

*Attention to particular aspects of persons, contexts, and emotions is an essential aspect of morality.*

## Universality and Particularity

*Lawrence Blum*

I am honored to contribute to this volume on Lawrence Kohlberg's work. Kohlberg was always an inspirational figure for me—first, as a psychologist who saw both philosophy and psychology as necessary for an understanding of the phenomena of morality and moral development; and second, as a thinker who invited criticism of his views and who struggled to come to grips with the criticism. As a philosophical critic of Kohlberg's view of morality, I always felt welcome to engage him in dialogue.

### **Complementary Principles of Morality**

The notion of universality plays various roles within Kohlberg's system. First, it is involved in the empirical claim that the development from preconventional through conventional to principled reasoning is a human and cultural universal (though according to Kohlberg's own findings only a minority of people in any culture actually attain the highest stage). Universality is also involved in the related normative claim that, from a universal standpoint, the empirically final stage of moral reasoning, preferred by all of those who can understand that stage, is also the normatively most adequate form of moral reasoning.

Without directly taking issue with either of these claims, I focus on a third claim concerning how, for Kohlberg, universality characterizes

---

I have benefited in writing this paper from an unpublished manuscript by Peter Davson-Galle, "Against 'Moral' Partialism," Department of Philosophy, Tasmanian State Institute of Technology, Launceston, Australia. I also thank Owen Flanagan, Jr., and David Wong for helpful comments on early drafts of this chapter and Johannah Meehan for insights into Habermas's recent views.

the nature of morality itself at the sixth and highest stage of development. Specifically, the universality of the highest stage contrasts with the conventional and relative stance of the agent at the conventional stages. At the lower stages the person either restricts the domain of moral principle to a particular social entity, whether a particular role conception or an entire society, or else he or she uses a thus-restricted moral conception as if it had universal validity. In either case the conventional reasoner's moral conception lacks true universality.

By contrast, for the highest-stage moral individual, moral principles are necessarily universal. They define a standpoint beyond any particular society, from which the specific morality of a society can be evaluated. This characterization applies to Kohlberg's (1958) original description of his sixth stage, as characterized by principles of equality, universal rights, and justice. But it also applies to the 1984 revision in which the sixth stage is characterized formally rather than in terms of a particular content. What this formal characterization guarantees is that whatever principles the individual holds, these principles must be universal in form and scope; they must be applicable to all persons.

I suggest that while Kohlberg (and Jürgen Habermas, who agrees with him on this point) may be right in seeing a link between mature moral reasoning and universality so understood, there is also an important incompleteness in a conception of morality that defines it (in its highest form) exclusively in terms of universality. One can see this incompleteness by examining two contrasts, each involving universality. One is the contrast between universality and conventionalism or parochialism; the other, between universality and particularity.

The contrast between universality and conventionalism may be between a more and a less adequate or developed moral outlook. Leaving aside the concerns about cultural bias and relativity raised by Schweder, Mahapatra, and Miller (1987), at least in Western cultures I believe that we rightly regard an appreciation of the equal and inherent dignity of all persons and a belief that all human beings have rights and deserve justice as moral advances over less comprehensive—and, in that way, more parochial—moralities.

However, the second contrast, between universality and particularity, marks a tension between two equally essential components of any adequate conception of morality. Reasoning in terms of universal principles is not the only moral capacity constituting someone as morally mature, as a person possessing morally good traits of character. Universal principles do not by themselves characterize lived moral agency. To possess moral traits of character involves something more, namely, particularity. Particularity, as I understand it, is knowledge of the moral character of the particular situation facing a moral agent at a particular time. To speak of particularity as a general moral capacity is to refer to a moral

agent's general ability to know the moral character of situations she faces.

Particularity is not only knowledge that certain features given in the description of a situation are morally relevant features (features that need to be taken into account in moral action). Particularity presupposes such knowledge and goes beyond it. For it involves getting the description of the situation one is faced with right in the first place. For example, it involves seeing that a situation does involve lying, dishonor, and cruelty in the first place.

Particularity is a complex phenomenon; it is not a unitary ability. I focus here on one element in particularity, namely, the ability and disposition to understand other specific persons in their individuality, and to be aware of what is going on with them in concrete situations. This involves, for example, knowing or perceiving when a specific person is in need, being cruelly treated, or in danger of having her dignity attacked.

One way to state the contrast between universal principle and particularity is that between seeing others in light of the commonality that makes all persons appropriate objects of universal, rational principles, and seeing them in light of each one's specific individuality. These ways of viewing are complementary, but both are necessary in the fully morally developed individual. A person who holds and reasons in terms of all of the correct universal principles of dignity and justice, but who does not recognize when others are in need, when their dignity is in danger, or when they are being treated unjustly, would not be a fully morally developed person, though she might be an advanced moral reasoner.

The recognition of need in others is often not a simple matter. Habermas reminds us in his writings of the necessity of what he calls "need interpretation." In the context of everyday life, other persons do not just present themselves with their needs displayed and articulated for us to respond to. Rather, recognizing and acknowledging that someone is in need is a task that is itself both cognitive and moral. Suppose, to take a mundane example, I am riding on the subway; another passenger not far from me is holding several packages. In the rush of everyday life, many of her fellow passengers might see her only as someone carrying packages. But it may well be that attention to this particular person reveals that she is struggling with these packages, that she is quite uncomfortable standing the way she is, and that the seated passengers near her could help her in various ways, say, by standing up and allowing her to sit down, or by offering to hold some of the packages. That is, this woman's need can be "seen" and "taken in"; or, on the contrary, it can go unrecognized, unacknowledged, and thus unresponded to.

The recognition of need—and, more generally, the understanding of particular persons in particular situations—is an essential capacity of a morally mature individual. Without it, moral agency, no matter how

developed and sophisticated the moral reasoning that informs it, can accomplish little. Moreover, this attentiveness to and understanding of others in their particularity is normally an expression of a person's caring about others. It is care that renders the agent open and receptive to seeing the other's need.

This caring understanding of others is not always easy to achieve. As in the subway example, self-absorption and lack of other-directed awareness can prevent one from seeing that another person is being treated cruelly, is depressed, or has been emotionally wounded by an insensitive remark. And within the context of personal relations, our own desires and needs for particular other persons, and our self-centered or insufficiently caring investment in a certain view of that person, can block from our vision the other's true needs.

Because the moral capacities involved in particularity are not focused on universality and universal principle, one might be tempted to confuse particularity with less than Stage 6 reasoning. But particularity has little to do with conventional reasoning or social contract. The ability to know others in their particularity, that is, to be attentive to the situations of others in order to discern their needs, depends in its fullest realization on a secure sense of one's own self. The nonautonomous or not-yet-autonomous self will see others' needs too much through the prism of her own needs; she will not grasp the other in his otherness. So this particularistic moral capacity can be seen to require an autonomous self, a self that Kohlberg rightly saw as also being a necessary condition for principled, postconventional reasoning.

### **Kohlberg on Particularity and Morality**

In his second volume of *Essays on Moral Development*, Kohlberg (1984) seemed to acknowledge that his previous definition of morality as comprising the domain of universal principles of justice and dignity was incomplete (pp. 227, 229, 307). He struggled to incorporate within the framework of his own theory some appreciation of particularity. He makes several suggestions in this direction, most of which conflict with one another, and none of which taken alone is adequate.

Kohlberg suggests (here termed view 1) that the nonjustice part of morality be seen in terms of the claims of special, personal relationships, such as family or friendships (1984, pp. 228, 231-232). It is true that the domain of personal relationships has not been given its full due in the rationalist and universalist tradition within which Kohlberg worked, and Kohlberg's acknowledgment of that domain is welcome. Nevertheless, he is not consistent in the importance he accords to it. At another point (view 2), he appears to give personal relations a kind of equal status with the more public domain of universal principles (p. 228). At

still another point (view 3), he sees it as secondary or merely supplementary to the domain of justice (p. 229). In addition Kohlberg approvingly cites Gertrud Nunner-Winkler, who takes yet a fourth position (view 4) that the domain of personal relationships be seen as part of the ideals of the "good life" rather than of morality, properly so-called (p. 360). Views 2 and 3 contrast with view 4 in acknowledging that personal relations are genuinely a part of morality itself.

Kohlberg also suggests (view 5) that ultimately the domain of special relationships can itself be handled, or encompassed, by a morality of justice and universal principles (1984, p. 228). His view here is not merely that the domain of personal relationships contains a confluence or interaction of two distinct types of moral notions (for example, justice and care) but also that justice and universal principles are by themselves sufficient to capture whatever is of moral significance in the domain of personal relationships.

According to view 5, we find out how to act morally in our personal relationships by consulting universal principles of justice, or principles derived from them. This seems to deny what the other four views assert, namely, that there is something genuinely distinctive about the domain of personal relationships with respect to the domain encompassed by universal principles (1984, p. 228). View 1 says the domains are distinct, view 2 that they are distinct but equally significant, view 3 that they are distinct but justice is the more fundamental domain, and view 4 that personal relations have to do with the good life, not with morality. So Kohlberg's five views are by no means compatible with one another. And it is probably fair to say that Kohlberg had not entirely decided on how to think about the domain of personal relationships from a moral point of view.

In any case, four of Kohlberg's five views are not adequate to handle what is involved in particularity more generally. Regarding view 4, there is no basis for excluding personal relations from the domain of morality proper. As Kohlberg comes close to acknowledging (1984, pp. 229, 343, 370), we do have duties to our children, spouses, and, perhaps, friends. Certain requirements govern these relationships (though such requirements constitute only one aspect of the relationships). In the passage about a woman contemplating divorce, Kohlberg seems to agree that certain moral principles do govern family life, such as the "principle of family unity" and the "principle of the welfare of the child" (Kohlberg, 1984, p. 230).

Hence, while there might be value in distinguishing between the right and the good, or between moral requirement and personal ideal, these distinctions do not correspond to the distinction between a universalistic public morality and morality in personal relations. The former distinctions will have to be drawn within personal relations, and perhaps within the public domain as well.

For similar reasons, view 3—that personal relations are less significant a domain of morality than the public domain of justice—is also incorrect. No grounds are given by Kohlberg for regarding the private domain as any less important to the moral life than the public domain. Ordinarily, we do regard both domains as reflecting significantly on an individual's moral character. View 5—that there is *no* significant moral difference between the two domains—is thus incorrect as well. While the differences may be only of degree, the moral notions of care, attention, personal commitment, and responsibility play a greater role in the arena of personal relations than in the arena of public action (Kohlberg, 1984, p. 228).

Furthermore, all five of Kohlberg's views presuppose that particularity is coextensive with the domain of personal relationships. But the example of the subway rider mentioned earlier suggests otherwise. Our capacity to attend to individual others applies not only to the morality of personal relationships—although this is a very important realm of its operation—but also to relationships with strangers, as well as to intermediate cases such as professional-to-client relationships (see Blum, 1990; Noddings, 1984). We can say, provisionally, that particularity encompasses any encounter of one person with another. The Judeo-Christian conception of the neighbor seems well-suited to capture this element of particularity beyond the arena of strictly personal relationships, by emphasizing an encounter with a particular other.

Kohlberg makes yet a sixth suggestion (view 6) about how particularity might be encompassed within his own framework for morality: rationalist moral theories such as his own and Kant's (except for the rigoristic and absolutistic strands in Kant) have always taken particularity into account, in that general principles have always been understood to encompass their applicability to particular circumstances (Kohlberg, 1984, p. 359). That is, rationalist moral theory has always understood that every general principle in its application to particular circumstances, by virtue of taking such context into account, is recognized to have exceptions (Kohlberg, 1982).

This rationalist view is misleading, however. First, it cannot be assumed that the process by which we recognize that moral rules have exceptions is anything like the process by which we arrive at rational and universal principles in the first place. The rationalistic process by which a moral person arrives at universal moral principles such as justice, equal rights, and the human dignity of all persons is typically quite different from the way that a moral person recognizes exceptions to a given moral rule. The recognition of exceptions typically comes in a confrontation with a particular situation, evoking an awareness, grounded in a particularistic understanding of the situation, that the rule in question does not apply there. This is to say that the acknowledgment of actual exceptions to rules involves a complex negotiation between the stance of uni-

versality and the stance of particularity. Thus, the recognition of the significance of context cannot be taken as support for the view that universality already encompasses, or accounts for, particularity, as view 6 implies.

Moreover, even when a moral agent possesses a universalized rule (whether containing exceptions or not), there is still a gap between the principle and its application to a particular situation. Kohlberg's view fails to recognize that the particularity involved in *applying* the rule involves a very different sort of capacity from that which is involved in *formulating* the universal principle in the first place. An understanding of individuals in their specific situations requires a different sort of capacity than that needed to recognize and formulate universal principles (though, as argued earlier, the formulation of principles with a lot of exceptions often involves an interaction of both particularity and universality). It is not a simple or quasi-mechanical matter to apply a principle in a situation, as Kohlberg's view here implies. Rather, rule application often involves complex perceptiveness, attentiveness, and understanding of situations and individuals.

The capacity for forming universal principles is a much more self-reflective and intellectualized capacity than that for particularity. Particularity, while cognitive, is more bound up with our emotional natures. Indeed, the grounding of particularistic care in emotion is trivialized by characterizations such as "affectively tinged" ideas (Kohlberg, 1984, p. 228), which presume that if the "tinge" were removed, we would be left with only rational, universal principles and their derivatives. If particularity in its form of understanding of individuals is at least partly dependent on caring, then because caring is both emotional and cognitive, the dependence of particularity on emotion is evident. Particularity is also less dependent on its own articulatability than is principled reasoning. If I act according to an autonomously generated moral principle, then I know that I have done so and am able to say what that principle is. But to the extent that my action is based on a particularistic understanding of my situation, I might have such an understanding without either recognizing that I have it, knowing how I arrived at it, or being able to articulate it (see Blum, 1988).

Habermas appears to agree with this criticism of Kohlberg. However, what Habermas sees as bridging the gap between universal principle and particular application is different from what I mean by particularity.

It may seem that I have not yet shown that particularity is part of a person's distinct moral makeup. But this analytic gap is apparent only if one identifies morality with nothing more than the intellectual generation of universal principles. My assumption has been that even if one accepts for the moment a central role for universal principles in the moral life, an individual whom we would regard as morally mature or morally devel-

oped would still have to do more than know how to arrive at, or reason to, moral principles. She would also have to live according to those principles. And what I am arguing here is that to live according to those principles requires particularity—the understanding of particular situations, which in turn involves (in part) caring attentiveness to individual persons.

In this way I have argued that particularity is no less important to morality than universality. It is not that particularity is a nonmoral, merely psychological capacity instrumental to the correct application of moral principles to particular situations. It would be no less true to say that reasoning to valid moral principles is instrumental to their application to particular situations. The point is rather that what is being called “application of moral principles” as if it were a mere appendage to a purely rationalistic or universalist formulation of morality, is no less than a critical part of what is involved in living a moral life. And living a moral life requires, equally, both universality and particularity. (Because of space limitations, the argument developed here does not challenge the assumption that all moral action is based on universal, rational principles. This assumption is challenged in Blum [1986, 1987], where I argue that non-principle-based, situation-specific caring can motivate morally good actions.)

Let me turn to a brief consideration of Jürgen Habermas’s partial criticism of Kohlberg’s views and his further development of Kohlberg’s basic approach toward an ethic based in dialogue and communication. Habermas (1979) sees Kohlberg as having provided the basic universalistic and rational framework within which morality should be understood. But he criticizes Kohlberg’s claim that Stage 6 is the highest stage of development because he sees that stage as purely “monologic” (1979, p. 90). That is, for Kohlberg, at Stage 6 the individual moral agent generates the highest principles from a (universalization) procedure that she engages in by herself. For Habermas, by contrast, the highest stage (Stage 7) involves actual dialogue with particular others about moral principles to be agreed on. Habermas sees principles of dialogue as bridging the gap mentioned earlier between pure universality and its application to particular circumstances.

This important corrective of Kohlberg’s view is a step toward the particularity I have been arguing for here. Kohlberg (1984) replies to Habermas’s (1979) criticism in two ways. First, he says that his description of Stage 6 is entirely “consistent with” Habermas’s principle of dialogue. For example, Kohlberg argues that Stage 6 involves “ideal role taking” (1984, p. 385), which is consistent with Habermas’s dialogic approach, since engaging in dialogue is a good way to learn about the perspectives of other persons. But to argue that Stage 7 is compatible with Stage 6 is an insufficient answer to Habermas’s criticism. It is no doubt true that engaging in actual dialogue with the persons to be

affected by one's action is compatible with imagining oneself in the situations of those persons, insofar as the results of the latter method may, on particular occasions, coincide with the results of the former. But Habermas's point is that engaging in actual dialogue is superior as a general method for accomplishing the universalization, that is, the taking of everyone's perspective into account, required by the highest stage of morality. In short, the dialogic or interactional method is superior to the monologic achievement of that universalization.

Second, Kohlberg takes this stronger position that dialogue is actually the best way to achieve what is stated in Stage 6 (1984, p. 386). Yet, if Kohlberg is saying that the dialogic method is actually superior to the monologic method as a way of engaging in ideal role taking, then he seems to have conceded Habermas's point, at least in regard to the way that Stage 6 has generally been understood and conveyed in Kohlberg's writings.

Kohlberg's failure to show that Habermas's interactional approach is not superior to the more Kantian-monological approach, which Stage 6 has generally been thought to embody, is not meant to preclude the possibility that Kohlberg was moving toward a more interactional and less individualistic and rationalist understanding of morality. The likelihood of this shift is suggested by his work on just community schools, as detailed in Power, Higgins, and Kohlberg (1989).

Habermas's dialogic view of morality sees the phenomenon as more social and less individualistic, and as more concrete and grounded and less abstract, than Kohlberg's view. Yet, I do not think that Habermas's dialogic Stage 7 succeeds in incorporating all of what I have meant by particularity. Habermas sees the dialogic process as involving different persons who seek grounds for agreement with others about moral principles. In this way Habermas follows the logic of Kohlberg's position, giving a social (but not conventional) form to the search for rational principles that is inherent in the logic of Kohlberg's stages.

But not all interpersonal events of moral significance involve a search for agreement or even a dialogue of any sort. Some involve the attempt by a moral agent to understand what the other person is about outside a context of seeking moral agreement, or when the other is not necessarily trying to communicate with that agent. In reaching that understanding the moral agent has to attend to more than the explicit truth-claiming and agreement-seeking aspects of speech. In fact, people's own needs are often masked by their explicit speech, a point that Habermas makes elsewhere. And understanding the needs of another—an important task of particularity—involves attention to other cues about a person, for example, her situation, bodily comportment, and emotional expression (see Young, 1987, on which the present criticism of Habermas is based). Hence the kind of interaction with others that produces particularistic

understanding—rooted in the emotions—of persons does not necessarily take the form of an agreement-seeking dialogue about moral principles, which Habermas (1979) sees as the highest stage of morality and which he suggests provides the principles of application of universal morality to concrete situations.

Furthermore, the kind of understanding of others involved in particularity often takes place outside of speech situations altogether, as illustrated by my earlier example of the woman in the subway. More generally, particular understanding does not always require interaction or stem from interaction, though Habermas is right to be generally suspicious of any purely monologic moral efforts—whether of noninteractional understanding or of generation of principle.

## Conclusion

In fact, no principles of application, no matter how they are generated, could provide all of what I have called particularity. For, as I have argued, no matter how detailed the principles that one applies, the agent must first perceive the moral character of the situation at hand in order to begin drawing on the appropriate principles. No principles can ensure the accuracy of those particular perceptions.

How the particularistic dimension of morality relates to the universal dimension that Kohlberg explored is a necessary and fruitful area in the study of the moral domain. Lawrence Kohlberg's own self-critical combination of philosophy and psychology well serves as a salutary model for the interdisciplinary pursuit of such an inquiry.

## References

- Blum, L. "Iris Murdoch and the Domain of the Moral." *Philosophical Studies*, 1986, 50, 343-367.
- Blum, L. "Particularity and Responsiveness." In J. Kagan and S. Lamb (eds.), *The Emergence of Morality in Young Children*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Blum, L. "Gilligan and Kohlberg: Implications for Moral Theory." *Ethics*, 1988, 98, 472-491.
- Blum, L. "Vocation, Friendship, and Community: Limitations of the Personal-Impersonal Framework." In O. Flanagan, Jr., and A. Rorty (eds.), *Psychology and Morality*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990.
- Habermas, J. "Moral Development and Ego Identity." In *Communication and the Evolution of Society*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1979.
- Kohlberg, L. "The Development of Modes of Moral Thinking and Choice in the Years 10 to 16." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 1958.
- Kohlberg, L. "Reply to Owen Flanagan." *Ethics*, 1982, 92, 513-528.
- Kohlberg, L. *Essays on Moral Development*. Vol. 2: *The Psychology of Moral Development*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984.

- Noddings, N. *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984.
- Power, F. C., Higgins, A., and Kohlberg, L. *Lawrence Kohlberg's Approach to Moral Education*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.
- Schweder, R., Mahapatra, M., and Miller, J. "Culture and Moral Development." In J. Kagan and S. Lamb (eds.), *The Emergence of Morality in Young Children*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Young, I. "Impartiality and the Civic Public: Some Implications of Feminist Critiques of Moral and Political Theory." In S. Benhabib and D. Cornell (eds.), *Feminism as Critique*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.