
The Necessity of a *Telos*: Karl-Otto Apel's and Wolfgang Huber's Ethics of Responsibility

Scott Kline

Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University

It has become popular these days to talk about responsibility. In many instances the discourse concerns how today's social institutions are facing novel challenges brought on by unprecedented technological innovation and a new sense that people, especially in the West, are living in a culturally diverse world. Many North Americans regard technological advancement and multiculturalism as positive products of modernity or postmodernity. However, there are significant negative consequences that are beginning to surface as we move into a technological and global age. Critics point to an alarming number of environmental problems, the difficulties associated with relentless growth in world population, and a world economy where the disparity between rich and poor continues to grow more acute.

Recently progress has been made in North America to educate, and alarm, the masses of current and impending dangers associated with unrestrained and irresponsible behavior. In the face of looming global crises many are demanding responsible intervention on the part of governments, industries, churches, and other social institutions to avert potential catastrophes. In short, there is a call to responsible moral action, an ethics of responsibility.

In this article I examine two contemporary attempts at an ethics of responsibility. First I look to Karl-Otto Apel, professor of philosophy at the University of Frankfurt, who attempts to incorporate the current tendency toward concrete moral responsibility (*Verantwortung*) within the framework of a Kantian-influenced discourse ethics (*Diskursethik*). I then turn to Wolfgang Huber, professor of theological ethics at the University

of Heidelberg and currently the Lutheran Bishop of Berlin-Brandenburg, who attempts to develop a theological ethics of responsibility that draws on the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and H. Richard Niebuhr. Because Apel and Huber represent radically different approaches and traditions—Apel the Kantian tradition, Huber the Aristotelian—one may be inclined to suggest before examining these two positions that any comparison is futile. However, it is my contention that, despite their obvious differences, Apel and Huber have more in common than one might expect at first. This is due in large part to certain interpretive stances that both men share, namely, that the challenges of this technological age demand that humans act responsibly.

On account of the limits of space I have to impose a limited, semi-arbitrary interpretive framework onto the arguments of Apel and Huber that focuses on the following categories: the human condition; the starting point of ethics; and the notion of responsibility. I have selected these categories to highlight significant points that are crucial to both perspectives. Using this framework, I begin by reconstructing independent arguments of Apel and Huber. I then highlight significant points of contact between both approaches. Finally I argue that both understandings of responsibility require that a *telos* be posited to deem moral decisions responsible.

Apel and Discourse Ethics as an Ethics of Responsibility

Confronting a postmodern world. Following Hans Jonas's (1978) appraisal of the human condition, Karl-Otto Apel (1988, 179–216) asserts that for the first time in history human beings are faced with problems that affect all of humanity. Such problems, Apel (1993, 505) contends, call for a "common, universally valid foundation of an ethics of justice, solidarity, and coresponsibility." The problem, however, is that many contemporary philosophers have shown that liberalism alone cannot provide the basis for solidarity and coresponsibility. In fact any attempt to bring distinct communities together in any sort of consensus is regarded as dubious. Apel concludes that contemporary ethics is stuck in a quagmire somewhere between Kant and Hobbes. Since contemporary ethics has been to a large degree reticent in the face of serious concrete global problems, the unrestrained actions of humanity continue on an unchartered course with few ethical boundaries. Seeing the real dangers and catastrophes associated with the current situation of contemporary ethics, Apel concludes that now is the time for a concrete ethics.

Apel contends that there are three major difficulties that challenge moral reflection in today's world. First, there is the issue of technological side effects. It is almost impossible in today's technological society to

know how the results of an action may affect another. The results of actions transcend everyday encounters (Apel 1993, 497–501; 1988, 198–216). For example it has become easier for North Americans to envision what the long-term results of stockpiling toxic waste near rivers may be, since they have some experience with the effects; but they have yet to encounter any disastrous effects as a result of the human genome project. The public simply has not been made aware of the long-term global effects—the results are literally inconceivable. Second, there is a need for scientific knowledge when making morally relevant decisions. Decision makers need experts to predict projected results. In reaction to Kant, who contends that one can know what one ought to do by listening to one's inner voice or will, Apel (1993, 499) suggests that doctors, lawyers, scientists, and other specialists have become this voice. Third, there is currently a collective nature concerning “technologized” actions. Indeed, it is not the results of one individual that cause the most harm to others; it is actions that are performed by a larger number of people. It is entirely possible that these actions are deemed “fair” by an individual or small group. The harsh reality, though, is that the results are often entirely unjust. That is not to say that the results are intentionally unjust, at least not always. Apel maintains (*pace* Kant) that individuals, small groups, and even individual communities are not the ideal loci for just ethical resolutions. The scope of responsibility must be broadened from “individual” to “corporate” responsibility so as to include multiple groups, diverse societies, other countries, and even future generations (502–6).

Reacting to these contemporary challenges, Apel (1993, 504) calls for a historically situated ethics of responsibility, especially political responsibility, within the framework of a communicative ethics that addresses the problems of a reality that is in many ways already unjust.¹ The question, then, is how can this be accomplished? Attempting to propose an alternative to philosophers like Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard, who create pseudo-problems by “playing off universalism of fundamental norms and pluralism of life forms against each other,” Apel offers a solution in the form of a “transcendental-pragmatic foundation of discourse ethics” (510).

The original situation of arguing. For Apel the starting point of an ethics that comes from a strictly philosophical reflection is the “original situation of arguing,” that is, *Diskurs*. Playing on John Rawls's well-known Kantian-influenced concept of the “original position,” Apel suggests that such a “situation” is analogous to the initiation of the transcendental-pragmatic approach to ethics. By saying “arguing,” Apel (1993, 507) proposes that the discourse “necessarily includes certain features that transcend the transcendental or methodical solipsism of the classical

philosophy of consciousness....” With the inclusion of these additional features, Apel (1981), turning to Charles Sanders Peirce’s concept of the community of interpreters, contends that it is possible to provide an ultimate foundation (*Letztbegründung*) for ethics.² For if one reflects on one’s arguing, one will find oneself a working member of a communication community, which is a real communication community, and, at the same time, a hypothetical member of an indefinite, supposed, counterfactual ideal communication community.

Apel presupposes two communication communities because of a dualistic nature he sees in human existence. As empirical beings we use a certain language and belong to a particular, real communication community. But by employing arguments with cross-communal, even universal validity claims, we have to transcend every particular community and predict the decisions of a supposed ideal community. Moreover individuals in the real community must act toward other members as though they were already members of the ideal community. Apel further makes his case for a transcendental-pragmatic foundation based on the dualistic existence of humanity by addressing critics who come from communal-hermeneutical perspectives. He agrees, on the one hand, with those who follow the linguistic-hermeneutic-pragmatic turn concerning an individual belonging to a particular community and his or her dependence on a determined preunderstanding of the world, including all norms and values. And yet Apel asserts that there is at least one noncontingent presupposition (*a priori*) that appears in cross-communal discourse and is incorporated into the counterfactual ideal communication community. This presupposition, which Apel (1980, 136–79) identifies as the *a priori* of the communication community, enables different and distinct communities to work toward a consensus. For Apel, then, the fact that individuals cross communal boundaries in a situation of arguing (*Diskurs*) demonstrates that there is a post-metaphysical (transcendental) norm or universal that functions as a meta-institution, a meta-norm, serving as the foundation for responsible ethical behavior. In sum, this nonmaterial meta-norm legitimates a material norm by seeking a consensus of all affected people by an argumentative mediation of their interests.

Co-responsibility and concrete ethics. Once communication communities are constituted and transcendental norms are discovered in the original situation of arguing, there must be a regulatory condition, Apel contends, which makes concrete an otherwise procedural method of ethics. This regulatory condition is the concept of co-responsibility (*Mitverantwortung*), which derives from a dialectic between two communication communities, the real and the ideal.

Briefly stated, Apel’s insistence on the inclusion of all indefinite dia-

logue partners from the ideal communication community in the real communication community creates an intrinsic regulatory characteristic. That is, because decisions and actions made by the real communication community must take into account an indefinite number of dialogue partners, including their unique histories and traditions, the point of view of the real communication community is primarily outward-looking, even though there are some forms of ethos that are inextricably tied to a specific culture or people (Apel 1990, 14; 1993, 501). Apel clearly warns, however, that working toward a consensus does not allow, nor imply, that one community unilaterally place its understanding of the good life over against others'. Rather, the consensus must be meted out in the situation of arguing, where all, even the supposed members of the ideal communication community, have equal rights and equal moral authority; that is, communicative respect. Consequently the real communication community works toward an ethical consensus based on the understanding that ethics must be global and intersubjectively valid for the coresponsible cooperation of all forms of life and culture. According to Apel, then, only a perspective that includes coresponsibility can meet the novel challenges of today's society, because current problems like pollution are not the result of a particular individual's actions, nor can a particular individual's actions solve these problems. Human beings must realize that they are responsible not only to their specific communities, but also to communities around the globe and future communities. For Apel responsible moral action will come about only when we work together in solidarity, cooperatively responsible for our decisions.

Still, this conceptual understanding of coresponsibility is not made concrete until it becomes a part of the real decision-making process. Apel proposes that argumentative discourse become a part of the political system, or any institutional system for that matter; but primarily and most importantly it must become a part of the international-political system. Although this process may take various forms, Apel (1993, 511–12) argues that the most realistic form is a worldwide network of formal or informal dialogues, conferences, commissions, and boards primarily in economical, cultural, and educational politics. Through continued discourse, agreements (i.e., consensus) will be reached and solutions to current crises discovered.

Huber and Theological Ethics as an Ethics of Responsibility

Humans as relational and responsible beings. Wolfgang Huber is, in general, a cultural pessimist, largely because he is keenly aware of what his parents' generation did in Hitler's Germany. In many ways Huber sees Nazi Germany as the product of an ideology that was formulated by a

people who thought themselves to be racially, culturally, and intellectually superior to others. Huber judges that many of the same characteristics found in Nazi ideology may be detected in present (post)modern technological culture. Attempts to create a more efficient society with the "aid" of computer technology and attempts to construct a better physical body through the use of modern drugs such as steroids ultimately degrade the dignity of humankind (Huber 1993a). Consequently humanity finds itself in a state of general disenfranchisement. Huber contends that society must rethink the manner in which humans interact with each other in a world that has to a large extent become dependent on machines.

In turn, Huber (1993b, 580) contends that any theological ethics of responsibility must rely on a "relational" rather than "substantialist" anthropology. The driving force behind a substantialist anthropology is the understanding of humans as rational beings, an anthropological understanding that tends to dominate liberal theories of justice. A relational anthropology, on the other hand, has at its core an understanding of humans as responsive and consequently responsible beings. Huber, rejecting a purely substantialist anthropology, proposes a relational anthropology based on a combination of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's and H. Richard Niebuhr's understandings of the human as responder. Bonhoeffer (1965, 224–62) grounds his anthropology on the (christological) idea that humanity is responsible to both God and other humans. Niebuhr (1978, 56) founds his on the basis of the human response to others, for example, man-the-maker, man-the-citizen, and man-the-answerer. Under the influence of both Bonhoeffer and Niebuhr, Huber holds that humans are agents who respond to others within a community. The result of a relational anthropology within an ethics of responsibility, then, might be summarized best by the Golden-Rule imperative: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

An eschatological-teleological approach to ethics. Huber, following Franklin I. Gamwell (1990), understands "teleological" as ethical reflection that intends to maximize some characteristic of existence.³ This tenet is fundamental to any teleological ethics. In theological ethics, however, there is the added concept of the *eschaton*, which is quite similar to *telos*. Huber distinguishes between these two concepts based on time and place. An eschatological perspective involves the end of history and the fullness of time, in which every single event receives definite meaning in light of all other single events. Huber (1993, 586–7) states that "[t]he realization of this end of history, in which every single human action receives its definite meaning in light of all other single events, cannot itself be the *telos* of human actions themselves. It is solely the result of the

divine activity.” Consequently the eschatological *telos* is divine. In contrast to the *eschaton*, all *tele* have a positive human relation and are marked by a relative and finite character; thus all human knowledge about *tele* is provisional and fallible. This view leads Huber to suggest that there is a plurality of *tele*, which is a potential problem for ethics, especially from a universalist perspective. He attempts to resolve the issue by appealing to the concept of correspondence, which he borrows from Bonhoeffer (1965, 224–62). It is Huber’s position (1993, 587) that there is a “correspondence between the *eschaton* and those *tele*, in the correspondence between the divine promise for nature and history and the relative and provisional ‘parables’ of this promise, which humans create in their historical activity.” The correspondence between humanity’s actions and ultimate ends implies the Christian idea of the Last Judgment. For Huber, then, a theological ethics of responsibility is an ethics of correspondence.

As a result, principles are flexible. They are flexible because an ethics of responsibility attempts to address every type of specific action. This in direct contrast to a procedurally strict, liberal ethics of principles, which can only address moral actions generally, never specifically. In the modern world, which has been transformed by technology to mean literally the “entire world,” there is a plurality of cultures that have different religious and ethical orientations. A strict ethics of principles may have nothing to say to a culture outside its particular, often Western context. An ethics of responsibility, in contrast, attempts to incorporate these cultural differences. Thus an ethics of responsibility continually asks the question: In what way do my principles relate to others’ principles? Raising this question heightens an individual’s awareness of others’ freedoms of conscience and practice. Applying the ethics of responsibility’s concept of reflexive principles to the Golden Rule, Huber (1993, 589) argues that a new imperative can be formulated: “Respect the principles of others as much as you want others to respect your own.” He suggests that this modified Golden Rule has two implications: (1) the dignity of humans is preserved without reference to their deeds or offset by their misdeeds; (2) humans will have to communicate in order to evaluate their convictions about truth questions.

Responsibility in ethical decision making. An ethics of responsibility also approaches teleological claims from a negative perspective, for an ethics of responsibility might know which state of affairs may have to be avoided more definitely than those that may have to be realized—this is referred to by Jonas (1984, 26–7, 202–3) as a “heuristic of fear.”

With the inclusion of the negative, an ethics of responsibility is comprehensive and forward looking, exposing the community to a variety of hopes and fears. Huber (1993, 587) suggests that the imperative of such

a position might be formulated as follows:

So act that the consequence of your actions remain compatible with the future existence and dignity of human as well as nonhuman life in the biosphere.

Negatively: Avoid actions that are incompatible with the future existence and the dignity of human as well as nonhuman life in the biosphere.

Modest Variant: Diminish those actions by which you use your freedom at the expense of the same freedom of future generations and minimize all actions of violence against nonhuman nature.

With this final imperative Huber wants to show that humanity has the duty, the responsibility, to self-limitation with respect to the dignity of nonhuman and human nature. From this perspective one of the first virtues of the responsible life is self-limitation that arises from freedom (Huber 1992).

Because humans must impose boundaries on themselves, Huber (1990, 143) suggests that responsible moral action has two basic meanings, "responsibility to" and "responsibility for." The former has its origin in law; it carries the connotation that one is responsible to a judge or statute. Theological ethics makes use of the term when speaking of the eschatological judgment (Huber 1993, 583). A theological ethics of responsibility also embraces the view that the divine judge will give meaning to all prior actions at the final judgment. Before the final judgment, the justification of actions is temporary as well as fallible. Humanity does not have knowledge about ultimate justification. There is, however, a provisional guideline that Christian theology expresses. Huber asserts that this guideline is founded on the criterion that the weak in the world are to be preferred. With the acceptance of the liberation theme of a preferential option for the poor, the weak, and the marginalized, the powerful must gain power over their power. Thus "responsibility to" has two meanings: (1) individuals are responsible in regard to divine judgment (emphasis on the future); (2) individuals are responsible to themselves by limiting their power and to others by preferring the weak (emphasis on the present).

"Responsibility for" consists of two closely related distinctions: "responsibility for" as care (*Fürsorge*), provided by parents, teachers, or politicians, and "responsibility for" as prospective care (*Vorsorge*), which includes care for nature, nonhumans, and culture (Huber 1990, 146–9). These distinctions, it is argued, allow for a context of ever-changing communities. Consequently Huber's ethics is neither an ethics of princi-

ples (*Prinzipienethik*) nor an ethics of convictions (*Gesinnungsethik*); it is a contextual ethics of responsibility (*Verantwortungsethik*) that evaluates every action in light of responsibility “to” and “for” (138, 156–7). Huber rejects a strict ethics of principles based on one’s own convictions (Kant), because an ethics of convictions focuses solely on the *intentions* of an individual’s and a community’s actions. An ethics of responsibility concentrates on the *results* of an individual’s actions, for intentions may be just but their results may be rather unjust. Responsible choices, then, can be made only through an interdisciplinary approach, one that includes as much information as possible.

Responsibility in Moral Theory

Having briefly sketched Apel’s and Huber’s ethics of responsibility, I would now like to examine more carefully the role that responsibility plays in their respective ethics. By probing into the way responsibility functions within each approach, I wish to propose the following thesis: the concept of responsibility in these two approaches to ethics requires a *telos*. I will begin by demonstrating that, despite their different approaches, the notion of responsibility unites Apel and Huber in regard to the basic structure of a concrete ethics of responsibility. Using the three broad interpretive categories outlined above, I intend to show that within each of these categories there are important similarities or points of contact in Apel and Huber.

The human condition. Both Apel and Huber have the same interpretation of the human condition. Both suggest that technology has in many ways created a “malaise of modernity,” to use Charles Taylor’s (1987) expression.⁴ For Apel, humans experience this malaise when confronting the incredibly complex and overwhelming problems facing the world. Because the world, or more specifically the Western world, has become so complex, everyday tasks raise perplexing ethical questions. Problems multiply when these everyday tasks are carried out around the globe. The result is that people sense that solutions to these ethical problems are beyond their control; the world seems to be utterly chaotic. For Huber, technology has displaced human relationships. Because machines have become so advanced, human interaction, actual face-to-face intercourse, has become almost an oddity in some areas of society. Both Apel and Huber agree that technology and modernization have raised novel challenges, challenges that require a new approach to ethics.

Both argue that a new approach to ethics must include a rethinking of the way humans define other humans. Apel and Huber suggest that what is needed today is a “relational” anthropology, not a so-called “substantialist” (liberal) one. For Huber, drawing on Bonhoeffer and Niebuhr,

such a conception is common in theological ethics, based primarily on the biblical legacy of the *Sanctorum Communio*. For Apel, however, who considers himself to be a neo-Kantian, arguing for a “relational” anthropology is truly a radical departure from Kant’s emphasis on one’s own rationality.⁵ This departure has some interesting consequences for so-called Kantian ethics. The emphasis shifts from a rational understanding of humans, which often leads to a procedural, deontological ethics of principles, to an understanding that requires humans to remain in continuing moral conversation. This shift also allows Apel to address specific concrete problems, for if one is in constant moral conversation with diverse communities, varied traditions, injustices, acts of violence, and so on, other dilemmas will inevitably follow in discourse. Apel insists that an intersubjective ethics can rectify the subjectivistic slant of Kant’s categorical imperative and justify a material norm similar to Kant’s second formulation of the categorical imperative: so act as to treat humanity, whether in one’s own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end and never as means only. Furthermore, like Huber, who suggests that humans are responsive and thus responsible beings, Apel also draws out of this relational anthropology the concept of responsibility, claiming that current injustices can only be addressed by an intersubjective, historically situated ethics of responsibility.

We can see, then, four points of contact in the ethics of Apel and Huber: (1) people living in today’s technological age have become alienated, experiencing a malaise; (2) there is a need for a new ethical approach, one that addresses concrete problems; (3) this new ethical approach must rely on a relational rather than substantialist or rationalist anthropology; and, most importantly for my argument, (4) the notion of responsibility derives from the contention that humans are primarily relational beings, existing within communities.

The starting point of ethics. Turning now to the general starting point of ethics, one can see that Apel and Huber come from two opposing ethical approaches. Apel, indebted to Kant and provoked by the perceived relativism of postmodern thinkers, argues that a universally valid and rational foundation for ethics is a modern necessity. The universal and rational foundation derives from the original situation of arguing, a situation in which one recognizes oneself in both a real communication community and an ideal communication community. Huber, in comparison, develops an ethics based on a teleological starting point derived from within a pluralistic community. There is the added theological-ethical notion of the *eschaton* or the divine *telos* that judges every human action. But are these approaches so different?

I submit that these two approaches, while they may differ in regard

to procedure, are quite compatible when it comes to their function. I would like to suggest two primary examples that demonstrate their point of contact: (1) Apel's real communication community, as well as the situation of arguing, and Huber's pluralistic community; (2) Apel's ideal communication community and Huber's *eschaton*.

First, Apel's real communication community is the actual or real situation in which people argue. It is the logical (not chronological) extension of the assertion that the starting point of ethics is the situation of arguing. If discourse is to occur, then there must be a community, whether large or small, that listens and responds. Huber's claim that ethics begins in a pluralistic community stretches Apel's concept of community. For Huber, because the world has become a so-called global village, people are now entering into conversations with diverse communities and traditions. The once-clear line between the localized communication community (with its distinct boundaries, traditions, and histories) and other global communities has been blurred. This blurring effect encourages theological ethics to insist that there are a plurality of *tele*, all of which are in some way developed out of various traditions, but are nevertheless a part of the pluralistic community. It is questionable whether Apel would go as far as Huber in suggesting that the real communication community (Huber does not use this term) would extend to the global community. But I would argue that Apel must admit that a real communication community includes a global community. If the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations were to enter into argument on the floor of the UN, he would be speaking to the world and simultaneously (with the help of translators) to the real communication community. There is nothing in Apel's argument that excludes this possibility. In fact his argument encourages it, especially since the so-called *a priori* of the communication community has already been constituted prior to the point of arguing. If I am correct in suggesting that Apel's real communication community is composed of people from multiple cultures, then Apel's real communication community and Huber's pluralistic community serve virtually the same function. That is, they ground ethical decision making in the context of a pluralistic, real world.

Second, Apel's ideal communication community functions as a supposed, counterfactual community that transcends every particular community. It is also, as Gamwell (1990, 127–53) argues, a hermeneutical or transcendental *telos*, in that the *telos* is, in theory, not a metaphysical *a priori*. At this level one may be tempted to suggest that Apel's method is ultimately teleological (Habermas 1993, 85–6) and thus similar to Huber's teleological ethics. Huber rejects this assessment. He argues that the ideal communication community, as formulated by Apel, is but “a

regulative idea," after which the real communication community may be modeled. Huber further rejects Apel's (1979, 338) new, seemingly teleological, categorical imperative as "realizing in the long run the ideal communication community within the real communication community." Huber (1993, 586) opts instead for the following reformulation of Apel's imperative: "So act as if the real communication community becomes the place of realizing the ideal communication community." What Huber seeks to reject is Apel's supposed dualistic understanding of reality, based as it is on the Kantian framework that includes concepts of the noumenal and the phenomenal world. Yet it is questionable whether such a dualism is at work in Apel's system, especially if one takes seriously Apel's new categorical imperative.

Huber's critique of Apel's apparent dualism could also be used against his own argument, for it comes astonishingly close to Apel's. The similarity is seen when examining Huber's "regulatory principle," the *eschaton*. The addition of the *eschaton*, I propose, serves the same basic function as Apel's ideal communication community. Both the *eschaton* and the ideal communication community are transcendental. Both regulate moral actions based on the assumption that a single material *telos* alone is too authoritarian, coercive, and/or arbitrary. Both the transcendental *eschaton* and the ideal communication community are critical devices by which real, concrete actions are continually judged.

For Huber, ethics is a constant dialectic or, to use his term, a correspondence between teleologically oriented actions and the transcendent *eschaton* where every human action is judged. The *eschaton*, however, cannot be a *telos*, since the *eschaton* is divine, transcending human action. Simply put, a *telos* is a prospective this-worldly reality. The *eschaton*, though potentially real, exists beyond human existence as we know it. For Apel, decisions made in the real communication community must always take into consideration various other competing interests found in the ideal communication community. There is then, for Apel and Huber, a continual back-and-forth process between the real and the transcendent. This continual back-and-forth process, both argue, will hopefully lead to just, responsible ethical decisions.

The notion of responsibility. Apel and Huber argue that the notion of responsibility results from a constant play between the material realities of the real community and the transcendental claims of the ideal communication community (Apel) and the *eschaton* (Huber). However, when speaking of responsibility, Apel and Huber seem to be speaking of two different concepts. Apel speaks of coresponsibility. The problems that face humanity today, Apel asserts, go beyond the individual. This position, however, does not mean that individuals may act irresponsibly. On

many occasions when Apel speaks of the communication community, he does so by placing an individual within the community of argumentation, thus implying that there is individual responsibility. Huber speaks only of responsibility, but at times infers that once individuals become educated about the problems caused by a collection of individual actions, groups may then naturally form and thereby take on corporate responsibility and duties.⁶

But what does it mean to act responsibly or to be responsible? And in attempting to define responsibility, what impact might this have on Apel's and Huber's ethics? As I noted earlier, responsibility has two meanings for Huber: responsibility "to" and "for." Since Huber's approach to an ethics of responsibility is clearly teleological, responsibility, in the most general of terms, means: humans are responsible inasmuch as they work toward a *telos*, whatever that may be. This understanding of responsibility, however, does not simply mean that one community pits its *telos* against that of another, for Huber's approach to ethics necessitates that a plurality of *tele* be incorporated into the decision-making process. If I am correct, Huber implies that a *via negativa* approach—an approach that works toward agreements concerning actions and results that should be avoided—keeps communities in dialogue, because agreements concerning undesirables are easier to reach than agreements concerning desirables.

In contrast to Huber's specifically teleological approach to ethics, the meaning of responsibility and its impact on Apel's approach is somewhat more complex. Apel is careful not to define a specific responsible action. Doing so would entail giving a *telos* a specific meaning, precisely what Apel wants to avoid. If a responsible action in Apel's approach can be defined at all, it would be put in the abstract terms of his categorical imperative: "Act so as to realize in the long run the ideal communication community within the real communication community" (Apel 1979, 338).

This definition raises at least two important and related issues. First, Apel's reliance on the position of discourse blurs any line between ethical and unethical behavior, which means that judgments regarding right and wrong are impossible. If ethical decisions truly derive from the situation of arguing, as Apel suggests, there can be no external criteria on which to base judgments regarding fairness, right and wrong, just and unjust. Validity claims are meaningless. For example, if community A were to allow toxic waste to be dumped on its land, community B, 700 kilometers down stream, cannot (in theory) take action unilaterally against A, for A and B must enter into discourse intersubjectively. However, community B demands unconditionally that community A ban the dumping of toxic waste, for community B's children are being born with serious defects.

Community A, though, refuses because a ban will result in huge economic losses to the community, which means that money funding old-age pensions, school-lunch programs, and student-loan programs will be cut. Community A simply refuses to comply with community B's demand and halts further discussion of the issue with community B. The question must be put to Apel: which community is justified in their claims? As is so often the case, some utilitarian form of calculation will probably be invoked, weighing certain benefits over against certain costs, a scenario Apel seeks to avoid. In short, Apel must be willing to take sides if his approach is to be responsible and concrete; he must be willing to determine whether one claim is more justified than another, for issues such as those found in this example demand swift action.

Second, by holding to a theoretical understanding of responsible action, Apel is open to charges of relativism, although he does posit a dialectic between the two universal communication communities. This perspective does little to help an individual or community make difficult ethical decisions. If one follows Apel's definition of responsibility, it is entirely plausible to argue that no action or result will ever be responsible; in fact all decisions are ultimately irresponsible, for at no time will individuals within the real or ideal communication community ever agree absolutely. This leaves Apel in a precarious situation. How can the real communication community make concrete choices, knowing that every choice cannot be realized in the ideal community? But at some point a decision has to be made, and those voices that would object to that decision will have to be silenced or temporarily dismissed. When the situation demands a decision, I would argue that Apel must interject a concept of the good (*telos*) that becomes the compelling factor in justifying moral decisions. This *telos* may or may not be founded on rational argumentation. In any case, the challenges facing moral theory in today's technological age require real solutions that are aware of real consequences.⁷

The two critical concerns surrounding Apel's concept of responsibility suggest that decisions are not justified rationally by the ideal communication community. Rather, decisions are based ultimately on what a community understands as a proper end or result. Huber seems to recognize the inherent necessity of having a *telos* in an ethics of responsibility. He is also aware of the potential abuses of teleological ethics. Apel, on the other hand, is rather skeptical of teleological ethics, arguing that such approaches tend to be too authoritarian and too arbitrary. What Apel fails to recognize, however, and what Huber (to his credit) acknowledges, is this: a technological age requires that we be responsible for and knowledgeably aware of (in the sense of "predicting") the results of our actions. In sum, an ethics of responsibility demands a *telos*, which brings us back

full circle to Huber's pluralistic community and Apel's situation of arguing: there needs to be communication between communities to predict how the results of our actions affect *every* community around the globe and in the future.

Endnotes

1. This critique of an unjust initial situation in ethics has also been raised by others. See, for example, Karen Lebacqz (1987, 51–4, 156–7). Both Apel and Lebacqz reject a point-zero starting position.
2. Jürgen Habermas (1993, 76–88) strongly disagrees with Apel's notion of a *Letztbegründung*. Habermas does not feel it necessary, or even plausible, to provide ethics with such a justificatory ground.
3. Franklin I. Gamwell (1990, 38) defines *telos* as "a possible or future state of affairs or characteristic of existence to which an agent has a positive relation."
4. Charles Taylor (1987, 1) defines this malaise as "features of our contemporary culture and society that people experience as a loss or a decline, even as our civilization 'develops.'"
5. Recall the Kantian motto: "Habe den Mut, dich deines *eigenen* Verstandes zu bedienen." Have the courage to make use of your *own* intellect.
6. Political parties would be one example of a group of individuals working toward ethical praxis. For these reasons, it would seem that, to some extent, there is virtual agreement—individuals and larger communities must act responsibly.
7. Gamwell (1990), too, suggests that Apel's moral theory is weak at this crucial point, but for reasons with which I cannot fully agree. Gamwell argues that only a theistic or divine good can make Apel's approach more realistic, providing it with an ultimate justification. In terms of everyday concrete decision making, however, such suggestions do not go very far. Few concrete decisions in today's secular world, whether in government or in business, take theistic elements into account. Nevertheless Gamwell is correct in so far as he suggests that Apel must have a notion of the good if communities and moral actions are to be responsible.

Works Cited

- Apel, Karl-Otto. 1979. Types of rationality today. In *Rationality Today*. Ed. Theodore Geraets. Ottawa, ON: Université d'Ottawa Press.
- . 1980. *Towards a transformation of philosophy*. Trans. Glyn Audy and David Frisby. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- . 1981. *Charles S. Peirce: From pragmatism to pragmaticism* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.

- . 1988. *Struktur und Verantwortung*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- . 1990. We must not forget those who are absent: Interview with Karl-Otto Apel on the universality of ethics. In *What rights does ethics have? Public philosophy in a pluralistic culture*. Ed. Sander Griffioen and René van Woudenberg. Amsterdam: Vrije University Press.
- . 1993. Discourse ethics as a response to the novel challenges of today's reality to coresponsibility. *The Journal of Religion* 73 (4):496–513.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. 1965. *Ethics*. Ed. Eberhard Bethge. New York: Macmillan.
- Gamwell, Franklin I. 1990. *The divine good: Modern theory and the necessity of God*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1993. *Justification and application: Remarks on discourse ethics*. Trans. Ciaran P. Cronin. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Huber, Wolfgang. 1990. *Konflikt und Konsens: Studien zur Ethik der Verantwortung*. Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag.
- . 1992. Selbstbegrenzung aus Freiheit: Über das ethische Grundproblem des technischen Zeitalters. *Evangelische Theologie* 52:128–46.
- . 1993a. *Die tägliche Gewalt: Gegen den Ausverkauf der Menschenwürde*. Freiburg: Herder.
- . 1993b. Toward an ethics of responsibility. *The Journal of Religion* 73 (4): 573–91.
- Jonas, Hans. 1978. *The imperative of responsibility: In search of an ethics for the technological age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lebacqz, Karen. 1987. *Justice in an unjust world: Foundations for a Christian approach to justice*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg.
- Niebuhr, H. Richard. 1978. *The responsible self: An essay in Christian moral philosophy*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Taylor, Charles. 1987. *The malaise of modernity*. Toronto: Anansi.