

[Kimberly Hutchings](#)

Universalism in feminist international ethics: gender and the difficult labour of translation

Book section

Original citation:

Originally published in Hutchings, Kimberly (2013) *Universalism in feminist international ethics: gender and the difficult labour of translation*. In: Browne, Jude, (ed.) *Dialogue, Politics and Gender*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, pp. 81-106. ISBN 9781107038899

© 2013 [Cambridge University Press](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/51492/>

Available in LSE Research Online: June 2014

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's submitted version of the book section. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

Kimberly Hutchings

Universalism in Feminist International Ethics: gender and the difficult labour of translation¹

Without translation, the very concept of universality cannot cross the linguistic borders it claims in principle, to be able to cross. Or we might put it another way: without translation, the only way the assertion of universality can cross a border is through a colonial and expansionist logic. (Butler, 'Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism' in Butler, Laclau & Žižek *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: contemporary dialogues on the left*, London, Verso, 2000: 35)

Introduction

The question of universality is at the heart of debates in international ethics, both feminist and non-feminist. For some ethical theorists, there can be no such thing as an international ethics without the presumption of strong moral universalism. For others, it is the absence of moral universalism that is the starting point for international ethics. Yet again, for many ethical theorists, the task for international ethics is to establish some kind of middle way between 'cosmopolitan' (universalist) and 'communitarian' (particularist) alternatives. Debates over moral universalism are, of course, not new. Neither are they peculiar to those of us concerned with the

domains of international, world or global politics. Nevertheless, when the ethical issues with which one is dealing are relevant to the latter domains, issues of universality as a matter of both the ground and scope of moral judgment become particularly salient. One cannot address questions about transnational distributive justice, the ethics of war or other kinds of cross-border intervention without addressing the issue of whether answers to such questions can be meaningful and/ or authoritative trans-nationally, across boundaries of culture and power. This paper examines arguments of thinkers concerned with how to authorise moral judgments across these kinds of boundaries, beginning with Hegel.

I will argue that Hegel's arguments about the 'moral point of view' provide resources to address the impasses inherent in the ways in which 'universality' (and therefore also 'particularity' and 'singularity') figure in debates in international ethics between cosmopolitan (moral universalism), communitarian (moral particularism) and care ethics (moral singularism). However, even though Hegel offers a powerful deconstruction of the logic of moral judgment, he does little to help with working out the positive implications of that deconstruction for international ethics. It is here that the work of certain feminist moral theorists becomes of interest. The turn to dialogical or communicative ethics in the arguments of thinkers such as Benhabib and Butler is very much a response to the problems of grounding moral judgment identified by Hegel.² In Benhabib's case, I will argue that her Habermasian understanding of the presuppositions of dialogue tends to lock her back into the unsustainable logic of moral universalism. In the case of Butler, however, her re-thinking of the ethical universal (which builds explicitly on a reading of Hegel) as the ongoing 'difficult labour of cultural translation', provides a possible way forward.³ 'Cultural translation', on Butler's account, is a perpetual process, which invariably involves

loss of purity of meaning on all sides, but which nevertheless admits the possibility of forging common ethical vocabularies. This offers a way of keeping the idea of ethical universality in play even within the complex and hierarchical plurality of international and trans-national politics.

The Moral Point of View, Culture and the Beautiful Soul

Hegel engages explicitly with the question of the grounding of moral judgment in his discussion of the ‘moral point of view’ in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.⁴ On Hegel’s account, the attempt to think in terms of the ‘moral point of view’ ultimately relies on unsustainable assumptions. We can see this with regard both to the Kantian moral point of view, in which morality is grounded in universal reason (the universalizability of will) and in the figure of the beautiful soul, the purity of conscience of the Romantic moral subject. In the first case, moral thinking is grounded in the universal, in the latter case, it is grounded in the singular – but Hegel argues that in neither case can universality or singularity be understood consistently in the sense that is required by the moral point of view, that is to say as pure, self-subsistent categories.

Hegel reads Kant’s moral philosophy as premised on the autonomy of the moral will (pure practical reason, *Wille*) in contradistinction to the heteronomy of the will influenced by natural, sensuous determination (*Willkür*). The universality inherent in moral principle is a consequence of the detachment of moral reason from nature and spirit, the realm of particularity. It is precisely because *anyone* would recognise that X or Y (for instance, telling the truth or keeping promises) is right that the moral actor can be sure that X or Y is right. The moral act, therefore, is

understood as a singular event (this truth telling or promise keeping), or particular events (truth tellings, promise keepings), which are subsumed under the universal and thereby detached from particularity in general.⁵ Hegel understands the aim of moral reason to be to bring particular acts under the rule of universality, effectively wiping out their status as particular (they become instances of the universal). Moral judgment, therefore, is a matter of judging whether these acts or this act can be subsumed under the universal or not. For Hegel, this way of thinking about moral judgment raises problems of both the content and form of how the singular act or particular acts are related to the universal. The first question to be raised is about how the universal is held to inhere in the singular/ particular on this account of moral judgment? Is it through a 'third party', which provides external criteria to bridge the gap between universal and singular/ particular? Is it the singular act itself that provides the bridge between universal and particular? And what does this tell us about the meaning of the copula, the 'is' that holds the different parts of judgment together?⁶

Much of Hegel's critique of Kant's account of moral judgment can be understood as focused on the 'content' of the copula. The argument he repeatedly makes is that the 'purity' of the universal does not stand on examination of what is actually involved in Kant's account, from the insertion of concrete details into the process of universalization to the embodied and enculturated (naturally and spiritually contaminated) nature of action in the world. For Hegel, Kant's argument is inadequate insofar as it does not provide the resources by which to think the interconnection of particular and universal in the singular act, which is required by Kant's own reasoning.⁷ Ultimately, this is because of the absoluteness of the distinction between rational and natural determination in Kant's thought. In this

context, Hegel argues that morality becomes a perpetual striving towards an ought-to-be, which is out of reach because it seeks to abolish the diremptions, both logical and ontological, which it nevertheless requires.

Still engaging with the ‘moral point of view’, Hegel moves on in the *Phenomenology* to examine an alternative account of moral reasoning, which was part of the Romantic reaction to the formalism and legalism of Kant’s moral theory. According to this view, rather than being located in universal moral law, the possibility of moral judgment is grounded in conscience and purity of heart.⁸ This way of thinking about morality is presented through the figure of the ‘beautiful soul’. The beautiful soul is the romantic hero/ heroine who exemplifies the perfection of moral subjectivity (the inner certainty of what is right). As such, the beautiful soul is a singularity which posits itself as the ground of connection between universality and particularity, shifting the ground of judgment from predicate to subject.⁹ Hegel goes on to argue that the logic of Kantian moral thinking is ultimately replicated rather than refuted from the point of view of the beautiful soul. For the beautiful soul it is the twin distinctions between spirit and nature and between identity and difference that underpin the authority of her moral voice. The disembodied purity of the ‘inner self’ of the beautiful soul identifies moral authority with disengagement from nature (sensuous determination), but also with a power located in an understanding of spirit as pure individuated self-legislation, disconnected from both spiritual and natural aspects of the world. In contrast to Kantian moral thought, with the beautiful soul, the moral law is located within the exemplary moral subject, it is not rationally, externally accessible or knowable, and its authority derives from its singular source rather than its universal significance. Yet, Hegel argues, if we examine the content and form of this moral judgment in which the positions of singular and universal in

the judgment of the moral point of view are reversed, we nevertheless find the same impossibility of grasping the interconnection between the moments of judgment except as the abolition of the terms in which it is grounded. Hegel sets out to show that there are in effect two options open to the beautiful soul, in its own terms, both of which effectively undermine her moral authority. One option is for the beautiful soul to exercise moral authority, agency and judgment. But if this option is followed, the purity and detachment of the beautiful soul immediately becomes compromised and mired in particularity. The other option is to withdraw into the ethereality of moral perfection, in which the beautiful soul dwells directly in the universal, and therefore also dies on Hegel's account.¹⁰ The option of withdrawal undermines the singularity of the beautiful soul as a bridge between universality and particularity just as much as the intervention of the beautiful soul in the world undermines it. This is a different story to the story of Kantian morality, but the logic of judgment where the limitations of judgment, in both content and form, are not acknowledged is at the heart of Hegel's critique in both cases.

Hegel's deconstructive critique of the moral point of view and of the beautiful soul can be applied to three forms of moral thinking, with their attendant logics of judgment, which are influential in contemporary debates in international ethics.¹¹ These are: *moral universalism*, which includes the substantive 'human nature' universalisms of Aristotelianism or utilitarianism, but also procedural universalisms of a Kantian type;¹² *moral particularism* as exemplified in versions of communitarianism in which morality is held to be relative to culture;¹³ and *moral singularism* as we find it at work in exemplary or virtue ethics. Although there are examples of feminist moral universalisms and particularisms in debates within international ethics, it has tended to be the third form of ethics, moral singularism,

which has dominated feminist contributions to international ethical debate in the idea of an ethic of care, which draws on the arguments of thinkers such as Ruddick and Gilligan.¹⁴

The feminist ethic of care, within international ethics, is presented as an alternative to both moral universalism and moral particularism.¹⁵ It represents the dissatisfaction of feminist thinkers with moral universalisms which are premised on a particular, masculinist account of what it means to be human (in terms of substantive accounts of human nature and rationality), and with moral particularisms which are premised on accepting the dominant, patriarchal norms of culture as equivalent to culture itself. This form of moral thinking, in a move reminiscent of the ‘beautiful soul’, identifies the ground of moral judgment as being in the singular, the specific voice that nevertheless carries exemplary, universal significance. On this account of morality, the judgments that X is good, X is a good woman or X acted rightly are authoritative insofar as they can be seen as grounded in the singular. That is to say, they are not authorised by universal rule or given cultural norm, but by the ways in which the singular agent has arrived at them in the context of the duties and responsibilities which are inherent in her singular being and experience.

From a Hegelian point of view, the feminist ethic of care raises questions as to the content and form of the extremes and copula of judgment within this approach to ethics. How are the content and form of singularity to be understood? How are the content and form of universality (‘good’, ‘right’) to be understood? And how does this kind of moral thinking configure the relation between singularity, universality and particularity? Unpacking the content of singularity reveals a variety of possibilities. If the singularity is the singularity of the carer, then is this to be understood as an instance of generic virtues embedded in care as such, or as a

category of persons, such as ‘women’ or ‘mothers’? If the former, then singularity collapses straightforwardly into universality, and therefore into a form of moral universalism. If the latter, then the category of women or mothers has itself to be unpacked, is this all women/ mothers, some women/ mothers, a specific woman/ mother? What are the criteria for what counts as women/ mothers? And should woman/ mother be understood as a universal or a particular? A common universalist critique of the feminist ethic of care is that it is a form of moral particularism, in which judgment is made relative to context, and which falls into contradiction because of the denial of its reliance on universal categories in a similar way to communitarianism.¹⁶ From a communitarian point of view, however, the critique more likely to be made is that the ethic of care is universalism masquerading as particularism, in which the particularity of practices inherent in Western culture are illegitimately claimed to be of universal significance.¹⁷

It would seem that the very idea of moral *judgment* is put into question by a Hegelian analysis, rendering us unable to make the claims ‘X is good’, ‘X is a good woman’, ‘X acted rightly’ which are both the subject matter of moral theory and part and parcel of our everyday existence. However, one could read Hegel’s purpose differently, so that rather than endorsing the abolition of judgment he is pointing to the need for a much more careful examination of the complex conditions of possibility which underpin the intelligibility and authority of moral claims. The purpose of the above discussion was not to suggest that moral universalism, moral particularism or moral singularism fail as ways of formulating the meaning of moral claims, but it is to suggest that in each case it is the ways in which the categories of universality, particularity and singularity are thought which sets up difficulties for judgment. In the light of this it is unsurprising that much debate in moral theory, both

feminist and non-feminist is about how to find ways 'between' the alternatives of moral universalism, particularism and singularism.

Within feminist ethics, including international ethics, the difficulties of accounting for moral judgment in universal, particular or singular terms have been particularly vexing. This is evident both in ongoing debates about 'ethic of justice' versus 'ethic of care' and in the problems raised by challenges to the idea that the ethical significance of 'women' or the 'feminine' can be understood in unitary terms, given the boundaries of culture and power between different women. In recent years, the most common response to the complexities of moral judgment for feminists has been to insist on the need for actual communicative interaction between different feminine moral subjects as the only way to ground a morally authoritative feminist discourse. This dialogical turn seeks to negotiate between universality, particularity and singularity and avoid the pitfalls inherent in according a transcendental significance to any one of these terms. In the following sections I examine two attempts to get beyond the paradoxes of judgment through a focus on the presuppositions of communication, those of Benhabib and Butler. Both of these theorists are to some extent influenced by Hegel's critique of the 'moral point of view'.¹⁸

Dialogical Universalism

Benhabib established the basis of her dialogical ethics in her essays in *Situating the Self: gender, community and postmodernism in contemporary ethics*.¹⁹ Within this collection of essays, her analysis is always framed by the need to eschew abstract moral universalisms that are, in practice, exclusive, but also to avoid a lapse

into the moral relativism she identifies in communitarian and feminist forms of moral particularism. Gender plays into both aspects of Benhabib's argument. On the one hand, gender represents those aspects of concrete identity that are overlooked by abstract universalisms, of a Kantian or Habermasian kind.²⁰ On the other, the particularity of gendered identity signifies the limits of morality insofar as it loses touch with the ethics of inclusion that is Benhabib's initial response to the claims of gender.²¹ Thus, within the book, Kantian and liberal approaches to ethics are condemned for being unable to recognise and encompass concrete gendered identities. But at the same time, the feminist ethic of care is condemned for remaining locked into a particularist world-view. Benhabib's answer as to how to escape from a choice between abstract universalism and concrete particularism in moral theory is dialogical. It builds on Habermas's communicative ethics and the principles of 'universal respect' and 'egalitarian reciprocity', which Habermas sees as built into the presuppositions of genuine communication. But Benhabib departs from Habermas in emphasising the importance of real dialogue between 'concrete', and not only 'generalized' others, in working through the implications of what universal respect and egalitarian reciprocity mean. This means that dialogue, as a basis for ethical judgment, cannot be understood in wholly rationalistic terms, but requires the exercise of empathy and imagination. Within this dialogue, the moral subject relies on an ability to put herself in another's place, see from their point of view and therefore enlarge their mentality in the business of moral judgment and prescription.²²

- - - if we view discourses as moral conversations in which we exercise reversibility of perspective either by actually listening to all involved or by representing to ourselves imaginatively the many perspectives of

those involved, then this procedure is also an aspect of the skills of moral imagination and moral narrative which good judgment involves whatever else it might involve. There is no incompatibility between the exercise of moral intuition guided by an egalitarian and universalist model of conversation and the exercise of contextual judgment.²³

Benhabib's emphasis on this model of dialogue as the procedural solution to tensions between universalist and particularist strands of moral theory implies the need for institutional arrangements by which such dialogue could be secured. This leads in her work to an argument for deliberative democracy as the ideal political arrangement within political communities and, as we shall see, guides her view about appropriate responses to ethical questions in a global context.²⁴

In her book, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*,²⁵ Benhabib applies her argument for this moderated form of Habermasian discourse ethics to the claims of multiculturalism for respect for cultural difference within and across political communities. Although Benhabib is not primarily concerned with gender or feminism in this text, nevertheless gender continues to mark the limits of morality, both by reminding us of the importance of concrete identity and by signifying the dangers of moral particularism. However, although this dual aspect of Benhabib's argument is carried through from her earlier work, the emphasis is now much more on the inclusive, universalist as opposed to the particularist aspects of her analysis. She continues to argue for the importance of genuine dialogue, which takes account of concrete as well as generalized aspects of others and insists that awareness of the 'otherness of others' can only come about

through exposure to their unfamiliar narratives of self-identification.²⁶ At the same time, however, gender is most often invoked in relation to the position of women as a warning against strong multiculturalist claims for group rights and as a reminder of the importance of universal human rights and equal membership of the deliberative polity for feminist conceptions of justice and the good.²⁷ She argues *against* strong pluralist responses to the claims of culture, in which different rights are assigned on the basis of cultural membership either within a given state or through secession, and *for* a deliberative democratic solution to the accommodation of difference, both within liberal democratic states and more broadly across the global arena, wherever discursive (which is to say, moral) community forms.²⁸

In *The Claims of Culture*, Benhabib's argument relies on three main planks. The first is an essentially sociological argument for the looseness and hybridity of cultures, backed up by an epistemological case against the idea of radical incommensurability. Benhabib uses this to sustain her position against radical pluralist responses to the moral claims of different cultures.²⁹ Her positive case for inclusive deliberative democracy depends on the further two planks of what she terms 'weak transcendentalism' and 'historically enlightened universalism' respectively.³⁰ The term 'weak transcendentalism' refers to necessary constraints on the form that justificatory strategies underpinning rational agreement about normative claims may take (in accordance with the conditions on communicative reason as explored by Habermas and Apel)³¹. These conditions are the conditions of 'universal respect' and 'egalitarian reciprocity' established in *Situating the Self*, in which all participants in the moral dialogue are accorded equal rights of participation and all are committed to understanding from the other's point of view.³² The term 'historically enlightened universalism' refers to the processes of moral learning ('through commerce as well as

wars; international agreements as well as international threats') through which individuals and groups come to appreciate (or at least accept) the superiority of the norms of universal respect and egalitarian reciprocity that are inseparable from communicative reason.³³

It is in the public sphere, situated within civil society, that multicultural struggles have their place, and that political and moral learning and value transformation occur.³⁴

What follows from Benhabib's argument in relation to feminist morality across cultures and states is that it must take the form of a 'pluralistically enlightened ethical universalism'.³⁵ Feminist actors in different places and radically different cultures and positions of power, must accept dialogue, under principles of universal respect and egalitarian reciprocity, as the means to articulate and legitimate conceptions of justice and the good and the principles and norms which follow from them. For Benhabib civilization is inherent in communicative reason, the presuppositions of this reason demand that the other be acknowledged, in detachment from their particular identity, as a human being as such. Whether they like it or not, all cultures and communities must learn this lesson if a global feminist ethics is to be possible, since it is only on the basis of this 'universal respect' and 'egalitarian reciprocity' that the plurality of different women can be guaranteed participation in moral discourse in the first place.

Thus, Benhabib's dialogical ethics offers a resolution of the tension between feminist moral universalism and moral particularism in the international sphere, by holding out the possibility of a transnational feminist moral community, which is formed through giving voice to all perspectives in moral and political debate. But how adequate is this as a resolution of the terms of moral judgment? Critics of

Benhabib's argument have drawn attention to her account of the presuppositions of 'moral conversation' and argued that, rather than resolving the tension between the terms of judgment, Benhabib becomes trapped in an attempt to give transcendental significance to a version of moral universalism, that can then be demonstrated to be haunted by its particularity. This kind of critique takes two forms: a critique of Benhabib's account of the dialogue between self and other; and a critique of the substantive political implications of Benhabib's moral argument.

In an essay written in response to Benhabib's arguments in *Situating the Self*, Iris Young takes issue with Benhabib's elaboration of her discursive ethical ideal.³⁶ Although Young endorses Benhabib's argument for the re-thinking of ethical relations in a way that accommodates the 'concrete' as well as the 'generalized' other, nevertheless Young sees her as making a mistake in identifying universal respect and egalitarian reciprocity with symmetry and reversibility of perspective.³⁷ For Young, this implies a tendency to assimilate difference to sameness, by always assuming that the other's point of view will be intelligible in the self's own terms. Instead, Young calls for a 'taking account' of others' perspectives and the relations between them, without assuming the possibility of seeing things from the other's point of view:

It is more appropriate to approach a situation of communicative interaction for the purpose of arriving at a moral or political judgement with a stance of moral humility. In moral humility one starts with the assumption that one cannot see things from the other person's perspective and waits to learn by listening to the other person to what extent they have had similar experiences.³⁸

Young's account of 'communication' substitutes the model of the gift relation and the idea of asymmetrical reciprocity for the relation of equal exchange and symmetrical reciprocity that she identifies in Benhabib's (following Habermas's) account of 'discourse'.³⁹ She (Young) stresses that communication may be a creative process:

- - - in which the other person offers a new expression, and I understand it not because I am looking for how it fits with given paradigms, but because I am open and suspend my assumptions in order to listen.⁴⁰

Young claims that Benhabib's argument is based on an unnecessarily constricted model of dialogue because it makes overly strong assumptions about the reversibility of position and perspective of participants in the public realm and thereby misunderstands the politics of moral engagement itself. This suggests that the moral relation inherent in the discursive ideal has a rather different political dynamic than the essentially liberal egalitarianism that characterizes Benhabib's account.⁴¹ The danger Young is pointing to in Benhabib's dialogical ethics takes us back to the two kinds of work that references to gender accomplish in Benhabib's argument. On the one hand, gender is the mark of concrete difference and the limit of abstract universalist accounts of moral reasoning. On the other hand, gender is the mark of the limits of moral particularism, both in the feminist ethic of care and in communitarian arguments that use culture to trump claims for women's equal rights. Young's critique of Benhabib suggests that even at the level of the model of dialogue itself, the sameness signified by gender trumps the difference that it also signifies and that therefore Benhabib's ethics risks lapsing into the assimilative universalism she herself criticizes in Kantian and Habermasian moral theory.

A second line of criticism of Benhabib's argument focuses more on the historical assumptions and political implications of her ethical arguments, where again it is argued that her openness to difference is more dramatically constrained than she admits.⁴² This is clear from the institutional specification of conditions and constraints on dialogue in the public sphere. In both cases, the principles of universal respect and egalitarian reciprocity rule out certain kind of identities/ groups and certain kinds of arguments in advance.⁴³ So that, for instance, it is clearly the case that certain moral judgements in the name of feminism *must* be possible in the light of the conditions of dialogue. By definition, it would not be possible for participants to find themselves unable to agree on the principle of equal rights for women, though they might differ as to how that principle should be applied.

The above objections point to a certain principled exclusivity in Benhabib's version of Habermas's discursive ideal, which becomes more obvious when her argument moves from the domestic to the international context. When the apparently egalitarian discursive ideal is operationalized transnationally it turns out to reflect a hierarchical relation in morality that maps onto, and could be used to endorse, actual hierarchies of power. Benhabib is well aware that accepting the guidance of the norms inherent in communicative reason is not something that comes about through an examination of the logic of argumentation alone, either within or between states. And here she calls upon a Habermasian theory of modernity to supplement the 'weak transcendentalism' of discourse ethics.⁴⁴ Like Habermas, Benhabib sees the 'generalized moral attitude of equality towards human beings' *qua* human beings as an historical achievement, one which has been carried by both coercive and communicative encounters between cultures and political communities over time. This collective moral learning is clearly most advanced in 'cultural life-worlds and

worldviews under conditions of modernity' and this might be seen to pose problems for moral and political questions which involve cultures and communities in debates over moral principles which do not necessarily accept either an attitude of egalitarianism to human beings as such (the moral point of view), or the distinctions between the moral (universal principles), the ethical (norms specific to culture or community) and the evaluative (values specific to culture, community or individual) which Habermas and Benhabib draw.⁴⁵ However, Benhabib does not see this as an insuperable problem because of the way, as she see it, in which interdependence is opening up all cultures to the moral lessons of modernity. Speaking of the different extent to which cultures may have internalised distinctions between moral, ethical and evaluative, Benhabib states:

Increasingly, though, the globalized world we are inhabiting compels cultural traditions that may not have generated these differentiations in the course of their own development to internalise them or to learn to coexist in a political and legal world with other cultures that operate with some form of these differentiations. Many traditional cultures, for example, still consider women's and children's rights as an aspect of their ethical life-world, of the ways things are done in that particular culture. However, the international discourse on women's rights, the activism of international development and aid organizations, migration, and television programmes are transforming these assumptions.⁴⁶

From the point of view of grounding an international feminist ethics Benhabib's linking of discursive ethics to the historical specificity of modernity poses problems both in principle and in practice. In principle, the worry is that we return to an assimilative universalism in which the plurality of women's identities and experiences become subsumed under a western liberal model of what it means to be a human being. In practice, it becomes clear that the conditions underpinning the discourses needed to agree on global moral norms are stringently liberal. They therefore require a high degree of coincidence of moral starting points in the first place, which cannot in fact be taken for granted.

Benhabib claims to offer a way through the tensions between universalist and particularist feminisms, by holding out the possibility of a transnational feminist moral community, which is formed through giving voice to all perspectives in moral and political debate. On examination, however, her handling of the terms of moral judgment (universal, particular and singular) through a dialogical ethic ends up much closer to Hegel's account of the 'moral point of view' than it initially promised. In the end, the 'weak transcendentalism' of discourse ethics carries more weight in relation to the ethical significance of gender than the 'concrete other' that gender also signifies. This means that much more comes to rest on the claim to universality, in contradistinction to particularity and singularity, as a ground for moral judgement than Hegel's analysis of the logic of judgment suggests that it can bear. Ultimately this is to do with the account of communication that Benhabib derives from Habermas, in which dialogue presupposes a high degree of coincidence in the meaning of moral subjectivity and agency for the parties involved.

Restaging the Universal

Butler's work is premised on a rejection of the Habermasian account of the logic of communication. For Butler difference and asymmetries of power are inherent in all attempts to articulate moral principles and values. In her recent work, Butler has returned to Hegel's arguments to help articulate her understanding of moral judgment and her ethical commitments in a post 9/11 world. In Butler's case, however, her Hegelianism is given what she terms a Foucaultian 'twist', which is crucial for her particular understanding of moral judgment. There are two aspects to the ways in which Butler re-appropriates Hegel in her recent work: the first is in her re-thinking of the category of the 'human' as a contingently universal category in terms of an idea of 'liveability';⁴⁷ the second is in her use of Hegel's arguments to challenge moral universalism (both substantive and procedural) and moral particularism (cultural relativism) and formulate her alternative in the notion of 'cultural translation'.⁴⁸

In my view, Hegel has given us an ek-static
notion of the self, one which is of necessity
outside itself, not self-identical, differentiated
from the start.⁴⁹

In the essays in *Undoing Gender*, Butler draws on Hegel's account of the self, desire and recognition in the *Phenomenology*. Two aspects of her argument are particularly significant: first, as in the above quotation, her agreement with Hegel's account of the self as always already 'outside itself'; second, the Foucaultian twist she gives to Hegel's account of recognition in her claim that 'norms of recognition function to produce and to de-produce the notion of the human'⁵⁰. The idea of the self as outside itself, or, as she puts it elsewhere, as a 'porous boundary' expresses, for

Butler, that the meaning of any singular human life (the identity and capacities of unique individuals) is given by complex culturally and institutionally embedded patterns and norms of recognition which enable sense to be made of that singular life, by both the individual concerned and others. In this sense, individual selves are fundamentally mediated by other individuals and by embedded norms of recognition, which Hegel would have referred to as 'objective spirit'. One of the most important ways in which this is evident to Butler is in relation to gender, which is at once at the heart of the individual's sense of self and outside of individual control ('But the terms that make up one's own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author - -')⁵¹. The crucial point for Butler is that every singular life is dependent on modes of recognition that are not individually authored or under the control of any specific 'self' or 'other'. It is here that the Foucaultian twist to her argument comes in, because, she argues, the dependence of self on recognition is necessarily 'bound up with the question of power and with the problem of who qualifies as recognizably human and who does not'⁵². This is because culturally and institutionally embedded norms of recognition are not neutral reflections of what it means to be human, but rather constitute the conditions of possibility of a liveable human life.

Butler's notion of 'liveability' encompasses both the literal and the psychic/social chances of surviving of any given individual. Her examples here draw on her experience of human rights activism in relation to the rights of lesbian, gay, transsexual and trans-gendered humans, and the ways in which the liveability of such lives is limited, and often entirely prohibited by the dominant norms of recognition in different national and cultural contexts. Prohibition may mean literal killing or injury (reflecting a primal bodily vulnerability which Butler sees as indissolubly bound up

with the self's other primal vulnerability, derived from its dependence on recognition). But prohibition may also mean the impossibility of engaging in certain practices or the necessity of concealing aspects of one's being and/ or doing from others. Butler's point is not that all individuals are determined in who they are and what they do by norms of recognition, but rather that such norms enable certain lives and disable others, and that there is no liveable life without recognition. The importance of human rights discourse, for Butler, is that it enables the articulation of alternative norms of recognition that permit the extension of the category of the human to those who have traditionally been excluded from it.⁵³

As Butler sees it, the question of which lives are to be allowed to be liveable, or of who is to count as human is foundational to ethics. The problem is that the ways in which this question has traditionally been answered in moral theory has *either* required the establishment norms of recognition that somehow transcend the 'given over' nature of the human condition (moral universalism, moral singularism), *or*, required the acceptance of the contextually dominant norms of recognition as authoritative (moral particularism). Butler is unhappy with both of these responses. With the first because, following Hegel, she does not think such transcendence is possible. With the second because there are no grounds on which to dismiss the alternative (to the dominant) articulations of the norms governing liveability that don't also require transcendence of the 'given over' in the sense of articulating some account of why dominant norms should be privileged as such. Butler is therefore looking for an approach to ethics that retains the inclusive ambition of universalist discourses (such as that of universal human rights) without relying on a claim to false transcendence via the specification of a universal ontological or procedural ground,

and without collapsing into a status-quo cultural relativism. In order to develop such a position, Butler again turns to Hegel.

In the essay 'Restaging the Universal: hegemony and the limits of formalism', Butler uses Hegel's account of the logic of 'universality' to underpin a critique of both moral universalism and moral particularism. She follows Hegel (as outlined in the previous section) in tracing the difficulties encountered by attempts to locate the authority of moral judgments in universal (moral ontology or moral law) or particular (culture) grounds. In her summary of the outcomes of her engagement with Hegel's logic, Butler lists four key points. The first is that it is impossible purely at the level of judgment to disentangle the universal from the other terms of judgment. Every time the meaning of the universal in itself is unpacked it involves reference to either particular or singular and, at different points in this unpacking, the universal becomes subsumed under particular or singular, just as the latter are in turn subsumed under the universal. Even at the most formal level, therefore, the meaning of the universal is unstable and implicated in that which it supposedly transcends. The second point that Butler derives from Hegel's account is that the specification of the universal is always haunted by the particularity or singularity to which it is opposed. Here, the argument is more substantive, since Butler suggests that this 'haunting' takes two forms in supposedly universal judgments: a 'spectral doubling' and the clinging of particularity to universality. Here, Butler is referring to the way that the spectre of genuinely inclusive universality is deferred (and therefore collapses into particularity), but also referred to, in any given universal judgment. For instance the universal human right to marriage and family life at the same time constitutes the exclusion of lesbians and gays from the universal (and thereby identifies the universal

with the particular – heterosexual men and women) and, in purporting to be genuinely inclusive, alludes to a universality that would not collapse into particularity.

Butler's third and fourth points, derived from her reading of Hegel, follow from the first two and relate to accounts of the moral universal that claim to be trans-cultural and accounts of the cultural that claim to be singular. For Butler, 'the relation of universality to its cultural articulation is insuperable'.⁵⁴ She illustrates this by demonstrating how different substantive and procedural moral universalisms are only intelligible to the extent that they articulate their claims in terms that are drawn from available frameworks of meaning. Such frameworks inevitably reflect certain patterns and norms of recognition as opposed to others, and their universalizability is therefore dependent on the universalization of particularity as a matter of politics and history and not just as a matter of logic. However, the logic of universality also indicates that just as universality is contaminated by particularity and singularity, so are particularity and singularity contaminated by universality. This means that 'culture' cannot be thought of as a discrete and unique entity any more than the individual can be thought of in this way. Butler's point, again following Hegel, is that the attempt to reduce the ground of moral judgment to any one of its possible terms invariably fails.

So what does this imply for international ethics in a complex, plural and interconnected world? At a formal level, Butler is clearly arguing that standard moral universalisms, particularisms and singularisms are all posited on a mistaken understanding of the ways in which the logic of judgment works. Instead, she argues that any adequate account of moral judgment needs to recognise that the interrelation between universality, particularity and singularity is fluid and open, in the sense that its meaning is always capable of re-signification. At the same time, however, any such re-signification is always conditioned and therefore fails to keep the promise of

the idea of universality, even as it keeps that promise in place. For Butler, this does not mean the abandonment of universality as a meaningful category in ethics.⁵⁵ Part of her argument is that the universal is an ineradicable category, whether we like it or not, when we make ethical claims, even when those are the claims of culture or of a ‘different voice’, we always invoke the universal. The challenge is to articulate an ethics that simultaneously recognizes both the universal’s contamination and its promise. For Butler this means an ethics that is grounded in a process of cultural translation.

Clearly there is an establishing rhetoric for the assertion of universality and a set of norms that are invoked in recognition of such claims. Moreover, there is no cultural consensus on an international level about what ought and ought not to be a claim to universality, who may make it, and what form it ought to take. Thus, for the claim to work, for it to compel consensus, and for the claim, performatively to enact the very universality it enunciates, it must undergo a set of translations into the various rhetorical and cultural contexts in which the meaning and force of universal claims are made.⁵⁶

As Butler points out, translation may be understood in two different ways. It can operate as a process in which competing meanings are adjudicated in relation to an authoritative meta-language. Or, it can be understood as a process of trial and error, in which the understanding and endorsement of moral claims depends crucially on the scope for recognition and negotiation between the authors, audiences and

referents of the claims in question. The former understanding is the one implied by accounts of moral judgment in which the grounds of judgment are secured in universal, particular or singular. But Butler's analysis of these accounts, following Hegel, has demonstrated that there is no such fixed, authoritative ground for moral judgment. Genuine translation, therefore, is not a matter of subsuming all languages under a meta-language but of forging common ground across different languages, or of recognizing the limits of mutual intelligibility. This is a process, according to Butler, which must allow for (even if it cannot guarantee) the possibility of mutual transformation and the articulation of more inclusive moral vocabularies. At the heart of this possibility is a 'letting go' which is foreign to the ways of thinking about moral judgment that are embedded in the predominant ethical traditions of the post-reformation, post-enlightenment West. Within that context, the mark of moral authority is moral conviction and the heroic stance of 'here I stand, I can do no other'. In contrast, Butler suggests that the ethical promise of universality depends on willingness to recognise its (the universal's) essential unknowability and therefore the limitations of any given moral stance.

Butler's argument denies the possibility of definitively settling questions about the meaning and validity of moral claims and concepts through a process of judgment. In doing this, she is repeating Hegel's lesson that the logic of universality, particularity and singularity in moral judgment is not ultimately a logic that can be grounded in one or other of the terms of judgment. The implications for moral judgment in an international domain are, for Butler, that moral claims must submit to a process of cultural translation. Butler finds inspiration for what this might mean in the work of postcolonial theorists such as Spivak and Gilroy, and in trans-national political activism around gender and human rights. In these contexts the meaning of

the 'universal' is challenged and transformed, enabling a recognition of its openness as a concept and of the kind of work needed to keep its promise open.

It may be that what is right and what is good consist in staying open to the tensions that beset the most fundamental categories we require, in knowing unknowingness at the core of what we know, and what we need, and in recognizing the sign of life in what we undergo without certainty about what will come.⁵⁷

Conclusion

Feminist international ethics is concerned with many substantive questions about violence, distributive justice and human rights. However, it is also persistently haunted by the problem of how to authorise moral judgments across boundaries of culture and power. I have argued that Hegel's critique of the 'moral point of view' demonstrates that attempts to settle these meta-ethical questions through an appeal to one of the terms of judgment (universality, particularity, singularity) are always unstable insofar as they require the abstract specification of one of these terms in contradistinction to the others. The dialogical turn in feminist ethics, in particular in relation to international ethical questions, is premised on the recognition of the difficulty of keeping universality, particularity and singularity distinct in the authorising of moral judgment. Nevertheless, I have suggested that this turn is only likely to be successful if it is accompanied by a recognition of the mutual contamination of the terms of judgment. In this respect, I find

Butler's account of the meaning of ethical universality as a presupposition and outcome of communication more satisfactory than that of Benhabib.

¹ A version of this paper was first presented at the World International Studies Conference, Istanbul, August 2005.

² Both thinkers count Hegel as one of the influences on their work, but I will argue that Butler's philosophical position is much closer to Hegel's than Benhabib's.

³ Butler (2000).

⁴ Hegel (1977): 379-407; Hutchings, 2003: 123. For a broader consideration of the relevance of Hegel's logic to his interrogation of the 'moral point of view', see Hutchings (2006).

⁵ Hegel (1977): 379.

⁶ Ibid: 382.

⁷ Ibid: 383.

⁸ Ibid: 383-409.

⁹ Ibid: 406-7.

¹⁰ Ibid: 407. Hegel's account of the 'beautiful soul' draws on Goethe's character in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship and Travels*, see Rose's discussion of the section 'Confessions of a Beautiful Soul' (Rose, 1992: 188-192).

¹¹ This question is clearly central to the liberal/ communitarian discussion that has been a major focus of concern in ethical and political theory in the Western academy over the last twenty years. Thinkers such as Rawls (in his early work), Habermas and O'Neill have argued for forms of moral universalism which link the authority of moral claims to rational procedure in ways which clearly connect to Hegel's account of the Kantian moral point of view; in contrast, thinkers such as MacIntyre, Walzer, Nussbaum and Rorty have challenged the neo-Kantian perspective in moral theory, either by re-working the meaning of universality or by challenging the idea that moral judgment requires a grounding in the universal. See Rawls (1972); Habermas (1990); O'Neill (1989); MacIntyre (1981); Walzer (1983; 1994); Nussbaum (2000); Rorty (1993). These debates gain particular resonance when applied to issues with international or global reach, such as international human rights or global distributive justice, to the extent that within this context, theoretical perspectives have been increasingly categorised according to a 'cosmopolitan' versus 'communitarian' distinction, see: Nardin & Mapel (1992); Brown (1992; 2002); Dower (1998); Hutchings (1999a).

¹² There are influential examples of all of these species of moral universalism in contemporary ethical theory: examples of Aristotelian universalism can be found in the work of MacIntyre (1981) and Nussbaum (2000). Examples of utilitarian universalism can be found in the work of Singer (1972).

Examples of procedural universalism can be found in the work of Rawls (1972) and Habermas (1990).

¹³ Although communitarianism is frequently invoked as an ideal type in moral arguments, in particular concerning multicultural and international policy issues, it is a position that is far less commonly held in a strong form than the variants of moral universalism listed above. However, the later work of Rawls (1999) and the work of Walzer (1983; 1994) do put forward a strong (if qualified) communitarian line of argument in which it is argued that most moral questions can and should be answered in relation to the cultural context of the specific political community, rather than at the level of universal procedures or claims about universal human nature or human flourishing.

¹⁴ The categories of moral universalism and moral particularism are familiar elements in the description of the range of contemporary moral theory. The notion of 'moral singularism' is less familiar as a stock position in moral argument, but I would argue that it is also a long-standing alternative for moral thought in modernity. Essentially it derives from the combination of an ethics of virtue, which has its roots in a universalist accounts of what it means to be a 'good' person (and therefore with Aristotelian traditions of moral thought) and peculiarly modern Protestant and romantic ideas which insist on the uniqueness of the person and their private relation to God and/ or the moral law (Goethe's and Hegel's 'beautiful soul'). For moral singularists, the specificity of the person is key to the authority of their moral judgment, and I find this perspective exemplified in contemporary feminist ethics following the work of Carol Gilligan and the idea of a women's 'different voice' and a feminist ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982; Ruddick, 1990).

¹⁵ See Robinson (1999).

¹⁶ Benhabib (1992): 178-202.

¹⁷ Mohanty (2003): 19-42.

-
- ¹⁸ Benhabib (1992): 23-67; Butler (1988; 2000; 2004a; 2004b). I do not mean to suggest that Hegel is the only major influence on these thinkers. For Benhabib, Habermas and Arendt are more significant inspirations for her moral theory than Hegel and, in Butler's case, although she is more fundamentally Hegelian in her philosophical approach than Benhabib, Lacan and Foucault are equally important intellectual reference points.
- ¹⁹ Benhabib (1992).
- ²⁰ Ibid: 170.
- ²¹ Ibid: 187.
- ²² Ibid.:121-124.
- ²³ Ibid: 54.
- ²⁴ Benhabib (1996). See also Benhabib (2002; 2004) for a working out of the political and institutional implications of her ethics in transnational and transcultural contexts.
- ²⁵ Benhabib (2002)
- ²⁶ Ibid: 34-35.
- ²⁷ Ibid: 82-104.
- ²⁸ Ibid: 36-37.
- ²⁹ Ibid: 4.
- ³⁰ Ibid: 39.
- ³¹ See Benhabib & Dallmayr (1992)
- ³² Benhabib (1992): 37.
- ³³ Benhabib (2002): 39; 107.
- ³⁴ Ibid. 106.
- ³⁵ Ibid: 36.
- ³⁶ Young (1997)
- ³⁷ Ibid: 41.
- ³⁸ Ibid: 59.
- ³⁹ Ibid: 50. Young draws on Levinas and Irigary in formulating her notion of 'asymmetrical reciprocity'.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid: 53.
- ⁴¹ 'Just because social life consists of plural experiences and perspectives, a theory of communicative ethics must endorse a radically democratic conception of moral and political judgment.' (Young, 1997: 59).
- ⁴² See Hutchings (1997; 1999b; 2004; 2005) for further elaboration of this kind of critique of Benhabib.
- ⁴³ Hutchings (1997): 140-141. Benhabib herself would deny this conclusion, she argues that discourse ethics is not closed to any specific content, in the way that more substantive (or 'substitutionalist') moral theories are, and that this is its great strength (Benhabib, 2002: 13-14). However, although any opinion may be expressed in the process of 'discursive validation', some opinions contradict the norms underpinning the discursive exchange (they entail a 'performative contradiction for anyone who has accepted those norms) and it becomes impossible for them to be taken seriously.
- ⁴⁴ Benhabib (2002): 38.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid: 40.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid: 40.
- ⁴⁷ Butler (2004a; 2004b)
- ⁴⁸ Butler (1988; 2000; 2004a; 2004b)
- ⁴⁹ Butler (2004a): 148
- ⁵⁰ Butler (2004a): 31-2.
- ⁵¹ Butler (2004a): 1.
- ⁵² Butler (2004a): 2.
- ⁵³ Butler (2004a): 33.
- ⁵⁴ Butler (2000): 24.
- ⁵⁵ Butler (2000): 24-5.
- ⁵⁶ Butler (2000): 35.
- ⁵⁷ Butler (2004a): 39.

Bibliography

-
- S. Benhabib *Situating the Self: gender, community and postmodernism in contemporary ethics* (Cambridge, Polity, 1992).
- S. Benhabib (ed) *Democracy and Difference: contesting the boundaries of the political* (Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1996).
- S. Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: equality and diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2002).
- S. Benhabib *The Rights of Others: aliens, residents and citizens* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- S. Benhabib and F. Dallmayr (eds) *The Communicative Ethics Controversy* (Cambridge, Polity, 1992).
- C. Brown, *International Relations Theory: new normative approaches* (Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992).
- C. Brown *Sovereignty, Rights and Justice* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- J. Butler *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth Century France* (Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 1988).
- J. Butler 'Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism' and 'Competing Universalities' in J. Butler, E. Laclau and S. Žižek *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: contemporary dialogues of the left* (London, Verso, 2000).
- J. Butler *Undoing Gender* (New York and London, Routledge, 2004a).
- J. Butler *Precarious Life: the powers of mourning and violence* (London, Verso, 2004b).
- N. Dower *World Ethics: the new agenda* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1998).
- C. Gilligan *In a Different Voice: psychological theory and women's development* (Cambridge MA., Harvard University Press, 1982).
- J. Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1990).
- G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* translated A. V. Miller (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977).
- K. Hutchings 'Moral Deliberation and Political Judgement: Reflections on Benhabib's Interactive Universalism', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 14, 1997: 132-142.
- K. Hutchings *International Political Theory: re-thinking ethics in a global era* (London, Sage, 1999a).
- K. Hutchings 'Feminism, Universalism and the Ethics of International Politics', in Jabri & O'Gorman (eds) *Women, Culture and International Relations* (Boulder CO, Westview Press, 1999b: 17-37).
- K. Hutchings, *Hegel and Feminist Philosophy* (Cambridge, Polity, 2003).
- K. Hutchings 'From Morality to Politics and Back Again: feminist international ethics and the civil society argument', *Alternatives* 2004 (**check refs**)
- K. Hutchings 'Speaking and Hearing: Habermasian Discourse Ethics, Feminism and IR', *Review of International Studies* January 2005 (**check refs**)
- K. Hutchings 'Hegel, ethics and the logic of universality' in K. Deligiorgi (ed) *Hegel: new directions* (Chesham, Acumen, 2006).
- A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London, Duckworth, 1981).
- C. Mohanty *Feminism Without Borders: decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2003).
- T. Nardin & D. R. Mapel (eds) *Traditions of International Ethics* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992).

-
- M. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: the capabilities approach* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- O. O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989).
- J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972).
- Rawls, *Law of the Peoples* (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1999).
- F. Robinson *Globalizing Care: ethics, feminist theory and international relations* (Boulder CO, Westview Press, 1999).
- R. Rorty 'Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality' in S. Shute and S. Hurley (eds) *On Human Rights: the Oxford Amnesty Lectures 1993* (New York, Basic books, 1993).
- G. Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1992).
- S. Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: towards a politics of peace* (London, The Women's Press, 1990).
- P. Singer 'Famine, Affluence and Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol 1 (1972): pp. 229-243.
- M. Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (Oxford, Martin Robertson, 1983).
- M. Walzer, *Thick and Thin: moral argument at home and abroad* (Southbend IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).
- I. M. Young 'On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarged Thought' and 'Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy' in *Intersecting Voices: dilemmas of gender, political philosophy and policy* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997: 38-74).