Golfo MAGGINI, *Habermas and the Neo-Aristotelians: Discourse Ethics in Jürgen Habermas and the Challenge of Neo-Aristotelianism*, with Appendices by S. Virvidakis and K. Kavoulakos, Athens, Patakis Press, 2006, 414 pp.

In a well known passage of his Third *Critique*, Kant notes that there are two ways of debating an issue: one is to *dispute* about the conflicting claims; the other is to *quarrel* with the opposing parties. The debate that forms the subject matter of Golfo Maggini's study is a classic fixture in the field of moral and political philosophy. What makes Maggini's study distinctive is the meticulous way in which she unravels the development of that debate in the writings of Habermas, of his Non-Aristotelian fellow travelers or offshoots, and of his Neo-Aristotelian opponents; by paying proper attention to the argumentative moves of all parties involved, Maggini manages to give us a real sense of the intricacies and complexities of a discussion, which took off in the late 60's and reached a peak point in the mid 90's, without, as yet, having fully settled.

Offering a *précis* of the book might lead to a simplifying reconstruction of Maggini's rich narrative. I propose instead to focus on some core issues to which Maggini's text gives rise. The first issue is not (perhaps understandably) addressed by the book itself, yet it concerns a rather important issue: what is the methodology that informs the writing *in* the book? Maggini's text does not read like a hermeneutical exercise on the connotations of philosophical prose, or as a deconstruction of its unintended implications, or as an edifying treatise for the moral benefit of alienated readers: her text purports to identify philosophical claims, to trace their history, to explicate how they were received, and to question their apparent cogency. In those respects, her text is both stylistically and intellectually quite close to, *e.g.*, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* – minus the polemical tone, and consequent inattention to detail, that characterizes Habermas' own narrative. It is thus, I think, all the more interesting that Maggini's inquiry ends by casting doubt on certain aspects of Habermas' own project: the doubts are significant precisely because they stem from within the Habermasian project of Discourse Ethics.

Among the several doubts expressed by Maggini, it is particularly worth noting those concerning (i) the proper articulation of the doctrine of the alleged priority of a context independent notion of «right» over a culturally embedded notion of «good», (ii) the application problem for ethical principles, or more generally, for normative strictures, and (iii) the viability of the conception of personhood that informs much of Habermas' theoretical moves. Each of those three issues is a major philosophical topic in its own right, and its full treatment should call upon a

variety of arguments in the analysis of consciousness, language, being, knowledge, motivation, and value. Maggini prefers to stay close to the views actually presented by the protagonists in the debate, and rather prudently avoids wandering in the broader philosophical literature on the aforementioned research topics. On the positive side, that authorial policy makes for a tightly weaved monograph. What is not so clear, perhaps, is whether a reader, who is not already subscribing to the significance of that debate, will be convinced not just about the particulars of Maggini's concluding remarks (on this score she is making, in my view, a fine job), but about the fruitfulness of setting those research topics in terms of that particular debate. The worry is not that readers totally unfamiliar with the debate might fail to see its point –that is not necessarily something that ought to concern the author– the worry is that someone otherwise sympathetic to Habermas' project, might still think that we may unlock his thinking by choosing a route that bypasses, or, at least, avoids dwelling upon, his critical encounters with Neo-Aristotelianism.

Setting Habermas against contemporary Aristotelianism, could hardly avoid casting him in the way Aristotelians conceive of their deontological opponents, *i.e.* as a Kantian. That move looks natural, given Habermas' many allusions to the great Konnigsbergian, as well as his insistence on a cluster of views regarding the significance of Enlightenment, the priority of justice, the importance of the public use of reason, etc., that are part and parcel of liberal Kantianism. However, this opens up a number of interpretative issues.

If Habermas were a strict follower of Kant's ethics, then perhaps some of the problems that Maggini and others rightly identify in Deontological Ethics in general, might not be Habermas' own problems. To mention a simple but crucial example: *das Anwendungsproblem* is not, on the face of it, a problem for a philosopher who, like Kant, thinks that the role of the «highest principle of reason» (be it «the categorical imperative», or the «universalizability principle») is not to *generate* rules of action, but to *test* maxims that agents involved in a situation already have and are ready to act upon. To be sure, the universalizability principle, in either Kant's or Habermas' version, is subject to all sorts of difficulties, but the «Application Problem» is not one of them – to think otherwise (as, *e.g.*, Klaus Gunther does) is, in my view, to run together two slightly different issues in Kant's philosophy, one concerning the Groundwork's view of practical reason, and another concerning the Third *Critique*'s analysis of the faculty of judgment.

If, on the other hand, we take at face value Habermas' disclaimers of any alleged commitment to Kant's 'monological', 'abstract', 'subjective' ethics (characterizations that would sound nicely to any Hegelian ear), then, *at a normative level*, he seems to be less engaged in a trench war with Aristotelians of various kinds, and to be more interested in how best to exploit the insights of 18th and 19th century philosophers, in both the Kantian and the Hegelian tradition. The reason for this is not hard to decipher: Habermas' declared theoretical aim, from the *Structural Transformation of Public Sphere* (1962) onwards, is not the revival of Kantian ethics, but the invigoration of Critical Social Theory. That aim appears to Habermas to be best served by providing Critical Social Theory with the *normativen Grundlagen* that Horkheimer's or

Adorno's works (despite their unmistaken moralistic overtones) admittedly lacked. However, those normative foundations (articulated in terms of communicative agency and its institutional formations in late modernity) are *not*, according to Habermas, of a moral character, be it Kantian, Aristotelian, Millian, or otherwise. Perhaps Habermas misreads his own project, or –as so often happens in this area– he takes as evaluatively neutral what is in fact morally laden. But it might be more charitable to think that Discourse Ethics is a normative grid, which allows the employment of cognitive and evaluative resources that might come from many quarters. Habermas' own take on moral matters, as recorded in his interviews (*Autonomy and Solidarity*), various of his public lectures, and his shorter political pieces (collected in the *Kleine politische Schriften*) is, therefore, of a different methodological order than his theoretical agenda that aspires to keep clear of one or another moral standpoint.

In light of the above, Maggini's general recommendations for, *e.g.* a *rapprochement* between Kantian and Aristotelian ideas of self-definition and self-realization should be welcome to a Habermasian Critical Theorist. It is, in fact, plausible to state that this is the direction to which lately Habermas' own work is moving – though, perhaps, not in a fully consistent way, as Kavoulakos' clearly argued contribution aptly shows. Virvidakis' *Appendix* also provides a much needed discussion of how and where exactly Discourse Ethics might fit in the domain of analytical Meta-ethics.

Maggini's book offers substantial food for thought to both the friends and the detractors of Discourse Ethics. It also shows, in practice, how a serious study can help us move beyond blind quarrels and on to genuine disputes on philosophical issues that matter.

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