

## Universalism in Habermas (A Reading in the Light of the Kantian Horizon)

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**Abstract---**The concept of universalism is among the important notions that have occupied human thought since its Greek age, embodied in the attempts of Plato and Cicero and accompanying the course of modern philosophy beginning with Kant, for whom universalism represented an expression of individual moral reason grounded in duty and goodwill. Although it took the form of salvation in an age crowded with materialities, it nevertheless remained imprisoned within its formal world, as the course of modernity revealed a profound paradox between, on the one hand, universal aspiration and, on the other hand, a stricken, noncommunicative reality. On the basis of this critique, Habermasian pragmatics emerged as a dialectical overcoming that does not abolish the Kantian striving to find a universal ethics, provided that it is founded on argumentation and communication rather than individual isolation. Hence, Habermasian universalism is a critical extension of Kantianism, leading it from narrowness to participation and from abstraction to concrete realisation. Accordingly, it is impossible to understand Habermas's communicative project outside its Kantian context, which constitutes its philosophical foundation. In this article, we aim to question the Kantian presence within the Habermasian conception of universalism and identify the principal points they share, as well as the points of difference through which Habermas surpasses the formalism of the Kantian inquiry.

**Keywords---**universalism, duty, practical reason, discursive reason, communicativity, argumentation.

### 1. Introduction

Since the Greeks, philosophers have sought to investigate human concerns and have attempted to establish universal laws that can save humanity from the deformations that have afflicted it, especially as

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a result of wars (World Wars I and II) and conflicts. Perhaps the project of perpetual peace and the ethics of duty were among the most significant contributions offered by Immanuel Kant as a solution to overcome the human crisis, through which he sought to construct universal moral values grounded in absolute rational foundations that are more comprehensive and free from any ends. If Kant represented the modernist current as the foremost figure striving towards a general moral universalism, then the critical sociological philosopher Jürgen Habermas was among the most prominent representatives of the postmodern line in Europe, starting from his being influenced by several prominent currents such as hermeneutics and philosophical anthropology, not to mention Weber's theory of communication and Kohlberg's theory of moral development. From here, he established a critical foundation for a new philosophy, with starting points that differed from Kantian universalism. Whereas the first-generation philosophers attacked Enlightenment reason, Habermas defended reason and viewed modernity differently, regarding it as a project not yet completed and one that must be continually worked upon. Accordingly, he presented his new project (communicative universalism), thereby surpassing the pessimism of Schopenhauer and Adorno and the closure of the self, through the philosophy of communicative action, taking critique as a pillar grounded in intersubjective optimism and aspiring to a kind of communicative universalism an important attempt to find an open, rational ethics based on dialogue rather than compulsion, and on communication and disputation rather than domination and despotism proceeding fundamentally from his critique of Kantian instrumentality, by which Kant relied on the individual's rational capacity to pass judgements on actions. Habermas saw in this a centring upon the self. In contrast, the moral Act is, at the root, social, grounded in communication, and closely resembles Aristotle's rules in formal logic (formal ethics), long rejected for its reality, something Kant neglected (the social and historical factors of intersubjective participation).

In this study, we attempt to highlight the fundamental differences between Kantian ethics and Habermasian ethics to lay our hand on the fundamental contribution offered by Jürgen Habermas in his establishment of a new point of view regarding communicative action to answer the following questions:

- How did Habermas move from the critique of literary reason to the founding of communicative action? Moreover, what drove him to do so?
- What do we mean by communicative universalism in Habermas?
- Did Habermas truly transcend the formalism of the universal project in Kant, or was he merely a continuation of it?

## 2. Universal ethics in Kant:

Kant was influenced by the rational revolution led by Descartes under the motto 'reason is the most equitable share among people'; it is the sole faculty capable of liberating the human being from his illusions. Accordingly, he built his ethical theory upon reason as a power capable of distinguishing actions and providing comprehensive moral standards. Ethics, for him, rests on the principle of the good will that legislates laws for itself under the rule: 'Act only according to the maxim that you can will become a universal law.' Here, universalism becomes the criterion of human action, and reason alone suffices to make it so through its transcendence of subjective passions and the spectre of belonging, identities, and the like. Perhaps his living through wars 1 and 2 made him seek to create a kind of 'league among peoples' through his project 'perpetual peace' to eliminate the evils of material, thing-like wars, proclaiming a day on which peace would prevail among states and their peoples once humans adhered to the moral law that correctly directs our actions and conduct. This law, as Kant affirmed, is founded on the principle of the exploitation of the will, which is 'the enunciation of the principle of general conduct that the rational being must make conform with his actions'. (Philosophical Dictionary, Ibrahim Madhkour, p. 145).

It is also 'the universal and binding principle to which the actions of the rational being ought to conform'. (Philosophical Dictionary, Muhammad Wahba, p. 323). Kant holds that moral law alone makes an individual's feelings about his actions a generally universal law. In truth, this law is not

imposed upon us; instead, it issues from the will itself, which justifies the necessity of our obedience to it. Hence, it is a free obedience, not a deficient obedience, which Kant calls the principle of the 'self-legislation of the will'. (Encyclopaedia of philosophy, part two, p. 284).

From here, it takes on the character of universality, which is a condition of moral law, on the basis of the fundamental maxim: 'Act in such a way that you can will the maxim of your action to be established as a universal law.' Here, Kant links the individual's freedom in performing his actions, proceeding from his self-awareness of them and his rational apprehension of their nature, thereby attempting to transcend relative ethics and inherited traditions, seeking to find a universal criterion founded on reason alone (the construction of a rational ethical system) that applies to all rational beings regardless of their circumstances, affiliations, or personal interests, proposing the idea of a cosmopolitical state based on a universal constitution that achieves peace through the duality of the voluntary union of peoples and the consolidation of the sovereignty of states, 'for the law is within myself' (Muhammad Mehran Rashwan, *The Development of Ethical Thought in Western Philosophy*, p. 171). Kant affirms the importance of moral law, criticising the philosophies preceding him, which turned ethics into a kind of natural harmony and tied it to empirical standards. Accordingly, Kant raised the banner of duty to the extent that he was dubbed 'the philosopher of duty', rejecting any connections other than those with moral action, and he rejected the doctrine of sentiment, which makes feelings a fundamental basis for human action. Accordingly, he noted in his *Critique of Practical Reason* that true virtue can be founded only upon principles and bases that are unrelated to either experience or sentiment but whose foundation is reason alone and the free will: 'the human being is a law unto himself, which entails the thesis of the self-legislation of the will' (Kamil Muhammad 'Uwayda, *Immanuel Kant, the Elder of Philosophy in the Modern Age*, p. 32). Moreover, the will in Kant never means practising moral action on the basis of the self and its passions; rather, the concept of the will for him is that innate disposition towards the good, which makes the individual capable of respecting the moral law in all its circumstances, indeed even submitting to it (an internal law). From here, this law takes on the character of the absolute or the universal.

## **1.2. The rules of universal ethics in Kant:**

As noted earlier, Kantian ethics is constituted by duty and the human will; hence, it is capable of being characterised by universality owing to its foundation upon a set of rules:

### **A. The rule of universalisation:**

Kant holds that the human will, always directed towards the good, requires that moral action be an absolute, general imperative fit for all humanity, nullifying any religious, geographical, or even temporal differences. Accordingly, he formulated this rule as follows: 'Act in such a way that the maxim of your action can become a universal law' (Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 11). Thus, reason addresses the human being to act in accordance with what he would be universal conduct, as although saying, 'Do as you would have done to you.' This is the fundamental rule upon which Kant establishes the rest: treachery, lying, theft, and other behaviours that contravene and contradict human nature cannot become a universal law because they are at odds with the benevolent human disposition.

### **B. The rule of the end-in-itself:**

Kant affirmed in many of his works that the rational faculty, which elevates the worth of the individual and makes him an end in himself, rather than another human being as a means to attain an end (Muhammad Mehran Rashwan, *The Development of Ethical Thought in the Modern Age*, p. 52). He formulated it in his statement: 'Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always and at the same time as an end in itself, never merely as a means' (Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 11). Kant thus calls upon the human being to free himself from the fetters of individualism and introversion and the pursuit of private benefit and to ascend to the sphere of collective generality to create a universal benefit, for he saw that the human being had lost his dignity and existence, especially under the intensity of conflict (World Wars I and II), and thus was

treated merely as an instrument (a reference here to the exploitation practised by states against individuals to achieve their aims of domination and expansion).

### **C. The rule of freedom:**

'Act in such a way that your will is as a legislature enacting for people a universal law.' (Muhammad Mehran Rashwan, *The Development of Ethical Thought*, p. 172). This is the rule by which he affirmed the human being's complete will in performing actions, which proceed from his being a rational human and which accords entirely with his benevolent nature; accordingly, he here combines the two previous rules. This is what led 'Abd al-Wahhab Ja' to remark in his book *Al-Akhlaq wa-l-Qiyam* that Kant prides himself on this ethical formula as the only philosophy that guarantees human freedom. The human being, according to Kant, is free by nature and cannot perform actions except through it. Thus, we see that the third rule of moral law requires each of us that he or she act such that the maxim from which his or her conduct issues expresses the utilisation of his or her will. (Zakariya Ibrahim, *Al-Mushkila al-Khuluqiyya*, p. 188).

From here, Kant conceived his project 'Towards Perpetual Peace': a world in which free, rational subjects encounter one another within their good will to form a universal moral community.

All these are principles that Kant saw as the path to realising humanity's dream of a world in which one says 'I' only when someone says, 'I am a human being.'

### **2.2. Towards Perpetual Peace: the political dimension of Kantian universalism:**

Kant's project constitutes a foundational moment in the history of modern philosophy, wherein he sought to dispense with the mediation of religion and custom and to establish a universal moral law grounded solely in reason. It is a new conception of the modern cosmopolitan state (cosmopolitanism), surpassing the nation-state toward a universal humanity founded upon reason and right together, out of a desire to make the self an active subject capable of directing its conduct from itself (the good will and the act of duty). 'For the establishment of a state governed by the law of duty, and whose individuals are guided by virtuous intentions, is the utmost to which humanity aspires; nothing can guarantee the good, enduring, and effective application of the law better than the inwards intention' (Paul Ricoeur, *The Universal and the Historical*, trans. Hassan Ben Hass, 2010). The Kantian project differs from earlier philosophical inquiries into universality (Plato, the Stoics) in its linkage of ethics and duty, as he holds that the world cannot advance outside ethics; accordingly, he maintains 'that true politics cannot make a single step before it bows in reverence to morality; and although politics is in itself a creative art, its union with morality is not an art at all, for morality resolves knots that politics is incapable of untying the moment it conflicts with morality' (Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, trans. and introd. Nabil al-Khoury, pp. 88–89). Thus, Kant deems necessary the union of politics with ethics, for ethics alone guarantees that politics proceeds along its proper path toward the achievement of perpetual peace; moral value removes from politics its savagery and despotism and grants the individual the freedom to exercise his role as a citizen with rights and duties, as an end in himself and an active force.

### **3.2. Cosmopolitan citizenship within the framework of Kant's peace project:**

Kant affirmed in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and in *Perpetual Peace* the moral foundation of reason, and from it the grounding of citizenship upon this principle. The human being as citizen, in his view, enjoys absolute freedom and transcendent dignity that make him an end, not merely a means to achieve ends, free of all affiliations or attachments that might unsettle his relation to the other something confirmed by his maxim: 'Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always as an end and never merely as a means.' Hence, he rejected the conception of a central world state, calling instead for the consolidation of a union among the states of the world as a system of federation among peoples: 'The right of nations must be founded upon a federation of free states' (*Perpetual Peace*, Immanuel Kant, trans. Nabil Khoury, p. 32).

### **Critique of the limitations of Kantian universalism:**

One cannot deny Kant's endeavour to change human reality, especially after that, and being marked by limitations and formalism. Universalism, for him, is constituted by subjective reason and thus creates a

centration that does not grant the other an actual place as a partner in the creation of the universal; accordingly, universal reason is embodied only in European reason. Similarly, his proposal for his conception of peace remained an idealistic notion far removed from historical and political reality and unfit for implementation on the ground. His reliance on human reason as the source of knowledge and the criterion of moral law is excessive because the knowing subject is subject to limits and its knowledge is conditional; thus, his universalism remains a universalism close within self-consciousness and not open to other cultures.

### **3. Universalism in Habermas: the shift from the closed self to the deliberative self:**

Habermas began, in presenting his universalist theory, from a critique of the individual, isolated self cut off from the other and from a rejection of reason's capacity to issue genuinely universal standards, directing his attention towards the participatory self in which reason is a speaking thought and a listening mind that gives and receives, whose identity is formed on the basis of argumentation and intellectual exchange with an acceptance of points of view, so that dialogue prevails and the most rightful and most appropriate moral criterion to become a universal law is reached. It is a self in complete contradiction to instrumental rational action, which employs means for the sake of achieving specific ends; its primary end is the attainment of understanding through deliberation and communication within a democratic public sphere, wherein the other, the stranger, becomes closer despite ethnic, cultural, or social differences. Here, Habermas excels within the Frankfurt School, which raised a new slogan entitled 'I am here, communicate with me'; it is communication with which Habermas began his project, 'placing instrumental reason within a broader conception of reason, namely, communicative reason' (Mahmoud Khalifa, Khidr al-Hayani, *Critical Hermeneutics*, p. 137). This is the reason that allows us to converse and communicate and then disclose opinions, reaching the dissolution and fusion of themselves, each one similar to the other. Habermas resort to language as a communicative means (Jürgen Habermas, *Ethics and Communication*, p. 46), demonstrating an excellent concern for language and its vocabulary. He recognised that it is the primary instrument of communication and the sole path to understanding.

#### **1.3. The pragmatic dimension of language:**

Habermas presented a new conception of language as a means of understanding and communicating with others, whose purpose is comprehension, recognition, and living within a collective public sphere. It bears within it a social, political, and ethical dimension, emphasising here an analytic language that releases the word from the confines of mere expression and speech to action, thus surpassing the formal conception of language towards a new conception, namely, pragmatics, 'moving from the study of linguistic competence to the study of communicative competence' (Hassan Musaddaq, Jürgen Habermas and the Frankfurt School, *Communicative Critical Theory*, 2005, p. 127). That is, Habermas makes language a means for creating and producing communicative action that imposes a kind of intersubjective harmony; 'this occurs through participation in communication expressed by means of language' (Jürgen Habermas, Christian Bouchindhome, *Logique des sciences sociales*, op. cit., p. 416). What is inferred from Habermas's linguistic thought is that communicative action is fundamentally based on discursive linguistic interaction, confirming this in his statement: 'The overall structures of discourse must be studied first and foremost from the standpoint of the question of understanding' (Jürgen Habermas, Christian Bouchindhome, *Logique des sciences sociales*, op. cit, p. 358). In other words, the pragmatic character of language makes it a means of creating consensus and facilitating universal communication, thereby promoting universal ethics. Habermas also holds that it is necessary to integrate sociology and communication science grounded in communication because the human being is a duality: a social, communicative being. Communication, as Habermas depicts it, views language in its pragmatic dimension; it means language immersed in the current of production and creativity (*Ethics and Communication*, Habermas, Abu al-Nur Hamdi Abu al-Nur Hassan). Its creativity consists of understanding and creating a kind of concord. Hence, the relation of language to communication was the chief pillar upon which Habermas built his communicative philosophy, which

he affirmed in his statement: 'We are indebted to all the pragmatic and analytic currents of linguistic theory, for the goal of mutual understanding is embedded in linguistic communication' (Ethics and Communication, Habermas, 2012, p. 151).

#### **Critique of Habermasian universalism:**

Among the criticisms that may be directed at the Habermasian universalist project is that it is utopian and challenging to realise on the ground and that the communicative action he called for is little more than a shining star in the sky of humanity, belonging to the ideal world. In addition, in fleeing from the self-centring of instrumental reason, he created a new centration, namely, European reason, for which one who examines his philosophy finds it issuing from European political history. Similarly, his call for the establishment of a universal punitive law to limit wars has as its fundamental purpose the imposition of European hegemony and domination over the rest of the world's states. Nevertheless, despite these shortcomings, it remains a human project that sought to create a socialist communicative space governed by understanding, which led many to be influenced by his philosophy, such as Axel Honneth and his philosophy of recognition and Seyla Benhabib and her advocacy of cultural pluralism.

#### **4. Habermasian universalism and Kant: critique or continuity:**

Habermas's universalism may be considered at once an extension and a surpassing of the Kantian effort, with Habermas introducing specific changes and criticisms that he deemed had prevented the realisation of Kant's universal project despite all that Kant offered, for he nourished the idea of peace with the idea of rational right: 'Kant added to the theory of right a third dimension, in addition to the rights of the state and the rights of individuals, namely, the right of the citizen of the world' (Jürgen Habermas, *La paix perpétuelle: le bicentenaire d'une idée kantienne*, tr. Rainer Rochlitz, p. 07). Kant's aspirations for universalism and his presentation of the concept of the 'right of the citizen of the world' spurred Habermas to nourish his project, especially after the failure to achieve a human union under a single ethical framework. This led him to turn towards communication as a solution for realising this union; accordingly, he proposed the concept of the ethics of discussion. This is the domain in which he attempted to combine the foundations of the liberal and the republican orders, whereby individuals have the right to exercise their freedom and express their opinions, with agreement after discussion and dialogue within a deliberative communicative framework to arrive at general universal ethics and standards: 'According to the ethics of discussion, a norm cannot claim validity unless all persons concerned agree as participants in a practical discussion about the validity of this norm' (Jürgen Habermas, *Intégration républicaine*, p. 21). Unlike Kant, Habermas, in his book *Republican Integration*, distinguishes among three democracies (republican democracy, liberal democracy, and deliberative democracy), or, as some call it, deliberative democracy, 'as an approach that has its own particularity vis-à-vis other approaches current in political philosophy' (Jürgen Habermas, p. 253), where he considers deliberative democracy to be the only system capable of guaranteeing individual freedom and recognition of the other at the same time. His question concerning communication, together with his experience of the Nazi era, led him to seek a space or energy of expression (replacing violence with argumentation). Kant's search for individual autonomy and the rational capacity to universalise the moral maxim entailed a quest to realise the freedom of individuals; however, in parallel, it neglected the human being's innate sociability and his urgent need for others, and accordingly, it became a formal ethic far from practical realisation. Hence, he developed the concept of individual freedom and made it a collective dissolution that guarantees the individual right and achieves collective perfection through public communication, in which he grounds moral norms on free discussion on the basis of the presentation of ideas and on positive, equal dialogue among interlocutors within a communicative rationality founded on consultation: 'it is a matter of integrating the largest possible number of citizens into the deliberative process'. This means that Habermas's universalism here surpasses Kantian self-enclosure in its approach to more expansive and comprehensive universalism without abandoning its rational aspirations. Habermas thus combines ethics and deliberative democracy within a public sphere on the basis of dialogue and communication to realise balanced moral universalism, as Habermas

affirms when he says: 'In the framework of the theory of communicative action, I have sought to establish a behavioural rationality whose purport is that a given person, whatever his social milieu, language, and form of life, is capable of engaging within social practices' (Jürgen Habermas, *The Ethics of Discussion and the Question of Truth*, p. 30). Habermas's experience of World Wars I and II and of the ages of modernity and the predicaments they produced, which threatened humanity, especially after East Germany's economic accession to West Germany, led him to observe the entrenchment of dependency and economic communication without a political and social communication grounded in recognition and difference that led to integration. Hence, the ethics of argumentation and communicative action provide a sufficient model for creating comprehensive, pluralistic, and democratic universalism without falling into relativism or cultural dissolution. This universalism brings together rational freedom and social communication, thereby transcending subjectivism and political domination.

#### **1.4. Communicative action in Habermas:**

Habermas began his critique of Kant primarily from Kant's conception of rational absolutism, as well as his view of universalism, which Habermas regarded as analogous to Aristotelian formal logic. In Habermas's estimation, Kant neglected the social and historical reality of individuals; his call for a universal ethics founded on the principle of 'duty for duty's sake' prevents the effective participation of subjects in determining their own destiny because universalism, in the Habermasian sense, can be realised only through mutual understanding and dialogue within a rational framework among subjects (intersubjective rationality). This affirms that genuine rationality lies not merely in using reason to achieve specific ends (as in instrumental rationality) but also in noncoercive communication among individuals aimed at achieving social consensus, as he confirms in his statement: 'Within the framework of the theory of communicative action, I have sought to establish a behavioural rationality whose purport is that a given person, whatever his social milieu, language, and form of life, is capable of engaging in communicative practices.'

Here, Habermas emphasises the acknowledgement of difference and the necessity of recognising it within the participatory sphere, insisting that difference does not mean discord but rather the strength of complementarity. He thus offers a new conception of universalism, far from being merely the imposition of abstract laws, standards, and rules and instead as a path to participation and coexistence for the sake of survival and stability. The validity of moral norms derives from their collective acceptance, which is produced through dialogue and communication free of coercion and compulsion (the rule of deliberative consensus). This shift in method, from introspection to argumentation and communication, is a necessary condition that proceeds according to the principles laid down by Habermas.

#### **2.4. The cosmopolitan state in Habermas:**

Habermas took from Kant the idea of perpetual peace but displaced it from its centring upon the self to a focus on the community through deliberation. The cosmopolitan state, whose blueprint Habermas prepared, is a magic solution for overcoming ontological dualism (the human at the centre, the human at the margins) and the optimal remedy for the crises of postcolonial societies. The criticisms directed at modernity and the dominance of instrumental thought led him to author numerous books that wove the threads of his universal project (communicative action), beginning with *Toward a Rational Society*, in which he attempted to reproduce modernity and to shift from individual instrumental reason to collective communicative reason, reaching *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, wherein he again sought to respond to the criticisms levelled at modernity many classed him as the proponent of a school renewing modernity and, finally, *the theory of communicative action* (1984), where he moved from a one-dimensional view of society to a more comprehensive one. This work constitutes a serious attempt to foster shared human dialogue and understanding (rationalised communication), a participation that believes in the human capacity to determine one's own destiny, surmounting all instrumental utilitarian injunctions that call for the exploitation of the human being (an inhuman turn). Accordingly, he began from founding deliberative identity in state-building, presenting a new concept of identity: identity is no

longer reductionist with a metaphysical bent; rather, normative identity discloses a universal character that rises above identitarian usage, elevating it to a relation of mutual implication among identities to reveal a sociological dimension termed 'deliberative identities' (al-Nasir 'Abd al-Lawi, *Identity and Communicativity in Habermas's Thought*, p. 118). Habermas rejected the futile conflict among identities and affirmed that it is the principal reason preventing the attainment of the cosmopolitan state; hence, he insisted upon argumentative identity within a public sphere in which identities meet and complement one another without infringing on any of them.

## 5. Conclusion

At the end of this analytical trajectory, we conclude that Habermas does not abolish the Kantian vision; instead, he recasts it within a socialist, argumentative framework. Instead of advocating an ethics of duty issuing from individual reason, Habermas turns towards a participatory ethics of argumentation in which the interactants themselves produce the rules and norms within the act of rational communication. This perspective cannot be regarded as merely a translation of, or a continuation of, Kant's project; rather, it represents a significant shift in interpreting the relationship between ethics, reason, and politics amid cultural, religious, and moral plurality. Although his project contained many difficulties, especially as it accompanied the profound transformations that affected the world, beginning with cultural plurality, identity conflicts, discursive instrumentality seeking hegemony, and spurious globalisation, it remains among the most prominent and significant contemporary attempts to revive universalism in its participatory, communal aspect rather than an exclusionary one, animated by recognition and grounded in rational understanding. Hence, critics have considered it a postcentric universalism whose basis is communication rather than self-centring; herein, precisely, it lies its secret.

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