carnap, R. (1928). *Der Logische Aufbau der Welt*. Leipzig, Germany: Felix Meiner Verlag. English transl. by R.A. George: *The Logical Structure of the World: Pseudoproblems in Philosophy*, University of California Press, 1967 (new edn. Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2003).
- Habermas, J. (1975). *Legitimation Crisis*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press (orig. *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus*, Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp, 1973).
- Habermas, J. (1984). *The Theory of Communicative Action. Vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press (orig. *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, 2 vols. Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp, 1981).
- Habermas, J. (1990a). The new obscurity: the crisis of the welfare state and the exhaustion of utopian energies. In J. Habermas, *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historian's Debate*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press (also Boston, MA: MIT Press; orig. *Die Neue Unübersichtlichkeit*, Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp, 1985).
- Habermas, J. (1990b). *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press (orig.: *Moralbewusstsein und kommunikatives Handeln*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983).
- Habermas, J. (1990c). Discourse ethics: notes on a program of philosophical justification. In J. Habermas (1990). *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, pp. 43-115.
- Habermas, J. (1993). *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*.
- Habermas, J. (1998). *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*. Cambridge, MA:

September 2013

Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
	1	2	3	4	5	6
	7	8	9	10	11	12
	13	14	15	16	17	18
	19	20	21	22	23	24
	25	26	27	28	29	30

October 2013

Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
			1	2	3	4
			5	6	7	8
			9	10	11	12
			13	14	15	16
			17	18	19	20
			21	22	23	24
			25	26	27	28
			29	30	31	

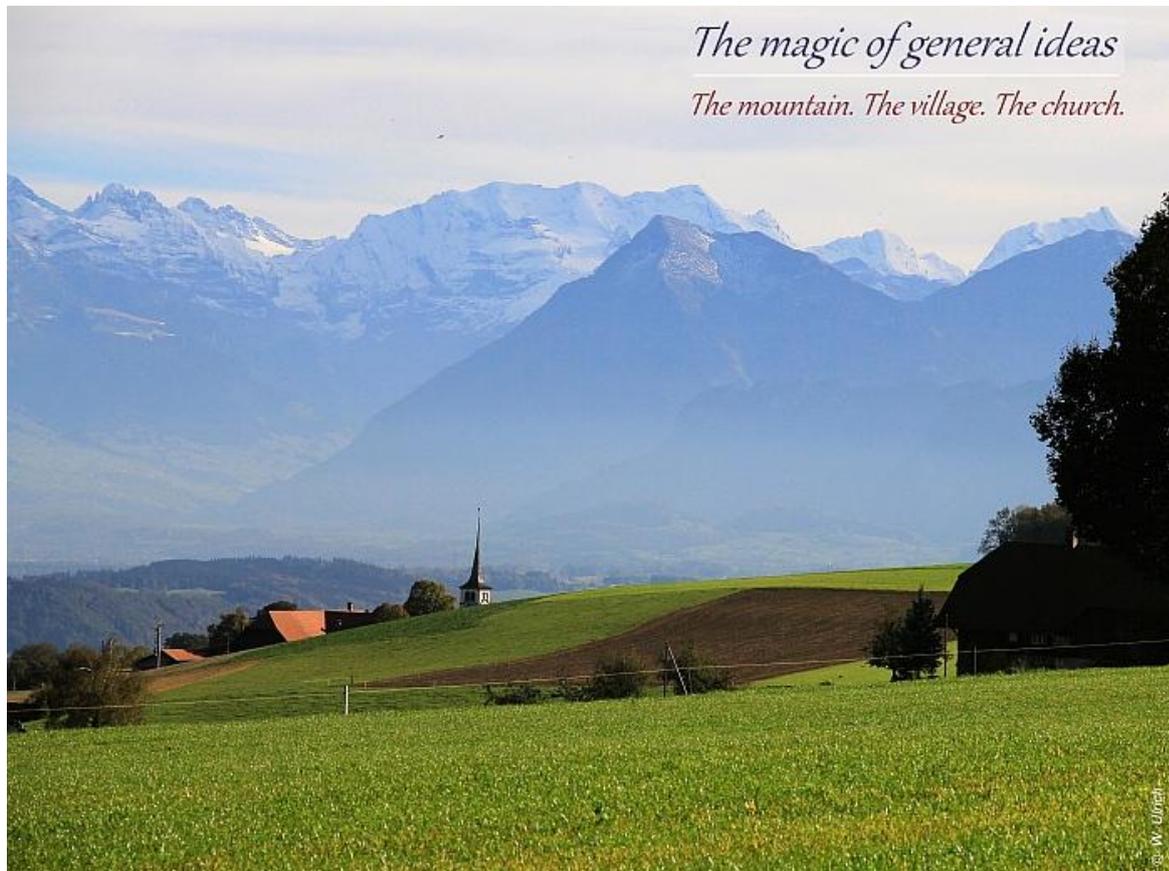
MIT Press.

- Habermas, J. (2009). *Philosophische Texte*. 5 vols. Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp. Vol. 2: *Rationalitäts- und Sprachtheorie*.
- Hare, R.M. (1981). *Moral Thinking: Its Levels, Method, and Point*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press /Clarendon Press.
- Illich, I. (1971). *Deschooling Society*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Illich, I. (1975). *Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health*. London: Calder & Boyars. Pocket book edn. New York: Random House /Bantam Books, 1976.
- Kant, I. (1786). *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*. 2nd edn. [B] (1st edn. [A] 1785). Transl. by H.J. Paton. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964. German orig.: *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, 1st edn. [A] and 2nd edn. [B], in: W. Weischedel (ed.), *Werkausgabe Vol. VII, Kritik der praktischen Vernunft, Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp, 1977 (orig. 1968), pp. 9-102.
- Kant, I. (1787). *Critique of Pure Reason*. 2nd edn. [B] (1st edn. [A] 1781). Transl. by N.K. Smith. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965 (orig. Macmillan, New York, 1929). German orig.: *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 1st edn. [A] 1781, 2nd edn. [B] 1787, in: W. Weischedel (ed.), *Werkausgabe Vols. III and IV*, Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp 1977 (orig. 1968).
- Kant, I. (1788). *Critique of Practical Reason and Other Writings in Moral Philosophy*. Transl. by L.W. Beck. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1949. German orig.: *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, 1st ed. [A], in: W. Weischedel (ed.), *Werkausgabe Vol. VII, Kritik der praktischen Vernunft, Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp, 1977 (orig. 1968), pp. 105-320.
- Kohlberg, L. (1981). *Essays on Moral Development, Vol. 1: The Philosophy of Moral Development – Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Popper, K.R. (1959). *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. London: Hutchinson. New ed. London: Routledge 2002 (German orig. 1935).
- Popper, K.R. (1968). Epistemology without a knowing subject. In B. van Rootselaar and J.F. Staal (eds.), *Proceedings of the Third International Congress for Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science*, 25 Aug. to 2 Sept. 1967, Amsterdam, pp. 333–373; reprinted in Popper (1972), pp. 106-152.
- Popper, K.R. (1972). *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.
- Reichenbach, H. (1938). *Experience and Prediction: An Analysis of the Foundations and the Structure of Knowledge*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Rudner, R.S. (1966). *Philosophy of Social Science*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Schlick, M. (1918). *Allgemeine Erkenntnislehre*. Berlin: Springer (2nd edn. 1925). English transl. by A.E. Blumberg: *General Theory of Knowledge*, Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1985.
- Schön, D. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books. Paperback edn. Aldershot, UK: Arena/Ashgate Publishing, 1995.
- Schön, D. (1987). *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Towards A New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Tugendhat, E. (1993). *Vorlesungen über Ethik*. Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp.
- Ulrich, W. (2006d). Rethinking critically reflective research practice: beyond Popper's critical rationalism. *Journal of Research Practice*, 2, No. 2, article P1.
[HTML] <http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/64/63>
[PDF] <http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/download/64/120>
- Ulrich, W. (2007a). Theory and practice II: the rise and fall of the "primacy of theory." (Reflections on critical pragmatism, Part 3). *Ulrich's Bimonthly*, January-February 2007.
[HTML] http://wulrich.com/bimonthly_january2007.html
[PDF] http://wulrich.com/downloads/bimonthly_january2007.pdf
- Ulrich, W. (2008a). Reflections on reflective practice (1/7): The mainstream concept of reflective practice and its blind spot. *Ulrich's Bimonthly*, March-April 2008 (1 March 2008).
[HTML] http://wulrich.com/bimonthly_march2008.html
[PDF] http://wulrich.com/downloads/bimonthly_march2008.pdf

- Ulrich, W. (2008b). Reflections on reflective practice (3/7): In search of practical reason. *Ulrich's Bimonthly*, September-October 2008 (8 Sep 2008).
 [HTML] http://wulrich.com/bimonthly_september2008.html
 [PDF] http://wulrich.com/downloads/bimonthly_september2008.pdf
- Ulrich, W. (2009a). Reflections on reflective practice (4/7): Philosophy of practice and Aristotelian virtue ethics. *Ulrich's Bimonthly*, January-February 2009.
 [HTML] http://wulrich.com/bimonthly_january2009.html
 [PDF] http://wulrich.com/downloads/bimonthly_january2009.pdf
- Ulrich, W. (2009b). Reflections on reflective practice (5/7): Practical reason and rational ethics: Kant. *Ulrich's Bimonthly*, March-April 2009.
 [HTML] http://wulrich.com/bimonthly_march2009.html
 [PDF] http://wulrich.com/downloads/bimonthly_march2009.pdf
- Ulrich, W. (2009c). Reflections on reflective practice (6a/7): Communicative rationality and formal pragmatics – Habermas 1. *Ulrich's Bimonthly*, September-October 2009.
 [HTML] http://wulrich.com/bimonthly_september2009.html
 [PDF] http://wulrich.com/downloads/bimonthly_september2009.pdf
- Ulrich, W. (2009d). Reflections on reflective practice (6b/7): Argumentation theory and practical discourse – Habermas 2. *Ulrich's Bimonthly*, November-December 2009.
 [HTML] http://wulrich.com/bimonthly_november2009.html
 [PDF] http://wulrich.com/downloads/bimonthly_november2009.pdf
- Ulrich, W. (2010a). Exploring discourse ethics (1/2). *Ulrich's Bimonthly*, March-April 2010.
 [HTML] http://wulrich.com/bimonthly_march2010.html
 [PDF] http://wulrich.com/downloads/bimonthly_march2010.pdf
- Ulrich, W. (2010b). Exploring discourse ethics (2/2). *Ulrich's Bimonthly*, May-June 2010.
 [HTML] http://wulrich.com/bimonthly_may2010.html
 [PDF] http://wulrich.com/downloads/bimonthly_may2010.pdf
- Ulrich, W. (2011a). What is good professional practice? (Part 1: Introduction). *Ulrich's Bimonthly*, March-April 2011.
 [HTML] http://wulrich.com/bimonthly_march2011.html
 [PDF] http://wulrich.com/downloads/bimonthly_march2011.pdf
- Ulrich, W. (2011c). A note on the convergence of Kant's concepts of rationality, morality, and politics. *Ulrich's Bimonthly*, September-October 2011.
 [HTML] http://wulrich.com/bimonthly_september2011.html
 [PDF] http://wulrich.com/downloads/bimonthly_september2011.pdf
- Ulrich, W. (2013a). Reflections on reflective practice (6c/7): Discourse ethics and deliberative democracy, or the difficult path to communicative practice – Habermas 3 (1st half). *Ulrich's Bimonthly*, May-June 2013.
 [HTML] http://wulrich.com/bimonthly_may2013.html
 [PDF] http://wulrich.com/downloads/bimonthly_may2013.pdf
- Ulrich, W. (2014). Reflections on reflective practice (6d/7): Discourse ethics and deliberative democracy, or the difficult path to communicative practice – Habermas 3 (2nd half). *Ulrich's Bimonthly* (in prep.).

Picture data Digital photograph taken on 19 October 2012, around 2:45 p.m., near Bern, Switzerland. ISO 200, exposure mode aperture priority with aperture f/8.0, exposure time 1/1600 seconds, exposure bias -0.33, metering mode center-weighted average, contrast low, saturation normal, sharpness low. Focal length 92 mm (equivalent to 147 mm with a conventional 35 mm camera). Original resolution 5184 x 3456 pixels; current resolution 700 x 525 pixels, compressed to 200 KB.

September-October, 2013



The magic of general ideas
The mountain. The village. The church.

The magic world of ideas

„Appreciating the role of general ideas”

(The theme of this new series of exploratory essays)

 **Previous Picture**

Next Picture 

Personal notes:

Notepad for capturing
personal thoughts »

Write down your thoughts before you forget them!
Just be sure to copy them elsewhere before leaving this page.

Last updated 17 Dec 2013 (first published 16 Dec 2013)
http://wulrich.com/bimonthly_september2013.html

[Home](#)

[Top / Menu](#)

[Site Map](#)

[Copyright](#)