Problems of Ethical Pluralism: Arnold Gehlen’s Anthropological Ethics

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Abstract: In this article the challenge of a pluralist ethics presented by Arnold Gehlen in his book Moral und Hypermoral [Morality and Hypermorality] is examined by attempting to find out what might still be worth preserving after Jürgen Habermas’s critical objections to the text in his “Arnold Gehlen: Imitation Substantiality” (1970). To this end the basic assumptions of Gehlen’s pluralist ethics are briefly presented (1), before going on to summarizing Habermas’s central, and largely convincing, objections to this ethics (2), in order, finally, to reintroduce Gehlen’s pluralism as a critique of Habermas’s monist discourse ethics (3). The core idea is to defend the pluralistic intuition of Gehlen against his own theoretical consequences and against the monism of discourse ethics.

In his book Moral und Hypermoral [Morality and Hypermorality], Arnold Gehlen employed anthropological tools in order to develop a pluralist ethics. He took “pluralism” to mean the idea that there is a series of distinct and independent sources and imperatives of morality, all of which we must take account of in our actions if we are to prevent the human life-world from succumbing to a social pathology that could threaten its existence. The actual impulse of this pluralist ethics is therefore polemical, aimed at correcting a pathology Gehlen saw arising in the present. Standing on the threshold of our contemporary “global industrial culture,” the pluralism of our ethical orientations and the integrity of our social life-world are threatened. Gehlen was convinced that this is due to the fact that a eudaemonistic humanitarianism has pushed all other moral imperatives, especially the preservation of the state, into the normative background. Similar to Michael Walzer or Alasdair MacIntyre today, Gehlen also maintains that an anthropological emphasis on an irreducible moral pluralism serves as a critique of a fatal kind of one-sidedness. He claims that an optimistic universalism oriented towards increasing

the happiness of all human beings has thus crowded out our much more “difficult” ethical obligations to the preservation of our state institutions.

In what follows I will not be dealing with this polemical core of Gehlen’s anthropological ethics. Although his critical remarks could certainly be considered relevant in the face of the current inflationary use of the rhetoric of human rights, the true challenge of his text lies in his insistence on the irreducible pluralism of our ethical obligations. What makes his book worth reading is not the hardly tolerable way in which he scolds the intellectuals of his time, but how he uses anthropological methods to demonstrate a plurality not only of the sources of moral imperatives, but also of their claims to validity. I will examine the challenge of this pluralist ethics by attempting to find out what might still be worth preserving after Jürgen Habermas’s critical objections to Gehlen’s text. To this end I will briefly present the basic assumptions of Gehlen’s pluralist ethics (1), then go on to summarize Habermas’s central, and largely convincing, objections to this ethics (2), in order, finally, to bring Gehlen’s pluralism as a critique of Habermas’s monist discourse ethics into play (3).

1. The Basic Assumptions of Gehlen’s Pluralist Ethics

In what follows I define morality to be that rather peculiar but nevertheless historically powerful achievement through which human beings seek to preserve the integrity of their social life-world by protecting each other from physical and psychical harm. Moral norms also constitute an element of such precautionary measures and are meant to ensure that the common life-world preserve its capacity for material reproduction. In short, morality represents the epitome of all moral precepts through which entities lacking in instinct but gifted with speech and reason convey to each other their willingness to cooperate. In the form of commands or, in psychological terms, the demands of our conscience, morality comprises both proscriptions and dictates, i.e., obligations to do or not do certain deeds. Gehlen’s own ethical approach is not so distant from these conceptual determinations. In an essay entitled “Der Pluralismus in der Ethik” [Pluralism in Ethics], Gehlen states that the “social regulations” he is dealing with constitute “a set of attitudes and inhibitions


that bear a notable imperative quality,” which “doubtlessly” regulate “the basic outlines of a society’s cohesion.” The thesis he thereby seeks to justify is that there are a number of such moral imperatives in the human life-world that often prove incompatible. The institution of morality can therefore give rise to “conflicts and even genuine antinorms that can arise in the same soul.”

Gehlen’s proof for this provocative thesis, in which he claims the existence not of an irreconcilable pluralism of human values, as is the case with Isaiah Berlin, but of a conflictual pluralism of human norms, is found in the middle section of his book *Morality and Hypermorality.* Here he demonstrates that there are four moral behavioral imperatives that oppose each other in the human life-world – both in terms of their origins and their practical validity. Unfortunately, this part of the book, which is relatively free of polemics, is not as clear and unambiguous as we might hope. Not only is the relationship between various systems of norms wholly opaque – i.e., it is not clear whether these systems can be integrated or placed into a hierarchy – but it is also unclear whether and how they have crossed the threshold from merely primitive dispositions to permanent physical and rational validity. In other words, we are ultimately left in the dark as to the relationship between genesis and validity – a problem of which Gehlen should be more aware given his earlier studies of Kant, Fichte and Hegel. Gehlen leaves these important questions unanswered by merely counting off various imperatives that are not so much moral as they are socio-biological. However, he does distinguish between the character of these imperatives according to how they are anchored in our human nature or in our life-world – either as the remains of instincts, as social dispositions, or merely as physical survival instincts. On the whole Gehlen is convinced that he can distinguish genetically between four distinctly anchored behavioral imperatives:

a) An ethos of reciprocity that expresses itself as a social disposition.

b) A series of instinct-like, quasi-automatic behavioral regulations – from the maternal instinct and sympathy to the pursuit of happiness. Gehlen uses the poorly chosen term “physiological virtues” to describe these regulations.
c) A tribal ethic, in the first instance attached to the family, which can be expanded and augmented by way of intellectual abstractions to encompass the “humanitarianism” of moral universalism.\(^{11}\)

d) Finally, the institutional ethos that ensures as an imperative of survival a moral obligation to the preservation of the state.\(^ {12}\)

On the basis of this typology encompassing four different and yet equally valid behavioral imperatives, Gehlen then proposes a developmental-historical thesis: due to intellectual amplifications and risky abstractions, the primitive drive to hedonism has been conjoined with a kind of universalism to form a “eudaemonian humanitarianism.” By crowding out all other systems of norms, all other obligations and duties have come to be neglected. Of course, what has actually become of all these behavioral imperatives in the course of historical development is a question that Gehlen leaves open. Not only does he ignore the social disposition to reciprocity in his developmental-historical account, but it remains unclear how the autonomization of hedonistic humanitarianism has affected impulses to care and sympathy. Gehlen makes his perspective on the contemporary moral situation so one-sided that only two systems of norms are left over from the original ethical pluralism: the bloated universalism of welfare for all is opposed to neglected duties to the state. These inconsistencies that plague the developmental-historical sketch in which Gehlen sacrifices his fruitful pluralist approach to a diagnosis of the times made it easy for Habermas to criticize his account. Because this account betrays Gehlen’s own approach in the course of his argumentation, Habermas could accuse the book of fundamentally failing to characterize the peculiar development of moral consciousness appropriately. I would like, first of all, to summarize briefly Habermas’s objections before returning to the question of whether Gehlen’s primitive and pluralist approach is stronger than what is conveyed by his developmental-historical thesis.

2. Habermas’s Objections to Gehlen’s Ethics

Habermas, then, had an easy time criticizing Gehlen’s anthropological ethics, because of Gehlen’s sacrificing his pluralist approach to a polemic impulse. After originally naming four moral compulsions of human nature, he ultimately leaves us with an abstract, non-binding obligation to universal hedonism and a forgotten obligation to preserve the state – of which we must there-

\(^{11}\) Ibid., chap. 6.
\(^{12}\) Ibid., chaps. 7, 8.
fore be repeatedly reminded. Habermas puts forth a series of objections to this notion, which in turn serve to justify the monist approach of his own discourse ethics. First he corrects a rather implausible opposition entailed by Gehlen’s typological distinction between four behavioral imperatives. The tribal ethic – i.e., the obligation to show solidarity with all the members of one’s family, group or tribal organization – is not a distinct category opposed to the state ethic; rather, it has a moral “external” side that regulates relationships with other groups. Every internal morality is paired with an external morality, such that obligations to other group members cannot simply be conceived of as a separate class of obligation opposed to behavioral imperatives that concern our relationship to people outside the group. This objection, which I take to be persuasive, leads Habermas to produce a further developmental-historical argument, which takes him a decisive step further in the direction of his own approach: if every ethnocentric group solidarity, which Gehlen terms a “tribal ethos,” is associated with a morality of external relationships, then the tribal ethos and the state ethic represent two sides of two different stages of the development of moral consciousness. For Habermas, the tribal ethos merely constitutes the internal side of a more primitive kind of small-group morality, which always entails an external moral dimension, while the state ethic represents on a higher level only the external side of a more abstract, politically organized, large-group morality, likewise possessing wide-meshed internal obligations to solidarity. Habermas thus states that “the two competing systems of values indicate world-historical stages of moral consciousness, which are marked by the differentiation of a pacifist internal aspect and a polemical external aspect.”

This developmental-historical argument, which I also regard as cogent, provides Habermas with a tool for shifting Gehlen’s pluralist typology from synchrony to diachrony, that is, from a shared origin to a historical progression. The different systems of norms that Gehlen conceives as classes of inherent anthropological moral obligations are thus no longer to be regarded as natural human drives, but rather as steps in the development of our gradually decentering moral consciousness. At this decisive point in his argumentation, Habermas makes skillful use of an inherently human behavioral imperative – distinct from those of Gehlen – in order to make it into a reflexive pace-maker for such a moral-historical decentering. He concedes Gehlen but one of his four original categories of obligation, the ethos of reciprocity, adapting it to the reciprocity conditions of spoken language in order to make it into a motor for the step-by-step expansion of an initial small-group morality.

14 Ibid., p. 112; [p. 116].
The result of this extremely skillful operation is that the only remainder of Gehlen’s moral constants is the human disposition to reciprocity. This disposition, which for Habermas is the core of all morality, blazes a trail for an ever more abstract determination of moral obligations via a reciprocal presupposition of freedom and the capacity to reason; the trail starts with a decoupling from small-group morality and ends with a wholly formal definition of moral obligations. Gehlen’s other behavioral imperatives line up like pearls on a vertical string running up the history of the human species, and thus merely constitute past stages in the establishment of a universalist ethics of communication. It thus seems that Habermas has managed to take Gehlen’s pluralist anthropological ethics and make it – almost in the form of imminent criticism – into the point of departure for his own monist discourse ethics. He summarizes: “The ethos of reciprocity, which is, as it were, hidden within the fundamental symmetries of possible speech situations, is (if one wishes to pursue the logic of the development of moral consciousness sketched above) the unique root of ethics in general.” According to this kind of ethics in which the ethos of reciprocity has become reflexive, moral obligations result solely from norms of action that have proven themselves to be universally justifiable in “discourse, that is, through a public process of formation of will that is bound to the principle of unrestricted communication and consensus free from domination.” Of course we might ask whether this kind of ethics might not ultimately underestimate the pluralism inherent in the variety of the behavioral imperatives that might not be biologically given, but are certainly socio-culturally anchored.

3. Gehlen’s Pluralism as a Critique of Habermas’s Monist Discourse Ethics

With his pluralist ethics Gehlen pursues two different aims that he fails to keep separated. On the one hand, his impulse is to prove that the moral consciousness of our “global industrial culture” has neglected and even eliminated all those obligations that derive from the tribal legacy of an institutional ethos. I believe that Habermas offers us a viable alternative to this approach by making it clear that civil obligations and responsibilities are not foreign to modern universalism. On the other hand, Gehlen aims to thematize what remains a significant and urgent experience even for participants in rational discourses, namely that our moral considerations are constantly confronted with irreconcilable demands or obligations, which betray an unsolvable plurality of deep-

15 Ibid., p. 117; [p. 120].
16 Ibid., p. 117; [p. 119].
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seated moral imperatives. It is to this sense of pluralism, this allusion to moral conflicts that arise from incompatible obligations, that Habermas’s objections fail to do justice. Habermas must face the question of whether all our obligations really arise organically from consensually agreed-upon norms of action, or whether they always penetrate into this discourse from the outside. Does the ethical pluralism that Gehlen has in mind silently dissolve in the coercion-free compulsion of persuasive arguments, or does it not stubbornly remain in the form of an external limit on discourse, as an imperative of our life-world?

The question this raises can be localized as an almost technical problem within the framework of discourse ethics. If we as isolated individuals or as members of a group run into a moral conflict, it might indeed be a rational demand of the reciprocity embedded in our way of life to search for amicable solutions in the form of internal dialogue or practical discourse among those affected. In such merely imagined or actually occurring conversations, we will have to attempt to allow each person affected to convey his or her beliefs in order to find a norm of action to which all could agree. And it might also be appropriate to check whether a solution arrived at in this manner could have found the agreement not only of those involved in the conflict, but of all human beings.

At the same time another, external social power penetrates into this rational line of argumentation, one upon which moral considerations are bound to break. After all, we will have to make an antecedent judgment on controversial norms according to the relevant kind of social relationship that we entertain with others on a regular basis. Depending on the type of social bond or emotional intensity in play, wholly distinct forms of obligation can result from these relationships, which cannot simply be rationally dissolved in discourse. Instead they give structure and limits to this discourse by acting as aspects with different characters of obligation: e.g., the obligation of care in love relationships, the obligation to solidarity within small groups, or the obligation to be loyal to one’s political community. We are thus dealing with categories of obligation in which a kind of moral pluralism asserts itself in every form of practical discourse. The power of this pluralism is therefore restricted at a sensitive point; it is preceded by a series of contexts of moral obligation that cannot so easily be questioned in discourse, because they act as stable aspects of agreement on norms of action. Such conditions arise from the sociocultural conditions under which our social life-world is maintained. As

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long as this world consists in a graded network of distinct forms of relationships, which are indispensable on the whole for our well-being, any and all forms of ethics will possess a pluralistic character. Perhaps we could therefore say that the universalism of our practices of moral justification must not lead us to ignore the material pluralism of our antecedent horizons of obligation.

Unlike Gehlen, I do not regard these socio-regulative imperatives as derivatives of our biological nature; rather, we have to conceive of the different obligations that result from the various forms of our social relationships as a sociocultural inheritance of accumulated experiences we have had with the preservation and cultivation of such relationships. Without the moral obligations built into these relationships in the form of mutual expectations, more demanding social forms such as friendship, love, solidarity or political cohesion could not survive. Therefore, the rational power of discourse is externally limited by the social pluralism of our form of life. In the form of antecedent obligations that cannot be so easily shaken by persuasive arguments, the power of the plurality of our forms of relationships penetrates our practical reason and constantly creates conflicts and antinomies that, as Gehlen states, can “reach into the individual’s soul.”

(Translated from the German by Joseph Ganahl)

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