Journal of Philosophical Investigations
Print ISSN: 2251-7960 Online ISSN: 2423-4419
Homepage: https://philosophy.tabrizu.ac.ir

Jürgen Habermas's Moral Failure

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Article Info

Article type:

Research Article

Article history:

Received 01 October 2026
Received in revised form 10 October 2026
Accepted 16 October 2026
Published online 25 October 2026

Keywords:

Habermas; solidarity; German antisemitism; Israel–Palestine; moral failure; public intellectual.

ABSTRACT

Jürgen Habermas's passing in 2026 was an occasion for his numerous disciples and followers to remember his influential contribution to the theory of democracy. However, the chorus of appreciation was disturbed by criticisms of Habermas's stance on the fate of Palestinians. Based on a review of the criticisms sparked by the publication of Principles of Solidarity, a declaration coauthored by Habermas following Hamas's attack on Israel of October 7, 2023, and the Israeli disproportionate response to the attack, I argue that Habermas failed to properly appreciate the moral problem of offloading the consequences of past German antisemitism onto the present fate of Palestinians, and exposed himself to the charge of moral failure. His moral failure has two dimensions: first is that the past German crimes against the Jews blinded him to the implications his unequivocal support of Israeli policies had for the Palestinians, while the second is that throughout his public activity, he never used his moral authority to defend the Palestinians' right to existence and their own state.

Cite this article: Chmielewski, A. (2026). Jürgen Habermas's Moral Failure. *Journal of Philosophical Investigations*, 20(56), 475-486. https://doi.org/10.22034/jpiut.2026.74673.4752

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Publisher: University of Tabriz.

Champion of Democracy

Jürgen Habermas, German philosopher and social theorist, passed away on 14 March 2026 at the age of 96. Habermas's death is a great loss for philosophy. Obituaries, written by eminent thinkers who owed him an intellectual debt, unfailingly emphasise that Habermas's theory of communicative action, encompassing the conception of the ideal speech situation and discourse ethics, is an indispensable reference point for any contemporary theory of democracy. They also dwell on his public activism, which shaped the political and spiritual culture of postwar Germany. Unquestionably, Habermas was the most important German philosopher and deservedly held a prominent place in the pantheon of great thinkers of contemporary Europe.

However, among the eulogies, critical voices were also heard. Some authors argue that toward the end of his creative and influential life, Habermas betrayed his own ideals. This claim is based on a statement Habermas made on November 13, 2023, one month after Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, 2023.

In Hamas's operation Al-Aqsa Deluge that took place on October 7, 2023, a total of 1195 Israelis died, including 828 civilians, 71 foreign nationals, and 367 members of the security forces. Hamas also took 251 hostages, 85 of whom did not survive. At least 14 Israeli civilians were killed by the Israeli armed forces, in accordance with the never officially acknowledged Hannibal Directive, stating that it is better to kill a person than to allow her to be kidnapped.

In response to the Hamas attack, Israel launched a military operation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank (known among Israelis as "Judea and Samaria"), killing over 73,000 Palestinians. In the operation Swords of Iron, three million Palestinians were repeatedly driven from one place to another, and the Gaza Strip was reduced to a sea of rubble. Israel blocked supplies of water, food, and medicine, and announced, yet again, the outrageous plan to expel Palestinians from Gaza to Egypt. All these actions were accompanied — and continue to be so — by exterminatory rhetoric directed against Palestinians. The term "hate speech" fails to capture the level of aggression of Israeli politicians and the people, as the genocidal rhetoric is embraced by the majority of Israeli citizens who overwhelmingly support the Israeli annihilationist plans regarding Palestinians.

Israel's actions against Palestinians have sparked protests worldwide. The cruelty of Israeli armed forces against Palestinians came to be seen as genocidal. The Republic of South Africa, seconded by Namibia, filed a motion with the International Criminal Court, accusing Israeli authorities of genocide.

New German Identity

Among the most outspoken opponents of the accusation of Israel of the crime of genocide were German politicians. Their claim that the accusation was baseless was consistent with the political culture of post-war Germany. Defending Israel's right to exist is one of the sources

defining the normative foundations of the new German Republic and its political culture. It is grounded in the sense of guilt and responsibility for the genocidal crime committed by Germany against the Jews during World War II.

Assigning a central place to the Holocaust in contemporary Germany's understanding of its own identity was predominantly the work of Habermas. His position in this regard took shape in the dispute known as the *Historikerstreit*, in which Habermas opposed renowned German conservative historians who, under the ideological leadership of Ernst Nolte, sought to „normalise" the Holocaust (Habermas. Nolte, the student of Martin Heidegger, in his "philosophical historiography argued that Germans should abandon the understanding of the Holocaust as a unique event, and thus consider German crimes against Jews and other nations as just one of many episodes in a series of ideologically inspired mass murders committed by numerous nations in the past.

Against this, Habermas argued that the Holocaust constituted an event of exceptional significance both in German history and for German identity. He did not deny the possibility of comparing the German extermination of the Jews with acts of genocide committed by other nations. However, he rejected the view that the event symbolised by Auschwitz was a justifiable German response to the Bolshevik threat. He believed that the memory of Auschwitz cannot be enclosed in, and confined to, historical volumes. He demanded that the genocide committed by the Germans become a key point of reference for the identity of the postwar German Federal Republic. Deriving moral, legal, and political implications from this belief, Habermas argued that a democratic Germany could only build a defensible political identity on liberal-democratic principles. Therefore, the proper path toward the new identity of the postwar German state was not nationalism, or a rewritten German history, but constitutional patriotism (*Verfassungspatriotismus*). The culture of remembrance of the new Germany should rest on a solid foundation of the memory of the Holocaust. The memory of the unique event should also serve as a moral measure for the assessment of the German policies and institutions.

Solidarity Limited

Habermas's position, which implied a particular concern for the right of the State of Israel to exist, commanded profound respect as a testimony to his genuine commitment to redressing the wrongs inflicted on the Jews by the German people. It is this concern that guided him when, on November 13, 2023, he signed the declaration „Principles of Solidarity:

The current situation created by Hamas' unparalleled atrocity and Israel's response to it has led to a cascade of moral and political statements and demonstrations. We believe that for all the conflicting views being expressed, there are some principles that should not be disputed. They form the basis of a rightly understood solidarity with Israel and Jews in Germany. The Hamas massacre with the declared intention of destroying Jewish life in general has prompted Israel to retaliate. How this principally justified counter-strike is carried out is the subject of

controversial debate; principles of proportionality, the avoidance of civilian casualties and the waging of a war with the prospect of future peace must be the guiding principles. Despite all the concern for the fate of the Palestinian population, however, the standards of judgment slip completely when genocidal intentions are attributed to Israeli action.

In particular, Israel's actions in no way justify anti-Semitic reactions, especially not in Germany. It is intolerable that Jews in Germany are once again exposed to threats to life and limb and have to fear physical violence on the streets. The democratic self-image of the Federal Republic of Germany, which is based on the obligation to respect human dignity, is linked to a political culture for which Jewish life and Israel's right to exist are central elements worthy of special protection in light of the mass crimes of the Nazi era. The commitment to this is fundamental to our political coexistence. The elementary rights to freedom and physical integrity as well as to protection from racist defamation are indivisible and apply equally to all. This must also apply to those in our country who have cultivated anti-Semitic affects and convictions behind all kinds of pretexts and now see a welcome opportunity to express them uninhibitedly (Deitelhoff et al., 2023).

The above document, signed by Habermas and his three colleagues, clearly indicates that what prompted them to this public intervention was not the extreme, disproportionate, and asymmetrical Israeli retaliation against the Palestinian people, based on the unacceptable principle of collective responsibility. What moved them was the fact that in the German public sphere there emerged voices of strong condemnation of Israel for the mass murder of Palestinians, and accusations of genocide. It is difficult to dispel the impression that its signatories were more concerned with the lowering of the standards of public discourse than with the deaths of thousands of victims. It is thus no surprise that this statement not only failed to calm anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli sentiments in Germany but only intensified them. While the statement is consistent with Germany's sense of responsibility for Israel, a state founded in 1948 by Jewish survivors of the German genocide in Europe, it completely ignores the Israeli treatment of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, where they have been brutally suppressed by Israel for decades. It ignores the fact that Israel employs the institutionalised Holocaust memory and invokes the right to self-defence to deny the existence of Palestinians.

The statement was condemned by a variety of people, including many intellectuals who for decades remained close to both Habermas and the Frankfurt School, of which he was a leading figure. The most significant critical document is the counter-statement *Human Dignity for All* (2023), signed by 109 intellectuals from around the world, including many former students and supporters of Habermas.

Its authors argue that in the statement endorsed by Habermas, the concern for human dignity was not applied to the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, who face annihilation as a nation. It did not address the fate of Muslims in Germany, victims of growing Islamophobia. The text

endorsed by Habermas also failed to invoke international law, which prohibits war crimes and crimes against humanity, such as collective punishment, persecution, and the destruction of civilian infrastructure, including schools, hospitals, and places of worship. Solidarity means that the principle of human dignity applies to all people. This requires recognising the suffering of all those affected by armed conflict and providing them with appropriate assistance. The authors of the counter-statement write: „Guided by the principles of international law, solidarity, and human dignity, we commit to holding all participants in conflict to these higher standards."

A similar view was expressed by signatories of an open letter in the *Guardian*, among them Adam Tooze, Samuel Moyn, Amia Srinivasan, Nancy Fraser, and Linda Zerilli. Condemning Hamas's action against Israeli citizens, they expressed deep concern that Habermas and his colleagues did not stand up for the human dignity of the Palestinian civilians in Gaza facing death and destruction, or Muslims in Germany experiencing rising Islamophobia. "Solidarity means that the principle of human dignity must apply to all people. This requires us to recognise and address the suffering of all those affected by an armed conflict" (Tooze et al., 2023).

To summarise the widely adopted view, one could say that Habermas and his colleagues failed to take notice of three things. The first is that the costs of the existence of the state of Israel are unjustly and unjustifiably transferred onto the Palestinians. The second is that Palestinians have the right to their state, and that Israeli actions consistently threaten the very existence of the Palestinian nation. The third, most important, is that the gravity of Israeli crimes against Palestinians is tantamount to the erasure of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, upon which Habermas's moral demands were based in the first place.

Habermas's Zionism

Inevitably, Habermas's controversial statement became the subject of references in almost all obituaries dedicated to him. Some, like Martin Jay (2026), dismiss it, pointing out that this gesture of solidarity with Israel cannot erase the legacy of Habermas's lifetime work in political and moral philosophy. Nancy Fraser, a prominent student of Habermas, expressed a less generous opinion.

> Habermas first lit my path as a critical theorist. I remain deeply grateful for that. But over the years the light he cast flickered and waned – until, with his stance on Gaza, it seemed to go out. Historians will eventually decide whether that stance was an anomaly or the culmination of a long process in which Frankfurt School critical theory turned into a form of liberalism that was too often complicit with US imperialism (Fraser 2026).

However, her remark on "Habermas's neglect of transnational and 'subaltern counterpublics'" leaves little doubt as to whether she thought his stance on Gaza was anomalous: her testimony may be read as saying that his unwavering support for Israel, and the neglect of the rights of Palestinians, was the reason why the previously emerging differences between them became too deep to be bridged.

Much harsher opinions were expressed by authors representing the Middle Eastern perspective. Remembering his personal meetings and exchanges with Habermas, Asef Bayat, a professor of sociology at the University of Illinois at Urbana, addressed him directly in an open letter:

> What meaning does the "obligation to respect human dignity" that your statement emphatically underlines have in the end? It is as though you fear that speaking of the suffering of Palestinians would diminish your moral commitment to Jewish lives. If so, how tragic it is that the righting of a colossal wrong committed in the past should be tied to perpetuating another monstrous wrong in the present. I fear that this twisted moral compass is related to the logic of German exceptionalism that you champion. Because exceptionalism, by definition, allows for not one universal standard but differential standards. Some people become more worthy humans, others less worthy and still others unworthy. That logic shuts down rational dialogue and desensitizes moral consciousness; it erects a cognitive block that prevents us from seeing the suffering of others, impeding empathy" (Bayat, 2023).

Bayat also wrote that in those unsettling times, „the wisdom, knowledge and above all the moral courage of thinkers like you are most needed. Your seminal ideas about truth and communicative action, cosmopolitanism, equal citizenship, deliberative democracy and human dignity remain immensely important. However, your Eurocentrism, German exceptionalism and the closure of free debate about Israel and Palestine to which you contribute would appear to contradict these ideas."

Habermas's statement was more severely assessed by Emad Abdul-Latif, professor of rhetoric and discourse analysis at Qatar University in Doha. For him, Israel's occupation of Gaza, which Germany was morally obligated to protect due to its own sins against the Jews, unequivocally constituted a direct contradiction of Habermas's intellectual project. Abdul-Latif recalled that Habermas was capable of acting in accordance with the spirit of his own teachings when, in 2021, he refused to accept the book prize established in honour of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan, worth approximately $1 million (Abdul-Latif, 2026). He was urged to refuse the award by some German circles, which pointed out that the United Arab Emirates is a country of repression, exploitation, and violation of justice. Habermas's refusal was interpreted as

evidence of his consistency in defending democracy and freedom. It is worth noting, however, that some Germans urged him to accept the prize, likely motivated by the United Arab Emirates' support for Israel's and the United States' interests.

According to Abdul-Latif, Habermas's statement of 2023 justifies Israel's genocidal actions and constitutes political support for the colonial occupation of Palestine. In other words, it is evidence of Habermas's Zionism.

In his attempt to understand Habermas, Abdul-Latif considered several possible explanations for his actions. The first refers to the local context of the German elite, which for decades cultivated a sense of guilt stemming from the Nazi legacy and the crimes committed against the Jews by the Germans. German determination to seek atonement for Nazi crimes included unconditional support for the state of Israel, which in turn positioned itself as the official representative of the victims of the Holocaust and the recipient of reparations.

The second explanation points to the strong influence of the pro-Israel lobby on German state institutions. This influence is overwhelming to the extent that the Federal Republic of Germany effectively functions under strict American-Israeli tutelage, which limits the sovereignty of the German Republic. This is evidenced, among other things, by the fact that the German government has been forced to endorse Israel's actions. At the same time, Chancellor Friedrich Merz's rhetoric often echoes Benjamin Netanyahu's statements, and the German government represses Germans who oppose the Israeli killing of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

Moral exclusivism

Both of these explanations, if justified, would be damaging to Habermas: they reinforce the belief that his philosophical and public success has led to disastrous consequences for innocent people living in a remote region of the world, and that he, the champion of cosmopolitanism, failed to notice them. Most damaging to Habermas, however, is the interpretation that explains the incongruity between his defence of Israel and his disregard for the fate of the Palestinians as a result of a toxic fusion of Eurocentrism and Orientalism. The source of this inconsistency is „exclusionary humanitarianism," according to which moral principles binding on members of a given group do not apply to people outside that group. That Western ethics and principles are universal only verbally and that, in practice, they are applied selectively or completely ignored in the case of the Western „Others" is evidenced by countless examples from the history of European colonialism, including German colonialism.

Throughout the centuries of colonialism, Western philosophers, thinkers, and reformers argued for European humanist principles, yet disregarded the very possibility of their application to the populations of colonised countries. Examples of the selective application of humanitarianism by Western nations abound. Liberty, equality, and fraternity, the values of the French Revolution, inscribed in the French constitution of the Second Republic since 1848, not only did not apply equally to all French people, but also did not prevent the French from

exterminating millions of people in Algeria, Indochina, and numerous countries in Africa and America. Philosophical theories of liberalism, democracy, and human rights, developed in Great Britain, did not prevent British politicians from exterminating millions of people worldwide, especially in India, and plundering the wealth they produced throughout the British Empire. The contemporary American empire justifies the plunder of resources from other regions of the world with slogans of democracy and freedom, while simultaneously sending armies to kill those who resist. Exclusionary humanitarianism is widely applied to all non-Western nations as well as non-European residents of Western countries who experience discrimination and racism that are incompatible with Western humanist ideals. Right-wing ideologies openly admit to racist prejudices. The latest example of the selective application of humanitarianism is the rhetoric of the present American administration, whose scathing references are directed against immigrants and which finds support in the myth of white racial superiority and calls for the globalisation of Western culture.

Paradoxically, at the time of US military intervention in the Middle East in the 1990s, Habermas himself condemned Western Eurocentrism and cultural hegemony. He accused religiously motivated masses and secularised intellectuals of the West of failing to "respect the identity and autonomy of the Arabic-Islamic world. The historical relationship between the Occident and the Orient, and especially the relationship of the First to the former Third World, continues to bear the marks of a denial of recognition" (Habermas1998, 213).

Abdul-Latif emphatically concludes: Habermas did not betray his principles by failing to defend the murdered Palestinians. He remained faithful to Western, exclusionary humanitarianism, which recognises the humanity only of „people like us." Even though in his theory Habermas advocated universal rationality and democracy and defended unrestrained communication, in his political practice, these values were limited to the Western world.

It is a proper place to remark that Lawrence Summers, the president of Harvard University, in his criticism of the anti-Israeli protesters, took a position not dissimilar from that of Habermas. In a statement on 17 September 2002, he argued that the "anti-Israel views are increasingly finding support in progressive intellectual communities. Serious and thoughtful people are advocating and taking actions that are antisemitic in their effect, if not their intent." Also, in a very Habermasian spirit, he added that his statement does not in any way prevent a free and civil debate of Israeli policy and that "the only antidote to dangerous ideas is strong alternatives vigorously advocated." In other words, Summers employed the charge of antisemitism against the critics of Israel, trying at the same time to avoid the charge of censorship, thus arguing himself into both a censorious and duplicitous position. Summers's stance provoked Judith Butler to pose the question: "How does one vigorously advocate the idea that the Israeli occupation is brutal and wrong, and Palestinian self-determination a

necessary good, if the voicing of those views calls down the charge of antisemitism?" (Butler 2023).

Habermas's Apology

The obvious, though seemingly paradoxical, conclusion that follows from Plato's *Apology* is that Socrates required no defence. He did nothing wrong deliberately and acted without ever renouncing his moral principles. Habermas's case is different. Some of Habermas's supporters believe that his action, or rather inaction, requires defence. The problem is that any defence of Habermas will necessarily turn out to be his indictment, or, at best, it will be about defending Habermas from himself. The express purpose of Matthias Risse's insightful study (Risse, 2026), is to provide a Habermasian response to the question of the fate of Palestinians, that is, the response Habermas himself did not provide. The unintended conclusion of his paper, however, is that Habermas's disregard for the fate of Palestine and the Palestinians contradicts the principles of his own philosophy.

According to Risse, it is undeniable that by supporting the creation and subsequent policies of the Jewish state in territory inhabited by Palestinians, and by providing material, diplomatic, and moral support for that state, Germany contributed to the dispossession and defencelessness of the Palestinians. In other words, the costs of German anti-Semitism and the costs of German atonement for their past sins against Jews were imposed upon Palestinians, who are facing total annihilation at the hands of the descendants of former victims of German eliminationist nationalism.

Risse argues that it is also undeniable that a state that bases its legitimacy on universal moral norms cannot simply offload the burdens arising from its singular responsibility towards Jews onto the people inhabiting the territory which Jews requisitioned to establish their home. This leads to the conclusion that by transferring the costs of its own sins onto others, Germany has not only forfeited the general obligations towards Palestinians but also specific obligations to protect them from the indirect and unintended but foreseeable consequences of their own actions. That is precisely the conclusion which Habermas failed to draw. Palestinians suffer the direct consequences of Israel's actions, which Germany has supported materially, militarily, diplomatically, and morally from the very beginning. Being the largest exporter of lethal weapons to Israel, offering training and political support, the German state cannot pretend to be a neutral observer of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It became complicit in how this support is used by Israel; it became complicit in the predictable harm inflicted on civilians affected by occupation, blockade, and murderous military operations.

Responsibility for these consequences is, or rather should be, inseparable from the German culture of remembrance, which Habermas helped shape. In other words, the way Germany institutionalises Holocaust memory has structural consequences for Palestinians. When the slogan „Never again" is reinterpreted as „Never again for us, even if it means serious and lasting

harm to others," and when it becomes a tool for repressing the support for Palestinians as a manifestation of antisemitism, Palestinians are placed outside the human moral community. Their suffering becomes normatively irrelevant. Habermas failed to reconcile the demand for reparations to Israelis with the wholly foreseeable consequences it has for the Palestinians. The result is a dehumanisation of Palestinians, analogous to the dehumanisation of Jews during the German Nazi era. In other words, towards the end of his life, Habermas denied the universalism that underpinned his much-praised theoretical achievements.

Risse concludes that German support for Israel should not translate into actions that condemn the Palestinian people to extermination or a life below human dignity. There will never be peace in the Middle East, and therefore, Israel will never be safe if the Palestinian people are denied the right to live in safety and peace.

Habermas's Moral Failure

Habermas's moral failure has two dimensions. The first is that by unconditionally assigning Israel's right to exist a central place in German political culture, he remained blind to the implications his own moral and political stance had for the Palestinians. Secondly, throughout his long and intense intellectual and public activity, he never used his overpowering moral authority to defend the Palestinians' right to existence and their own state. Blinded by the Western moral alterity, he did not see fit to address a problem that has been glaringly obvious since the beginning of Jewish settlement in Palestine: namely, that Palestinians have been forced to pay a horrendous price for the depravities committed in the past by the Germans against the Jews. He did not see that Israeli atrocities committed against the Palestinians are a consequence of the atrocities committed by the Germans against the Jews in the past. Habermas thus bears a non-insignificant share of the responsibility for the fact that the German state, based on liberal constitutional patriotism, has been exploited by Israeli politicians to serve their nationalist, expansionist, and annihilationist policies.

Ultimately, attempts to defend Habermas demonstrate the extent of his moral neglect of the fate of Palestinians. They also demonstrate how badly he needs defending. At the same time, the very attempts to defend Habermas constitute the unassailable evidence of his intellectual and moral culpability. Habermas will not be able to atone for his moral myopia. But it is time for Germany to reconsider its support for the Israeli regime that commits genocide, seeking impunity in the status of perennial victim and in American protection.

Conclusion

Exactly two decades ago, Danny Postel published a book entitled *Reading* Legitimation Crisis *in Tehran. Iran and the Future of Liberalism* (Postel 2006). The reference to Habermas's seminal book in its title serves as a *pars pro toto* for a wider Western liberal tradition that includes such thinkers as Hannah Arendt, Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin, Leszek Kołakowski,

Richard Rorty, Agnes Heller, Timothy Garton Ash, and many others. Postel considered not only possible ways the Western liberal tradition may support Iranian intellectual elites in their struggle toward democratising their country. Pointing to the work of such intellectuals and activists as Shirin Ebadi, Akbar Ganji, and Ramin Jahanbegloo, he also argued that Iranian liberalism can teach the West a lot and that the Iranian struggle can breathe new life into Western liberalism by reminding them how profoundly radical a force it is (Postel 2026, 40). He also observed that Habermas, during his visit to Tehran in 2002, spoke about encounters with uninhibited, spontaneous and self-confident intellectuals and citizens of Iran. Postel did not fail to condemn the intellectual Left, especially Michel Foucault's views on the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979.

Postel's idealist view of Western liberalism is now belied by the presently ongoing war of choice, proclaimed by Israel and the United States against Iran. The unprovoked American attack in Iran has revealed, once again, that the Western liberal champions of cosmopolitanism are unwilling to learn from nations and cultures it considers subaltern, and are too feeble to resist the authoritarian tendencies in their own region. More generally, the Western attitude towards the fate the Palestinian suffer ever since the Nakba of 1948 is a testimony to the moral bankruptcy of the purportedly democratic and liberal Western world. It is a disgrace to the whole West that Iran, a victim of multiple acts of Western aggression, now autocratically ruled, is nowadays the only serious force standing against the onslaught of the Palestinians.

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