

**Kenneth Baynes, *The Normative Grounds of Social Criticism: Kant, Rawls, and Habermas*, State University of New York Press, 1992.**

Of the various problems that critical social theorists attempt to tackle, two stand out. On the one hand, critical theorists perceive a need to develop a position from which they can criticize institutions that exhibit forms of oppression or other unethical behavior; and on the other hand, they want to affirm the move away from a foundational approach to philosophy. In this book, Kenneth Baynes offers an analysis of critical social philosophy that sheds light on the theories of Kant, Rawls and Habermas while adequately addressing the problems just identified. By comparing these thinkers, Baynes has provided a valuable account of the development of critical theory in the deontological tradition, and in the process he has made a convincing case for a workable approach to social criticism.

Central to the theories of Kant, Rawls and Habermas is a "normative conception of practical reason," which amounts to "a conception of ourselves as free and equal moral persons." (p. 1) Since Baynes sees all three philosophers as engaged in a constructivist approach to their theories, this concept is not offered as an infallible foundation; rather, it is based on certain presuppositions of human cognitive capacities that, to varying extents, we are justified in presuming.

By examining Kant's political theory, Baynes develops the essence of this normative concept of the self. Kant is on the right track, according to Baynes, when he acknowledges the fact that a justification for moral principles must be accomplished formally: duties are based on the notion of an agent capable of justifying universal moral law rationally while retaining his or her own conception

of the good. Furthermore, Kant's constructivist approach is also a step in the right direction, because it denies moral principles the status of external truth and places their legitimation in the necessary constructs of the human mind. However, Kant runs into trouble when he bases his practical reason on the problematic notion of "Facts of Reason," which undermines the social constitution of the self and the historical evolution of normative concepts. (p. 48)

Rawls, too, emphasizes the normative conception of social agents as free and equal moral persons. Consider his social contract theory. The terms of the contract agreed to by persons in the Original Position must be "reasonable," meaning that an agreement must be mutual and reciprocal, regarding everyone as free and equal; and the terms of the contract must be "rational," meaning that persons choose principles of justice that they perceive to be to their advantage. Unlike Kant, Rawls recognizes the ways in which socialization and material conditions shape our opportunities and freedoms. By focusing attention on the basic structure (i.e., the arrangement of major institutions which shape the society) and the need for publicity and general agreement in choosing principles of justice, Rawls allows us to acknowledge a dimension of socialization that moves beyond Kant's monological conception of the self. Additionally, Rawls's process of reflective equilibrium acknowledges the contextualization of decision making and the need to maintain an opportunity for revision and criticism within our theorizing. However, Baynes thinks that Rawls's conception of practical reason is still too monological; the process of choosing principles of justice from within the Original Position does not allow for full appreciation of the way in which norms are constituted by social interactions.

Habermas overcomes this deficiency with a theory of communicative action. According to this theory, the inherent telos of language use is to reach understanding. By raising and responding to validity claims concerning our values and beliefs about the world, we are able to maintain a common source of knowledge and values; but this process also allows us to call various aspects of our culture into question and take a critical position on them. Habermas bases his ethics on just this insight about how we shape and maintain our social world: only those norms are valid that everyone could agree to as the result of free and open discourse. These presuppositions of language use are reconstructed from what we always already do when we communicate, but the entire account is recognized as fallible and open to revision with changing human conditions and experiences.

For Baynes, this move to a discourse ethics underscores the importance of an account of social participation that the more monological approaches of Rawls and especially Kant lack. Using the insights from a discourse model in connection with Rawls's emphasis on the basic structure and primary goods, we can get a normative ground for social criticism that is sensitive to the problems of foundationalism and subject-centered reason.(p. 151) Once again, at the heart of all this is the concept of a person as a free and equal moral being; and one of the most important contributions Baynes offers is the means of using that concept to do critical theory. With it, we can examine the major institutions of society and see if they foster or suppress the freedom and equality that lies at the heart of our presuppositions about society.

While I think Baynes is right about this, I think that we can do more with the normative concept of a person than what critical theorists generally expect. We can also apply this concept in the other direction, as it were, by asking what kinds of personal perspectives on the world empower persons to be free of dogma and oppression in order to participate in a truly constructive discourse. For example, by investigating the narratives that groups and individuals use to identify themselves, we might be able to understand when social and cultural structures support the kind of critical thinking necessary for reaching understanding with others about conflicting values and beliefs. In other words, we could ask about what changes need to be made in the society that would allow for the kind of participation in public discourses that Baynes and others argue for.

**Bill Pamerleau**  
**Purdue University**