Feminists Read Habermas:  
Gendering the Subject of Discourse

Edited and with an introduction by Johanna Meehan

ROUTLEDGE
New York and London
This book is dedicated
to my mother,
Ring Kelleher,
the origin of all my aspirations
and the model of so many.
Acknowledgments ix
A Note on the Text xi
Introduction 1

1. What's Critical about Critical Theory?
   Nancy Fraser 21

2. Critical Social Theory and Feminist Critiques:
   The Debate with Jürgen Habermas
   Jean L. Cohen 57

3. The Public and the Private Sphere:
   A Feminist Reconsideration
   Joan B. Landes 91

4. Women and the "Public Use of Reason"
   Marie Fleming 117

5. From Communicative Rationality
to Communicative Thinking:
   A Basis for Feminist Theory and Practice
   Jane Braaten 139
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A Note on the Text

I would like to express appreciation for permission to reprint the following:


Introduction

Perhaps the first question this introduction should answer is why feminists should read Habermas at all. Habermasian theory stands squarely in a tradition of Enlightenment-inspired political theory and deontological ethics which many feminists have thoroughly rejected, and the authors anthologized here are to some extent rowing against the feminist mainstream. What these essays have in common is a shared conviction that while Habermas’s discussion of gender is limited, his discourse theory is one of the most persuasive current reflections on politics and moral and social norms, and thus of great interest to feminists theorists despite its failure to specifically theorize gender. Because feminist scholarship problematizes gender relationships that are politically constructed and reinforced, regardless of often significant differences, it is essentially politically driven. Thus much feminist theory is devoted to clarifying the structure of the social and political world and the way in which gender functions to produce and reproduce male domination and female subordination. Habermas’s work can be of varied use to feminists engaged in this clarification as it offers a framework for analyzing the structure of modern life, its potential for both emancipatory forms of life and forms of life issuing in political repression, market manipulation, and domination. Habermas’s discourse theory is not merely useful for political diagnoses, in radically reconceptualizing the subject and underscoring the intersubjective formation of self-identity, he offers a normative ideal of self/other relationships and the discursive
contexts in which they are negotiated, usefully traversing the road between public and private, personal, and political. He provides a model of subjectivity and an account of the pragmatic presuppositions of discursive validity, against which actual political and personal relations and discourses can be measured.

Although the scope of Habermas's philosophical project defies easy summary, I will offer a sketch of the central elements of his theory, followed by a brief description of the articles collected in this volume.

Habermas's Argument
Recognizing the shortcomings of Kant's monological subject and incorporating both Hegel's critique of Kant and Marx's critique of modernity, Habermas offers a discursive theory of ethics predicated upon the intersubjective constitution of identity, originating in and mediated by communication. It includes a developmental account of rationality and a critical assessment of its institutionalization in modernity's social and political institutions.

Modernity, Habermas argues, brings with it the increased rationalization of social life, or of what Habermas calls the life-world; multiple spheres of discourse, previously unified in mythological world views, are separated and made the subject of reflective elaboration. For Max Weber and the earlier members of the Frankfurt School, this disenchantment of the world was an unmitigated disaster marked by the stealthy encroachments of strategic rationality. This identification of rationality with means-end rationality undercuts normative claims by making strategic success the only appropriate criteria for the assessment of choices. Habermas counters this view and argues that in restricting their account to purposive rationality they defined rationality too narrowly. And thus, though they accurately described the progressive disenchantment of the lifeworld, they are unable to recognize or explain either the normative character of modern institutions and behaviors, or gains in the spheres of theoretical, practical, and aesthetic rationality.

Habermas replaces their account with a theoretical framework that integrates Jean Piaget's genetic structuralism with a communicative model of action. From this perspective, the differentiation of the world into the multiple spheres of the scientific, the aesthetic, and the moral, can be viewed in a positive light, making possible the increased reflexivity of social and political norms and a decentered and reflective moral point of view, expressed and embodied in a communicative form of reason.

Only a subject that has acquired the specific cognitive and communicative skills needed to recognize and redeem normative claims can take up this point of view. Habermas's account of the structure and genesis of this moral identity is, in part, the result of his critical appropriation of George Herbert Mead's account of the intersubjective constitution of self-identity and of Lawrence Kohlberg's moral stage theory. Like Mead, Habermas contends that we are not first individuals and then social agents; personal identity is essentially socially mediated, and the constitution of the self is concomitant with the establishment of relationships. Language functions as the medium in which identity is constituted, in which we understand and define ourselves, and for the coordination of social activity. Identities are formed in webs of social relationships through the taking up of myriad social roles, but most especially by taking up the role of the generalized other. This can be accomplished only when subjects can distance themselves from particular roles and recognize that all roles are structured by shared social norms. Thus the vantage of the generalized other is the vantage of a neutral observer, who can objectively survey the reciprocal expectations and interactions constitutive of these roles. Only then can the intersubjectively grounded character of norms which shape expectations and actions be grasped. For it is only when the force of the group and tradition loosens its grip, that individuals can reflectively question the legitimacy of norms and move beyond merely conventionally justified beliefs and values.

In formulating the cognitive stages of a post-conventional moral identity, Habermas turns from Mead to Kohlberg, arguing that one of the most compelling features of Kohlberg's moral stage theory derives from the cross-cultural analyses that led to his conclusion that while the content of moral problems varies from culture to culture, the forms of moral judgment are universal and can be described by analyzing the logical structure of moral thinking at different stages of development. Habermas marshalls Kohlberg's empirical studies in support of an ethical universalism that can challenge the claims of cultural and moral relativism prevalent in contemporary ethics. Habermas's relationship to Kohlberg's work is not limited to his drawing upon the latter's empirical data; his theoretical project resembles Kohlberg's insofar as the ethical universalism they defend arises from the Kantian character they share. Like Kant's, both Habermas's and Kohlberg's accounts share three philosophical features of cognitivism, universalism, and formalism, which make it possible to identify the structure of moral thought in abstraction from any particular aim or conception of the good life. This kind of moral thinking is formal because it shifts the burden of the moral from the content of judgment to the form of judgment (the cognitive structures involved in the process of reasoning). It is cognitivist because it holds that moral conflicts can be resolved through argument, which is viewed as a cognitive and interactive skill acquired through a developmental process marked by successive levels of competence. It is universalistic insofar as it
claims that the form of moral reasoning at the same stage in any culture is identical, that there are criteria for moral reasoning which hold universally. Like Kohlberg, Habermas argues that the achievement of principled morality entails recognizing that normative claims must be supported by reasons and principles, but unlike Kohlberg, he insists that having recognized the essentially social and linguistic constitution of the subject, monological reflection must be rejected as inadequate for the identification and justification of norms. Instead, the universalizability of normative claims and the interpretations and legitimacy of needs must be taken up in public discourses where interests and need-interpretations are debated, identities defined, and their legitimacy contested.

While rejecting the Kantian view of moral subjects as those who through reflection give the moral law to themselves, Habermas is not proposing a neo-Aristotelian or communitarian ethics. Though he argues that even the very possibility of social action rests on the intersubjectively constituted and recognized norms which originate in communication, the rationalization of the modern lifeworld entails the demand that all claims be justified by an appeal for valid criteria when challenged, and the validity of the criteria does not derive in any simple way from the shared values of the community.

In fact, Habermas argues, claims raised in the context of modernity arise in three differentiated spheres of values: the cognitive, the normative, and the expressive. These parallel the formal conceptual distinctions between the objective, the social, and the subjective world. Successful communication requires that we associate the appropriate claim with each sphere: we must distinguish objective claims about the natural world from normative claims about the intersubjectively constituted social world, and both from expressive claims about inner nature. When any claim is challenged it must be defended appropriately; claims about the external world on the basis of their truth, paradigmatically achieved in scientific discourse; claims about social norms on the basis of their rightness, the validity of which are negotiated in social and moral discourse; and claims about the inner self on the basis of their sincerity, as demonstrated in narratives of character and self-reflection.

Habermas is most interested in normative, social, and moral claims and argues that while they are not identical to the claims of science, they are nonetheless analogous to them, insofar as they are defensible only by appeals to reasons accepted as legitimate by the community of modern subjects. Thus at the heart of his project is the clarification of the reasons and procedures employed in producing justifications for normative claims.

Engaging in what he calls reconstructive theory, a theorizing that makes explicit the intuitive knowledge of a socially and linguistically competent subject, Habermas elaborates what is entailed in raising and redeeming different kinds of claims and develops a framework for understanding the normative structures of communication and the competencies it involves. Among the skills he identifies as necessary to successful communication are the abilities to assimilate norms that regulate behavior, delineate the obligations of social roles, and stipulate what can be legitimately expected and demanded. Language not only serves as the medium through which these normative obligations are conveyed and justified, but it is in learning how to exchange speaker and hearer perspectives in order to justify claims of truth, truthfulness, or authenticity, raised in the context of social interaction, that we learn what norms are and what makes them valid. It is possible, Habermas claims, to reconstruct the norms embedded in and regulative of all social interaction and thus to ground a universalist ethical theory. Raising and redeeming validity claims, he argues, involves competencies that can be measured and cognitive achievements that can be ranked regardless of particular cultural values. Thus the focus of his theory is on the formal elements of normative discourse, and it rests on a firm distinction between norms that can be rationally adjudicated and justified, and values, which in his view, are too integral to our identities to permit the distancing necessary for their moral justification. In drawing this distinction Habermas seeks to preserve the deontological character of his discourse ethic, and insure that it retains its universality and its impartiality vis-à-vis any particular version of the good life. Such a move is necessary he claims, since any truly post-conventional morality must ground the legitimacy of norms in justifiable, universalizable principles, and not in claims that they bring about a desired way of life. Taking up a post-conventional perspective makes hypothetical the taken-for-granted assumptions of the lifeworld, dissolving them into so many conventions, all in need of justification. It is in ideally constructed discourses where only the unforced force of the better argument is decisive, that Habermas believes such justifications can be provided.

Because discourse ethics excludes recognizing any specific version of the good life as normative, it sets up a purely formal testing procedure that cannot produce norms but can only test the validity of hypothetically proposed ones. While Habermas holds that the ideal criteria which structure discourses are universally valid, actual discourses themselves are always historically located, and it is this feature that distinguishes discourse ethics from other cognitivist, universalist, and formalist ethical theories and lends it its distinctive political twist. Because discourses are actual, historical, and particular, norms justified in an initial round of discursive consideration are not thereby inviolate from reconsideration, for their validation is always contingent upon the outcome of the next round of arguments.
Habermas locates the emancipatory moment of modernity, which Weber and the earlier members of the Frankfurt School missed, in the increasing reflexivity made possible by advances in communicative rationality and in its institutionalization in law and in political and moral discourses. Arguing against their reductivism, Habermas answers Hegel’s question of how reason can be made practical, locating in social and political institutions the actualization of the rationality which is the intrinsic telos of communicative interaction. In distinguishing strategic rationality from communicative rationality, he distinguishes the increased rationalization of the sphere of production from the increased rationalization of other aspects of the lifeworld, arguing that while the former issues in increased repression, the increasing rationalization of communicative action makes possible, “a decreasing degree of repressiveness and rigidity, increasing role distance and the flexible application of norms—socialization without repression.” Habermas is not however wholly sanguine about the emancipatory potential the differentiation of these sphere makes possible. For while he argues that the media-steered mechanisms of money and power can be distinguished from communicative action, he also recognizes that in actuality they are closely linked and believes that realizing the emancipatory potential of rationalized forms of communicative interaction depends on effective resistance to the colonization of the lifeworld by these systems. Habermas is also well aware that the potency of political resistance is undermined by the imperatives of the very systems it seeks to check. And although Habermas distances himself from Weber and the early Frankfurt School in embracing the Enlightenment conviction that rationality is potentially liberatory, his is an optimism born not from naiveté, but from an ideal of decency that forecloses an adolescent retreat into cynicism.

Synopses of the Articles

The Public and the Private
The first four articles of this anthology problematize Habermas’s analysis of the public and the private spheres, whose differentiation and structure he argues, are essential to the character of modernity. This distinction between public and private parallels, but is not identical to, the distinction he draws between system and lifeworld. On the one hand, action in the modern world is coordinated by systems which function according to an internal logic of means-end rationality; the market is a paradigmatic example of such a system. Choices and outcomes of action are primarily dictated by market imperatives, and only secondarily by the desires and intentions of social actors. The administrative-juridical institutions of the state functions as another system determining social action and structuring choices and modes of interaction. On the other hand, actions are coordinated primarily by communicatively mediated norms and values, and by the socially defined ends and meanings which constitute the fabric of the lifeworld. It is from an analysis of this kind of socially coordinated action that a normative model of undistorted communication, which achieves its telic end in understanding, can be derived. The public form of such communicative action occurs and is made possible by the public spheres of participatory democracy which Habermas calls “public space.”

Fraser, Cohen, Fleming, and Landes make it clear that they are persuaded of the importance of the theoretical framework Habermas develops, and they acknowledge the usefulness of his distinctions between system and lifeworld, public and private. While their criticisms and the directions of their arguments differ, all agree that inasmuch as Habermas’s account suffers from a gender blindness that occludes the differential social and political status of men and women, his model of modernity falls short and needs revision and reconceptualization.

Nancy Fraser argues that while Habermas’s model of classical capitalism clarifies the inter-institutional relations among various spheres of public and private life, in failing to thematize gender issues his model fails to realize its full explanatory power. While linking the relations between the economic sphere and the family, for example, he does not recognize that this relationship is affected as much by gender as it is by money, for the capitalist role of the worker is a masculine one reflected in the identification of the male as breadwinner and in the historic workers’ struggle for a “family wage.” If capitalism has assigned the role of the “worker” to men, it has assigned the role of consumer, which links economy and family, to women.

In addition to the role of consumer, capitalism has assigned women the tasks of child rearing and household maintenance, as well as other repetitive and unpaid tasks involved in the reproduction of daily life. Because Habermas’s analysis does not consider the gendering of these role assignments, he fails to recognize and explore gender as an “exchange medium” and thus misses this gendered division of roles, in addition to failing to recognize the extent to which the role of the citizen, figuring in his scheme as the participant in political debate and in the forming of public opinion, is configured as male. Consent and public speech, prerequisite for the exercise of citizenship, are historically the prerogatives of men and have often been viewed as at odds with femininity. Thus, Fraser argues, the gender-blindness of Habermas’s model occludes the subtext of masculine and feminine identity in the arenas of paid work, state administration, and citizenship as well as in the domain of familial and sexual relations. Fraser concludes her essay with the insistence that since gender cannot be
assumed to be incidental to politics and political economy, the practice of good critical theory requires an integrated analysis of gender, politics, and political economy if critical theory truly is to be “the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age.”

Jean Cohen finds Habermas’s political theory enormously important as well, and is particularly interested in his analysis of contemporary social movements, though like Fraser, she argues that Habermas’s analysis suffers from a gender blindness that fails to differentiate the social and political status of men and women. This leads to a failure to appreciate a certain fluidity between the public and the private spheres, which in turn leads to his dismissal of many contemporary social movements as particularistic.

Cohen argues that Habermas’s characterization of most contemporary social movements (including feminism in some of its moments) as purely defensive and particularistic responses to the encroachments of the market, media and power, and thus as not furthering the universalistic emancipatory goals of modernity, fails to recognize that these movements also generate new relations of solidarity, alter the nature and structure of civil society, and revitalize old public spaces and create new ones.

While Habermas views the feminist demands for rights, equality and participation as emancipatory, he holds other demands on the feminist agenda while important for social learning and for identity formation, to be particularistic and thus not “emancipatory” in the fullest sense. Cohen insists that the particularism Habermas identifies in the feminist movement is, like that of other contemporary movements, part and parcel of the universalistic demand for institutional change. The feminist struggle to reconfigure identities and gender relationships is an essential moment in the reconstruction of the institutions of civil and political society. Such institutional reconfigurations arise from these changes in concrete forms of life that derive from the particularistic politics Habermas dismisses as unemancipatory. Indeed, conventional gender roles are so deeply entrenched in our identities that they blind us to political injustices which are only graspsable with shifts in these roles. Before one can join the struggle, one has to be able to see that there is one. Thus “consciousness-raising” becomes a crucial strategy which precedes and makes possible the universalist demands for equal rights.

Joan Lacedes also finds Habermas’s discussion of the public sphere rich and interesting, but she argues his estimation of the liberatory potential of the public sphere is too sanguine and his description of its emancipatory mechanisms too narrow. Describing the public sphere as one in which private people come together as a public and through the use of reason, Habermas locates its obstacles in the slippage between the actual and the ideal, and not in the notion of the public sphere itself. But Lacedes argues, the parameters of this public sphere include only the disembodied subjects of discursive reason and the texts which embody that reason. The exclusion of the private sphere of emotions and of the personal relations in which they are initiated and sustained constituted the de facto exclusion of women as well as a privileging of the literary institutions of the press and literature. In identifying “publicity” with universality, truth, and reason, Habermas fails to address discourses and interests associated with women. Echoing the positions of Cohen, Fleming, and Fraser, Landes argues that Habermas “...misses the masquerade through which the (male) particular was able to posture behind the veil of the universal.” The Habermasian public sphere, identified with equality and reason, favors certain abilities and interests over others and in effect, if not in intention, excludes the problematization of the gender-determined power differential in the intimate sphere, insuring that male subjects would be its dominant inhabitants. Landes argues that Habermas’s idealization of the public sphere conceals the extent to which the exclusion of women is constitutive of it and undercuts the legitimacy of particularity in which concrete differences between citizens are lodged and actual life forms are realized. Landes concludes her discussion with a series of reflections on action, the spectacle, the body, and style. Arguing that there are compelling reasons to accept Habermas’s claim that textuality is modernity’s dominant form of representation, she points to empirical evidence that textuality is not the only form of representation possible in the modern public sphere, and argues that attention to other forms of representation reveal inadequately reflected upon avenues for non-discursive forms of critique and subversion. Landes concludes that in the contemporary world where politics and style are inextricably tied, there is play in politics, and in play there lies a potential for political performance and gesture.

Like Fraser, Cohen, and Landes, Marie Fleming assesses Habermas’s account of the structure of the private and the political, specifically focusing on Habermas’s account of the emergence of the public, private, and intimate sphere as he elaborates it in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society. She argues that Habermas is wrong to see the exclusion of women from the bourgeois public sphere as simply the failure of the bourgeoisie to realize its own normative ideals. For in fact, this exclusion was actually constitutive of the institutionalization of that sphere.

Fleming notes that, according to Habermas, deep structural changes taking place at the level of gender relations were essential to the development of the bourgeois public sphere. As the patriarchal conjugal family became the normatively dominant type, a space for “intimate,” non-economically ruled relationships was carved out in the private sphere. This experience of intimacy was essential to the construction of the bourgeois concept of “humanity” which served as an ideological norm in the expansion of rights.
of citizenship, for it was in the sphere of the intimate that the individual knew himself as bourgeois—i.e., as property-owner—but also as a man like any other. Fleming argues that while Habermas thermatizes the false universality of a citizenship which in actuality was and is structured by property ownership, the gross inequities constitutive of gender relationships in the patriarchal conjugal family remain invisible in his account and the false universality of the rubric “humanity,” which in essence and in actuality was and is male, remains unchallenged.

Fleming examines Habermas’s failure to consider the extent to which the protection of the basic rights and personal freedom of the intimate sphere of the patriarchal conjugal family from legal and political intrusion functioned to reinforce the rights of the male head of household, leaving women and children vulnerable, their lives invisible, and their rights unrecognized. The thrust of her argument, however, is directed at revealing the extent to which the patriarchal conjugal family is essentially tied to the institutionally separate public sphere, insofar as the bourgeois family is at the core not only of notions of citizenship defined in terms of rights to property, but also of the political ideal of autonomy itself.

While Habermas clarifies the extent to which the private is political and the political is private, Fleming urges us to consider the gendered structure of the sphere of intimacy which would reveal the extent to which the personal is political and the political is personal. She believes that despite limitations in Habermas’s work, feminists can use his distinctions between the public, the private, and the intimate since distinguishing between the private and the public allows us to theorize a wide range of issues and would be especially helpful in examining modernity’s social-sexual gender arrangements. Recognizing a distinction between the private and the intimate does not, she assures us, deny a connection between the family and the state and the economy, but allows us to assess that connection. If Habermas is right, as Fleming believes, to locate the genuine site of humanity in the intimate sphere, and if the intimate sphere can only be fully articulated when it is conceptualized in terms of gender, then the category of gender must become central to the philosophical discourses of modernity.

Theory and Practice
The essays by Jane Braaten and Simone Chambers reflect on Habermas’s discourse ethics from the perspective of political praxis, assessing its importance and limitations in light of women’s lives, and with respect to feminist goals and practices.

Jane Braaten argues that to a significant extent, Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality converges with the ideals of feminism and can be put to good use by that community as it formulates its political critiques and projects. She criticizes Habermas’s understanding of communicative rationality as non-substantive, and develops the thesis that feminists in the pursuit of solidarity, in effect, reverse the order of the development of Habermas’s argument, deriving criteria of rationality and knowledge from substantive ideals of solidarity and community, rather than deriving ideals of solidarity from notions of rationality and abstract ideals of equality. Braaten contends that what makes an engagement with discourse ethics so promising is that it emerges from a critique of the Cartesian philosophy of the subject important for feminist theory. Habermas recognizes that fully human social relationships require a mutuality of understanding; this mutuality is achieved when a justified consensus is reached. It is in this reliance on “a procedure for epistemic justification as the guarantor of autonomy, community, and knowledge,” that Braaten locates the legacy of the epistemological scepticism of the early moderns.

In Habermas’s account of communication and the competencies that make it possible, it is the mutual recognition of and compliance with the rules constitutive of communicative action which make non-coercive communicative relationships possible. Braaten argues that this identification of the norms of communication clarifies the grounds for epistemic justification, but does not provide an adequate account of the ideals of social association. While recognizing and acknowledging that discourse theory was never intended to offer a substantive vision of societal institutions and associations, she contests the notion that these shared epistemological norms are “the sole fundamental constitutive activities of community, solidarity and society.” One can recognize with Habermas the emerging of a distinctly modern rationality employed in the settling of normative disputes without conceding “that it constitutes the basis for the entire edifice of socialization, social integration and enculturation.” Sympathy, affection, and other emotions, as well as mimetic relations, are equally important for the achievement and maintenance of social relationships.

While justice and truth can function as constitutive values of a political community, Braaten claims that substantive ideals of solidarity and community are also important. Indeed, Braaten argues that in the burgeoning feminist community it is commonly the experience of solidarity in a community, which is often defined by its oppression, that clarifies the norms of the community and clarifies the nature and possibility of this solidarity. As we experience ourselves as parts of a community of women we “learn to cultivate the norms that make that experience possible.” It is in this sense, Braaten claims, that “feminist knowledge is the creation of solidarity-building.” Though the ideals of this community may, as Habermas argues, converge with modernity’s ideals of reason and knowledge, they are not identical to them. Braaten concludes her paper by introducing a model of feminist
thought she calls "communicative thinking." While "communicative thinking reflects Habermas's notion of communicative rationality it rejects a "univocal axiomatic structure, or a regimented semantics." Braaten suggests that communicative thinking must be evaluated, not in terms of an internal structure, but "in the worth of its ideals of solidarity and community." These ideals should function as both the end and the constitutive ideals of that community.

Simone Chambers juxtaposes an analysis of Habermas's discourse theory with her reflections on the feminist anti-nuclear encampment at Greenham Common, England. While Habermas lays out the procedural conditions necessary for engaging in consensual decision making, Chambers argues that he does not consider what it would take to be able to institute those conditions. Taking the Greenham Common women as an instance of consensual community, Chambers details the commitment of these women to fully consensual decision making, and exploring the complex demands created by such a commitment, Chambers considers some of the conditions constitutive for instantiating a discourse community that Habermas does not consider. For instance, while Habermas argues that fully consensual discourse requires that all those affected by the discourse be able to speak, he does not explore what would make exercising this right either possible or meaningful. Consensual discourse requires not only the right and wherewithal to speak, but in addition, the possibility that speech will be listened to and heard in the fullest sense possible. It requires that participants adopt attitudes and responses towards one another that create a positive environment in which the procedural norms of discourse become more than abstract and significantly unexercised rights. Chambers uses the discursive practices of the Greenham Common women as an illustration of the arduous process of creating a truly consensual discourse community and argues that such a goal is not a realistic one for the day-to-day decision making in complex contemporary societies. This does not lead her to reject Habermas's discourse ethics as impossibly utopian and impractical however. Chambers argues that a distinction should be drawn between the processes of discursive decision making and discursive will-formation. While discursive decision making is impossibly clumsy from all perspectives, including that of administrative bureaucracy, Chambers accepts as a normative ideal that public opinion should be constructed and reconstructed discursively.

**Discourse Theory and Ethics**

The next three essays in the collection, Seyla Benhabib's, Jodi Dean's, and mine, reflect attempts to use Habermas's discourse theory to bridge the gap that arises from significant feminist critiques of deontological ethics, ranging from the issues of the universal and the particular, to criticisms of Habermas's account of the generalized other, and to discussions of autonomy and of social and moral recognition.

Seyla Benhabib lays out the challenges that Carol Gilligan's work poses for deontological theories of the sort offered by Rawls, Kohlberg, and Habermas. She argues that while there are conflicting interpretations of exactly what Gilligan's claims are, it is most fruitful to read her work as a correction of universalistic moral theories rather than as a rejection of them, as a "contribution to the development of a non-formalist, contextually sensitive, and post-conventional understanding of ethical life." If one pursues this reading of Gilligan, Benhabib argues, her work cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to the universalist project as Habermas did at one point in the Kohlberg/Gilligan debate, claiming that Gilligan had merely confused issues of moral motivation with cognitive problems of the application of norms. While Gilligan had identified an interesting set of questions about applying abstract principles in concrete situations, from the deontologist's perspective, these problems had little bearing on the nature of those principles in the first place. Habermas, like Kohlberg, claimed that Gilligan confused issues of justice with evaluative issues of the good life, and issues of self-determination with issues of self-realization. In defending Gilligan, Benhabib counters Habermas's easy distinction between evaluative concerns and issues of justice, arguing that a consideration of concrete moral actions and choices quickly reveal the degree to which these issues are inextricably entwined. Gilligan is right, she contends, to see issues of relational obligation and care as genuinely moral ones, "belonging to the center and not at the margins of morality," and claims that her reading of Habermas's discourse ethics is a call, not just for a formal proceduralism, but for "a conversational model of a kind of enlarged mentality," that makes it possible for a universalist ethical perspective to incorporate Gilligan's insight, while retaining its desirable universalism. In this account the domain of the moral is extended to include the domain of care, but considerations of universalist morality set parameters within which an ethic of care can function, and in situations of conflict, universalist norms "trump" other moral considerations. As a discourse theorist Benhabib is committed to the values of justice and impartiality; as a feminist she is committed to recognizing the needs and well-being of the concrete other. In her view, modern moral philosophy has too often recognized only the dignity and worth of an abstract moral subject while failing to recognize our vulnerabilities and dependencies as bodily selves. While acknowledging the importance of postmodernist critiques of both metaphysically grounded accounts of a unitary subject and of post-Enlightenment morality, she defends a notion of the subject as a unitary narrative perspective, and of ethical norms as discursively negotiable and universalistic.