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LEVEL: 8 [i.e., draft]

[Chapter 6]

Situating Postmodernism in Cognitive- developmental Perspective¹

[URL: PIC-dP]

SECTIONS (& perhaps subsections):

- I Situating Postmodernism
- II Case Study: Seyla Benhabib's (1989) "Liberal Dialogue Versus a Critical Theory of Discursive Legitimation"

ABSTRACT

Postmodernism's critique of normative systems is insightful but also subject to reflexive self-negation and consequent political impotence. This essay attempts to both honor and rescue postmodernism by situating it as part of a dialectical structure – Habermas's "reconstructive science" – including both construction and deconstruction. Kohlberg's sequence of moral reasoning stages is used to organize these various theoretical positions. A case study of Benhabib's (1989) critique of Ackerman shows what these positions look like in one context. [line spacing set here]

I Situating Postmodernism

This essay lays out a theoretical framework situating postmodernism.² The framework abstracts certain logical features of postmodernism and several other normative positions in order to acknowledge postmodernism's strength and to clarify the manner in which Habermas's "reconstructive science" provides a positive direction that postmodernism is so often criticized as lacking. Rather than use postmodernism's difficulties to dismiss it, a tactic which can be used ideologically by entrenched power structures to beat back postmodernism's critique, I want to

¹A previous version of the first section of this essay appeared in *Egipán de vidrio: Revista de filosofía* (Chilton 2000b). The essay's odd formatting comes from its being one of several essays in Chilton (forthcoming:Chapter 6).

²I assume the reader is familiar with the sequence of moral reasoning stages developed by Lawrence Kohlberg (Kohlberg 1981, 1984; Colby & Kohlberg 1987) and with the general genetic-epistemological perspective of Jean Piaget (Flavell 1963). A very condensed explanation and presentation of these can be found in Chilton (1988a). I also assume some familiarity with Fishkin (1984).

clarify how reconstructive science preserves the power of the postmodern critique while rendering it secure against the accusation of an absolute and thus self-defeating relativity.

The basic perspective is shown in Table 1. In moral development terms, premodern society is characterized by its organization through face-to-face relations within the small community. Social conflicts are addressed by mutual adjustments by all parties. The community is small enough (and organized simply enough) that people's relationships are basically face-to-face and so people know what their agreements are and with whom. At Stage 3, the "first-order Golden Rule" stage, these agreements are arrived at mutually, affirming a relationship of mutual role-taking and thus mutual care.³

Premodern society becomes modern when social intercourse can no longer be regulated by face-to-face relations. Historically, this occurs due to population growth, more differentiated manufacturing processes, wider trade connections, and more complex technology. Population growth makes face-to-face relations difficult or impossible. Trade and manufacturing complexity requires organization beyond the local community. And face-to-face accommodations are too slow to adapt to the faster pace of change (new markets, new trade routes, new technologies, new knowledge). It doesn't matter whether society is organized by Stage 1, 2, or 3 moral reasoning; all of these are based on face-to-face relations.⁴

³Earlier premodern stages – Stages 1 and 2 – are based not on mutual role-taking. Technically, Stage 3 is fully satisfactory only for dyadic relations, since a shift in any one relationship can disrupt the agreements made in the parties' other relationships. In Kohlberg's classic moral dilemma of Heinz and the drug, where Heinz must decide whether to steal a drug to save his wife's life, Heinz's relationship with his wife disrupts his relationship with the druggist. Similarly, in Sophocles's tragedy, "Antigone", the disrupted relationship between King Creon and the slain rebel Polynices disrupts Creon's relations with Antigone (Polynices's sister), his son Haemon (Antigone's fiancé), and his wife Eurydice. This is the argument I made in Chilton (1988a).

This interpretation helped me illustrate the nature of the centrally important break between Stages 3 and 4, but I no longer believe it is the best. I now believe it more reasonable to read "Antigone" as a cautionary tale about the consequences of a stubborn refusal to work things out with each other. In other words, I believe Sophocles saw the problem as arising primarily from Creon's inflexibility, his refusal to work out a mutual accommodation with the people around him. Creon's hubris consists in his determination to have his own way, to be the sole determiner of the right and wrong of the situation. His refusal to accommodate is punished by the deaths of his wife, son, and future daughter-in-law. The same point can be made about "Oedipus", another of Sophocles's plays, interpreting Oedipus's tragic flaw as his determination to know the truth of his situation despite the pleas of his wife/mother Jocasta – i.e., his refusal to work out a mutual accommodation with her.

⁴This is not to imply that Stages 1-3 are no longer in use. Many relationships involve only issues of concern to the immediate parties – simple agreements between friends, for example. In a complex society outside forces may sometimes intrude, meaning that to really understand those issues one requires higher-stage thought, but this occasional intrusion of the outside world does not obviate lower-stage thought in other circumstances. I appreciate Aki Halme for pressing me on this issue.

These problems could be dealt with at Stage 4, where, historically, one's loyalty was organized by a centrally-defined, overarching moral system and where one's face-to-face relations were subordinated to that loyalty. So on this account, modern society appears with the advent of the true political subject, the citizen, whose responsibility is not merely to obey the law but also to maintain it. Political theories of modernity differ widely from each other, but they are all premised on the idea of citizenship and the simultaneous subordination to and support of the law.

The remainder of our story is told in terms of the interplay of a search for normative ground and a critique of any such ground. The positions alternate between assertions of moral positions (stages 4 & 5, shown in boldface in Table 1), and critical subversions of these positions (stages 4½ & 5½, shown in italics).⁵ Notice finally that each stage has a variety of theorists associated with it, because each cognitive-developmental stage can be realized in a variety of concrete forms; however, each concrete form retains the basic logical structure of its stage.

Postmodernism appears as Stage 5½, and this positioning indicates what I see as the central, defining characteristic of postmodernism: postmodernism is any philosophical position or critique that seeks to show the contingency of modernism (Stage 5 theories) by undercutting modernism's pretense to objectivity. For example, Michel Foucault's general critiques and his archeology of knowledge show that the institutions and logical categories of liberal society are neither inevitable nor neutral. Instead, they are always *contingent* choices that become dominant at least in part because they serve a particular social grouping (class; occupation; etc.).⁶ His archeological expeditions into the origins of specific social categories or practices – the clinic, the prison, sexuality, and so on – turn up evidence that these categories or practices are the result of choices being made among a variety of possible alternatives, choices that were by no means self-evident at the time. Even these minimal findings show the contingency of these choices and thus implicitly call our categories and practices into question. But beyond that, his findings also show that the choices are made at least partially through the battle among specific sites of social power, and the consequences of that battle is seen still today in the advantages enjoyed by the winning site, advantages that may have become oppressive instead of merely the best of possible choices. In political conflict, Thomas Kuhn's "normal science" would be conflicts within the framework of existing categories and practices, e.g., whether we should spend our tax revenues on guns or butter. Foucault provides us with a systematic approach to conducting, in the social

⁵These positions are numbered according to Kohlberg's stage scheme (Colby & Kohlberg 1987). Kohlberg's work specifically includes Stage 4½. His work includes Stage 6 only as a theoretical position; too few of his subjects could be found at that level to establish its existence. Kohlberg does not even mention Stage 5½ (or 3½), but their existence I take from Fishkin's (1986) argument that each of Kohlberg's stages can be subverted by a relativization of the former's commands. (Thus there are also Stages 2½ and 1½. These are not shown in the figure.) *Pace* Fishkin, I have included no Stage 6½, because as I will argue later, Stage 6 incorporates its own relativization.

⁶Actually, one need not claim that such choices were made consciously; only that they *were* choices – i.e., contingent – and that their results serve to arbitrarily and thus unjustly advantage some groups over others.

sphere, what Kuhn would call “revolutionary science”.⁷ Other postmodern critiques vary in how they identify and undercut these pretensions to objectivity, but they have the same basic logic.

The postmodern critique draws on the force of the so-called Münchhausen trilemma, namely, that any attempt to ground a moral theory in propositional logic must result in one of three unsatisfactory situations: either the chain of justificatory implication is circular, or it is an infinite regression, or it breaks off at a certain point held to be self-evidently true (Habermas 1983/1990:7, 79; see also Albert 1985). This last alternative is the object of postmodernists’ critiques. Their critiques show, in effect, that the supposedly “self-evident” positions are in fact contingent, subject to critique, thus dislodging the modernist from his entrenched position.

However, all such postmodern critiques have a particular vulnerability: they cannot answer the fundamental question of how we are to live together. Critique is a means of improving the human condition, but it is not itself a way of life. A way of life requires some form of justification, a means of making decisions in the face of new situations and better understandings. Taken by itself, postmodernism’s critique can say what should *not* be, but it cannot say, or at least justify, what should be. In fact, the more absolutist forms of postmodernism damn all social constructions in advance, a self-annihilation even of their own sources of meaning. So postmodernism, to be successful, must accept its own limits. If its critique is to have any value at all, it can only have it within the context of the possibility of value.

What happens to modernists in the face of postmodernists’ vigorous critique? A bad response – but a common one, alas – is to entrench themselves more firmly, catching the postmodernists in a crossfire between (a) the demand that postmodernists provide ways to improve or overcome the categories and practices they criticize and (b) the use of their (the modernists’) entrenched power to resist any such changes from being attempted.⁸ In effect, such modernists claim, *a priori* and absolutely, that regardless of postmodern critiques, we are in

⁷I find Foucault the easiest to explain, but other postmodernist methods certainly exist. For example, Derrida shows the possibilities inherent in a systematic reversal of figure and ground – a systematic highlighting of the previously enshadowed “inferior” in contrast to which the putatively “superior” form of knowledge has claimed value. The field(s) of social construction theory and symbolic interactionism provide similar critiques in their ongoing demonstration of how social practices are constructed out of people’s choices and so can conceivably be constructed in other ways.

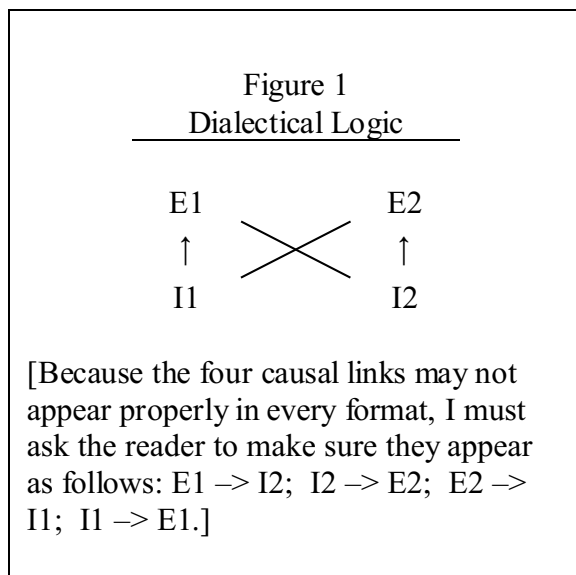
Other examples of postmodern critique would include Benhabib’s (1986) attack on the whole generalizing approach of justice-based theories (arguing that their focus on the “Generalized Other” prevents any consideration of the “Concrete Other”) and to Nancy Fraser’s (1986:425) long list of means by which the dominance of certain normative discourses are maintained.

⁸U.S. policy toward post-revolutionary Cuba is an example of this. On the one hand, the U.S. government demands that Cuba prove the adequacy of its socialist regime, while on the other hand it uses its political power to create difficulties for that regime. (See also the discussion of Cuba in [“Some Problems of Circular Reasoning in Social Science”](#).)

fact living in the best of all possible worlds.

A better response of modernists would be to rely upon the necessity of *some* construction without totalizing it. This places them and the restrained postmodernists as dialectical partners, not opponents. No one has to choose sides in such a partnership. Those who have categories and practices to propose or defend can do so while still accepting the legitimacy of critiques that subvert their positions – indeed, beyond accepting the possibility of those critiques, actively seeking them. critiques. Those who use critical techniques to arrive at critical subversions can do so while still accepting the ultimate necessity for some affirmative choice of positions. I recognize that this sounds rather idealistic and impractical. I do not have time enough, space enough, or your tolerance enough to describe the background processes that deal with what I acknowledge are practical problems of emotions and the world’s limits. I deal with them to some extent in my other conference paper, particularly under the rubric of “therapeutic discourse”.

This dialectical relationship is the structural characteristic constituting Stage 6.⁹ Two



⁹Colby & Kohlberg (1987) provide no scoring criteria for Stage 6, because Kohlberg could not get enough cases to prove its longitudinal formation after Stage 5. Some theorists believe it cannot be structurally described well enough to code it; some theorists even hold that Stage 6 does not exist at all. Obviously I don’t agree, but I want to acknowledge that I have no

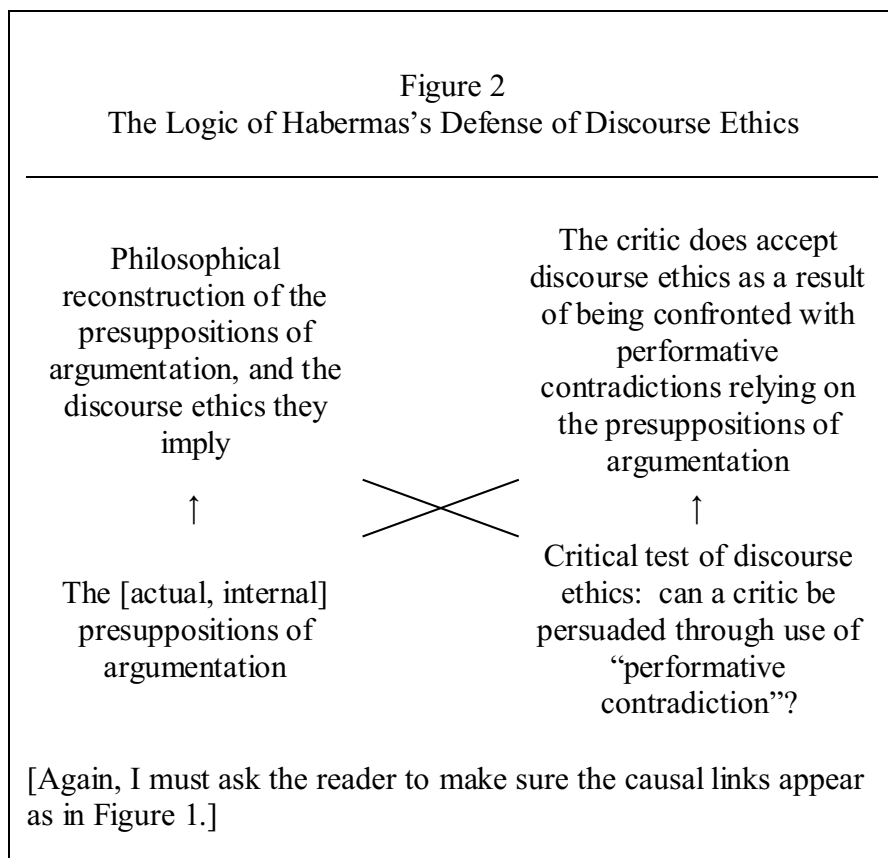
forms of knowledge are said to be in a dialectical relationship when neither has logical priority over the other, each can subvert the other, and no other, superior forms of knowledge exist. (See Figure 1, below.) In the domain of normative theory, modernism has to give up its hope of establishing any absolute truth; normative positions can *only* be held contingently. For example, even if, as Habermas's discourse ethics requires, we can achieve the agreement of all, this agreement is contingent, since it can be broken by the defection of anyone, now or later. In particular, postmodern objections must be dealt with. Postmodernism, for its part, gives up the right to damn all positions in advance. Its method can continue to identify problems with existing normative positions, but it has to do so in practice. Such critiques are accepted or even welcomed as necessary and important, but only in the form of *post facto*, concrete corrections. Even if we face the *prospect* of an infinite series of such corrections, the existing, contingent normative position retains its binding power.

This logical relationship seems to be difficult to grasp. Consider the "ways of relating" approach as an example. When I tell people that it is based in part on the recognition (via the Münchhausen trilemma) that no morality can be deductively justified,¹⁰ they object that this is self-contradictory, since it means that I might be wrong too. They believe that this objection forces me either to confess that my argument is wrong or to claim a justification that the ways of relating perspective itself holds to be impossible. However, the phrasing of this dilemma conceals a gap in their logic. To say that a theory might be wrong is not the same as saying that it is in fact wrong. I have no problem saying that the ways of relating perspective might be wrong; I'll even go so far as to say that I believe better perspectives *will* be found. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to find one of those theories, and not for want of being open to the possibility. So unless the critic can show a specific flaw in the theory, s/he has given me no reason to discard it. I'm not obligated to defend the theory against the *possibility* it is wrong, only against specific objections. And even if specific objections were to be found, they are not in themselves grounds for discarding the theory unless a better one is known.

empirical evidence of the validity of my claims, only what I believe to be a clear grasp of the logical structure of such a stage.

¹⁰For example, in recounting *satyagraha*'s determined avoidance of sanctimoniousness and self-righteousness ([q.v.](#)).

Here (Figure 2, below) is another example of this dialectical structure, taken from Habermas's discourse ethics, where the criteria for moral norms derive from the presuppositions of argumentation. Let us momentarily bracket the issue of how Habermas can know these presuppositions. Habermas concludes from them that norms are justified only when they are or could be agreed to by all in practice. If he has correctly identified the presuppositions and if his deductions from them are accurate, this allows him to "corner" the moral skeptic into accepting his position, because any attempt to argue against that position embroils the skeptic in a "performative contradiction": arguing brings into play the very presuppositions that the skeptic



wishes to deny. So in this sense Habermas's justification is based on the inescapability of discourse ethics, not its self-evidentness. This side of discourse ethics corresponds to the "modernist" half of the dialectical relationship, where Habermas is maintaining a particular normative position. But how can Habermas prove the accuracy of his understanding of the presuppositions of argumentation? Here he completes the dialectical relationship by turning to what he calls "reconstructive science". The accuracy of his claimed presuppositions of

argumentation must be proved in real discourse, not by some transcendental philosophical analysis. This means that if a skeptic is able to formulate an objection to discourse ethics that does *not* embroil him in a performative contradiction, i.e., where Habermas is unable to corner him, then the presuppositions must be revised to take account of this, and the discourse ethics that follows from them must be altered correspondingly. Discourse ethics is recognized as contingent, since we can never prove the accuracy of the presuppositions of argumentation, but unless and until someone finds a way around them, the use of the performative contradiction method lets us demonstrate their accuracy and that of their consequent moral system, *in practice*

and to all.¹¹

In conclusion, postmodernism is properly situated only as one half of a dialectical relationship. Its critiques of the absolutist theories of Stage 5 must be recognized, but it does not itself provide a means of organizing our lives together, and in some incarnations it even goes so far as to absolutize its critiques. The dialectical relationship of which it forms a part gives us a theory with normative force but with the modesty of a self-recognized contingency.

II Case Study: Seyla Benhabib's (1989) "Liberal Dialogue Versus a Critical Theory of Discursive Legitimation"

In this section I apply the foregoing analysis to Benhabib's (1989) critique of Ackerman (1981, 1989). By situating Benhabib's and Ackerman's arguments in cognitive-developmental terms, we can clarify the source of their conflict and suggest a direction in which Benhabib's argument needs to be extended.

A. Multiple disclaimers

Before taking up the analysis I should note explicitly that the cognitive-developmental analysis is only a means to understanding and critiquing positions; it is not a teleology, and it does not replace actual analysis of the arguments. It provides, at best, a good way of understanding the common forms of argument for critiquing one position and forming a new one. In this paper the classification of Ackerman's position as Stage 5 and Benhabib's position as Stage 5½ is only a way to understand key features of their arguments and thereby guide us to standard lines of critique. It does not mean that Benhabib's position is automatically superior to Ackerman's. Ackerman might (probably does) have insights into political legitimation that, while not yet brought within a coherent logical structure, are important things to notice and are not inherent in Benhabib's position.¹² In short, the cognitive-developmental analysis is intended to give insight, not to dismiss.

There is yet another reason for this caution about cognitive-developmental analysis: we cannot be certain that we have adequately captured why a cognitive stage is better than previous stages. Habermas showed this, and Kohlberg accepted it, in a series of works (Kohlberg 1981a, Habermas 1983a, Kohlberg 1984a). Habermas's critique of Kohlberg's earlier position, and the point being made here, is that there is a dialectical relationship between the contingent philosophical position required to construct Kohlberg's moral reasoning test in the first place and Kohlberg's empirical discovery that people do in fact move stage by stage upward.¹³ In other

¹¹It does not seem reasonable that "agreement of all" be the criterion. Chilton (1998, 2000) deal with how discourse ethics can deal justly with disagreement.

¹²And the same could be said for Benhabib vis-a-vis Ackerman, quite apart from her effective critique of his position.

¹³The philosophical position is necessary for the test in order to say what questions would be relevant to morality in the first place (as opposed to custom, or prudence, or obedience to authority, etc.). Habermas terms such a philosophical position a "placeholder" – something that

words, we cannot know for certain that Kohlberg's description of moral development stages is correct. And if this is true, then even less can we blindly rank one position as better than another based on this contingent framework. Certainly I have found Kohlberg's framework extremely useful in clarifying issues; I would not be offering it here otherwise. But even so, you and I must both be aware that it may not be a perfect guide.

In this particular case I will be emphasizing the vulnerability of Ackerman's position to Benhabib's critique, but this is not to imply that his position (and, indeed, the liberal project overall) does not carry important moral truths: the value of liberty, the distinction between the legal and the moral, the distinction between the Good and the Right, and so on.

Finally, my concern is with how Benhabib situates herself with respect to Ackerman's position, not whether her perception of that position is accurate.

B. Benhabib's critique of Ackerman

Both Benhabib and Ackerman are concerned with the question of how the power configuration of a society – that is, its set of “institutions, relations, and arrangements” (Benhabib 1989:143) – can be evaluated as legitimate. Benhabib characterizes Ackerman's position¹⁴ as resembling Kant's “republic of devils” liberalism, a liberalism for communities whose members can assume nothing about each others' good will, moral integrity, or conceptions of the Good. Ackerman holds that legitimation in such circumstances can only be achieved through a public dialogue in which only “neutral” claims can be advanced. Neutral claims, in Ackerman's view, are those in which the citizen does not rely on claims either “that his conception of the good is better than that asserted by his fellow citizens ... or that, regardless of his conception of the good, he is intrinsically superior to one or more of his fellow citizens.” For these restrictions Ackerman “presents [only] a pragmatic-political as opposed to moral justification” (Benhabib 1989:145). Specifically, he defends what he terms a “Supreme Pragmatic Imperative” (SPI), encapsulating his sense that the problem of legitimate social order is to find a way for individuals and groups to relate that all will accept despite their disparate senses of the Good and the unlikelihood of any one sense being able to carry all others before it. Ackerman defends the SPI as merely the recognition of what we need to engage in public discourse at all.

Benhabib terms this position, “modus vivendi liberalism”. It is a Stage 5 position, because it recognizes that social norms cannot be legitimized by some absolute authority (monarch, tradition, a holy text, the existing power configuration, etc.), as in Stage 4, and it

cannot itself be proven directly, but that we require to stand in for whatever the true philosophical position is in order to construct the test(s). This position can then be tested indirectly by seeing if people do in fact move from stage to stage in accordance with the sense of moral adequacy implied by the philosophical position. As with the justification of Habermas's discourse ethics, the process here is one of “reconstructive science”.

¹⁴Without prejudice, I ignore the question of whether Ackerman would agree with her characterization. If you like, you can think of the word “Ackerman” as being always in quotes, meaning “Benhabib's excellent/flawed/distorted/insightful/ridiculous/brilliant [pick one] view of the real Ackerman's position”.

attempts to ground its claims on the consent of all to certain decision procedures or principles. This is clearly Ackerman's intent, since he justifies the SPI on the grounds of its evident necessity for carrying out public discourse at all in the face of disagreement, particularly in the face of disagreements over the Good, which appear incapable of resolution.

As with all Stage 5 positions, however, the foundational premise – for Ackerman, the SPI – has certain power implications that postmodernists can critique as arbitrary. For Ackerman's theory this is a fairly easy task; as Benhabib shows, the SPI divides public and private in a way that has very clear power consequences and is thus unacceptable to those whose voices are muted thereby.¹⁵ Here is how she voices her objection:

If I am deeply committed to the belief that prevalent conceptions of sexual division of labor in our societies are morally wrong because they oppress women and hinder their full expression of themselves as human beings, why should I agree not to do the best I can to make this a public issue and to convince others of my point of view? Or suppose I am a member of the Israeli opposition to the occupation of the territories. I consider this occupation wrong not on pragmatic grounds but on moral ones, because I believe that the occupation is corrupting the ethical values of the Jewish people.¹⁶ I may well be aware that under current conditions public opinion is so divided that I stand no chance of winning assent; nevertheless, is it unreasonable of me to seek the widest possible forum of public discussion and participation to air my views, rather than to agree with you, as Ackerman advocates, not to talk about what is of most concern to me[?]" (Benhabib 1989:147).

These objections resonate with me, not just because I share her normative beliefs in the areas she mentions but also because of an incident I remember clearly from my childhood. Around 1962, when I was sixteen years old and wrestling with the great mystery of sexuality, Hugh Hefner was challenging the existing morals with his "*Playboy* philosophy".¹⁷ So one night at the dinner I

¹⁵In theory it is undercut by the objections of even one citizen, but social power being what it is, with the first reaction to cries of unfairness being silencing and social disapproval, any foundational principle like the SPI can only be overcome by the objections of objecting citizens numerous and powerful enough to make others pay attention to the merits of the issue.

¹⁶I believe Benhabib goes farther than she needs to here. Her moral objection to the occupation is primary; its corruption of the ethical values of the Jewish people is secondary. Perhaps she means that the immorality arises *because* the occupation is against (specifically) Jewish law. But I find it hard to believe that she would accept the practice even if the Jewish tradition mandated such occupation; more likely she is making it clear, in a discourse taking place among people sharing that tradition, that her views cannot be dismissed as foreign to it.

¹⁷I now regard Hef's philosophy as Stage 4½. Its hedonism rightly challenged the rigid cultural norms of the 1950s, but hedonism is not yet a principled stance. Perhaps I am doing it an injustice here, but that's certainly what my teenage mind got out of it, and I haven't seen anything since then to change that perception.

asked my parents what they thought about this philosophy. This was a question of some importance to me, since (as I now recognize) I was implicitly asking if there were any reason to restrain my erotic exuberance, i.e., any reason beyond blind obedience to a frightened Victorianism. My father wouldn't touch that question, and there was some period of silence. "Oh, Steve," my mother finally said, "do we have to talk about *every* philosophy?" Even though that response avoided asserting any specific sexual ethic, its reticent relativism was nevertheless in those circumstances an assertion of power in that it denied that they had to meet my questions as equals.¹⁸ Thus it is with Ackerman's SPI.

Benhabib does not carry her argument beyond Stage 5½, however, because in the end she is only demonstrating the inadequacy of Ackerman's position. In particular, she does not provide a positive grounding for a moral position that could remedy Ackerman's problems. She argues – correctly, I believe – that a moral proceduralism can thematize its own procedures in what she calls, in a nice image, "Neurath's boat", whose leaks can be fixed by replacing a limited number of boards at a time but cannot be fixed by replacing all the boards at once.¹⁹ However, in this article at least, she leaves undone the task of telling us which of Neurath's boards we need to fix first and how we might go about doing so.

Afterword: Questions

[When this work was presented to the Workshop on Politics and Postmodernity,²⁰ it received the following response (among others), which deserves some discussion. The comment was by Dr. Louise A. Lulhier.]

Q: Your argument depends on the dialectical relationship between assertion and critique carrying no substantive normative claim in itself, since any such claim will be vulnerable to the very postmodern critiques you seek to surmount. However, Kohlberg's work carries a normative claim about what people's morality ought to be. By stage-scoring people's reasoning, Kohlberg is judging people, even if he claims he is not; the hierarchy of reasoning is implicitly a judgment.

A: This is a complex issue. I disagree with the assertion that Kohlberg's stage sequence is necessarily an evaluation of people, but there is a larger sense in which the question does push my argument to greater clarity. Let me deal with my disagreement first. Kohlberg consistently said that his stage sequence represented deontic judgments of the adequacy of particular arguments, not aretaic judgments of the value of the people making those arguments.

¹⁸I have to say that springing the question on my parents at dinner in front of my siblings was not conducive to a well-thought-out response.

¹⁹"Bootstrapping" could be another term.

²⁰Held under the auspices of the Center for Philosophy and the Social Sciences, Federal University of Santa Catarina, Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brazil, June 6-7, 2002.

It is true that in Western culture, at least as I understand it, these two forms of judgment are confused: one is punished for being wrong. This is clearly true in the academic world, where we make our living by being Right, but it is also true in the larger culture, where misjudging what products will sell (say) can mean bankruptcy. “Let the weak go to the wall” represents not just a judgment of people’s reasoning but a judgment of their very value as fellow human beings. In view of this confusion, it is natural to suppose that the moral reasoning stage scores might be taken as an evaluation of the morality of the people bearing them. And it is true that in a complex society like ours, social issues have ramifications that require higher-stage reasoning, so that people unable to deploy this reasoning can make judgments that are in a certain sense blind. When those judgments are seen as inadequately based, then people’s actions are judged as “immoral”, and the people themselves are then commonly judged as immoral as well.

Nevertheless, despite the ease with which our society converts deontic into aretaic judgments, the fact remains that this is not inherent in Kohlberg’s theory. The limitations and inconsistencies of people’s reasoning do not make their judgments wrong, because knowledge of the Truly Right is beyond our ability to judge; these apparent limitations and inconsistencies might simply be the inadequate explanations of an underlying, perceptive moral intuition. Nor is there any connection in Kohlberg’s theory between mistaken judgments and punishment of the individuals involved. “Praise and blame are not moral categories”, Kohlberg (personal communication) has said, and in his stage-scoring manual (Colby & Kohlberg 1987) the moral element of blameworthiness/approval drops out at the higher stages. So while it is true that people may mistakenly regard or even use Kohlberg’s stage sequence as the basis for aretaic judgments, it is not the case that it “implicitly” embodies such judgments.

It is true that Kohlberg’s stage sequence necessarily rests on a specific view of the nature of morality, since it is that very view which enables him to create the Defining Issues Test and claim that it is in fact testing “morality”. However, Kohlberg does not demand that we accept his definition on blind faith; the definition is itself supported by the empirical results of the test, which bear on the original premise. If the original view of morality is wrong, then to that extent the results will not make sense, and so Kohlberg’s metaethical premises are indeed open to challenge.

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²¹This article and its bibliography use the same reference scheme as in Chilton (forthcoming) – naturally enough, since they form parts of it. Apologies for the incomplete citations; the source bibliography is incomplete, and I have not yet unpacked my books sufficiently to get the complete citations.

²²This was the original URL of the article. However, this web site and, as far as I can tell, the entire journal have vanished. There went my 15 minutes of fame.

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Table 1

Moral stage	Assertive / constructive positions (in boldface); <i>Critical / deconstructive positions (in italics)</i>	
Pre-modern	3	Normative meaning arises out of face-to-face relations.
	3½	<i>Face-to-face negotiations prove unable to regulate large, diverse, complex, and interconnected societies.</i>
Modern & postmodern	4	Normative meaning, one that overarches specific face-to-face relations, is already given to us; we must uphold it. Political and religious absolutism; classical conservatism; Fascism, Naziism.
	4½	<i>The “already givenness” of Stage 4 norms make them culturally arbitrary. To that extent the existing choice reflects social power.* Cultural relativism, libertarianism, Hobbes [sic]</i>
	5	Theories of normative meaning with at least formal equality of meaning- and decision-making – i.e., modernist theories. Classical liberalism; Kant; Burkean conservatism [sic]
	5½	<i>Any theory of normative meaning falls to the Münchhausen trilemma, and because it is arbitrary, norms again (as in Stage 4½) reflect social power. Postmodernism, social construction / symbolic interactionism theories; Foucault, Derrida, Benhabib, Fraser.</i>
6	<i>The duality of normative theories and critique; dialectical reasoning / reconstructive science. Both normative meaning and critiques thereof are still necessary; discovery by inescapability (= universality <u>in practice</u>), so that any current theory of normative meaning can be undercut by anyone’s escape from it, any such escape necessitating a reconstruction of the theory to take account of it. Kohlberg’s grounding of his developmental scale; Habermas’s grounding of his discourse ethics</i>	

*The term “reflects” is deliberately ambiguous. It could mean that an existing power configuration has forced this choice on people or that a preexisting or accidental choice has yielded a class structure along the lines of who accidentally happens to benefit from the choice. Or both, of course. The basic point is that moral arbitrariness and social power are internally connected.