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Moral Development: A Review of the Theory

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The purpose of this issue of *Theory Into Practice* is to elaborate the application of moral development theory to the practice of teaching. Each of the articles following rests upon a body of knowledge and research which, if comprehensively reviewed, would require book length treatment. The bibliographies contained in this issue will provide the reader with ample background for a reasonable grounding in cognitive moral development theory and research. The purpose of this article is to review the major concepts embodied in the moral development literature. As such it is intended only as an introductory context for understanding the richness of the applications described in the accompanying articles.

Whether we like it or not schooling is a moral enterprise. Values issues abound in the content and process of teaching. The interaction of adults and students within a social organization called a school results in human conflict no less so than does such interaction in social organizations labeled "families." Yet moral education has been viewed as the exclusive province of the family and/or church. Disregarded or misunderstood has been the nature of the school as an important moral education institution. Because schools have not been viewed as legitimate institutions of moral education society has avoided concepts of morality and ethics in evaluating the effects of these institutions on the social development of children and adolescents. Terms like "socialization" or "acculturation" or "citizenship" have been used to refer to the moral impact on students. Such terms ignore the problem of the standard or principle of value implied by such terms. We must face the issue of choice as to whether the outcome of the growth and education process is the creation of a storm trooper, a Buddhist monk or a civil rights activist. All are equally "socialized" in terms of their social group. To consider "socialization" or the "acquisition of values" as moral education, is to consider the moral principles children are developing (or are not developing). It is also to consider the adequacy of these principles in the light of an examined concept of the good and right (the province of moral philosophy) and in

the light of knowledge of the moral processes of human development (which is the province of psychology).

We are concerned with the traditional prohibition of schools from teaching values or “morality” normally felt to be the province of the home and church. In keeping family, church, and school separate, however, educators have assumed naively that schools have been harbors of value neutrality. The result has been a moral education curriculum which has lurked beneath the surface in schools, hidden as it were from both educators and the public. This “hidden curriculum”¹ with its emphasis on obedience to authority (“stay in your seat, make no noise, get a hallway pass”; and the feeling of “prison” espoused by so many students), implies many underlying moral assumptions and values, which may be quite different from what educators would admit as their conscious system of morality. Schools have been preaching a “bag of virtues” approach—the teaching of a particular set of values which are peculiar to this culture or to a particular subculture, and which are by nature relativistic and not necessarily more adequate than any other set of values. But the teaching of particular virtues has been proven to be ineffective. We wish to go beyond this approach to moral education and instead to conceptualize and facilitate moral development in a cognitive-developmental sense — toward an increased sense of moral autonomy and a more adequate conception of justice.

Moral development, as initially defined by Piaget² and then refined and researched by Kohlberg³, does not simply represent an increasing knowledge of cultural values usually leading to ethical relativity. Rather, it represents the transformations that occur in a person’s form or structure of thought. The content of values varies from culture to culture; hence the study of cultural values cannot tell us how a person interacts with his social environment, or how a person goes about solving problems related to his/her social world. This requires the analysis of developing structures of moral judgment, which are found to be universal in a developmental sequence across cultures.⁴

In analyzing the responses of longitudinal and cross-cultural subjects to hypothetical moral dilemmas it has been demonstrated that moral reasoning develops over time through a series of six stages. The concept of stages of cognitive development refers to the structure of one’s reasoning and implies the following characteristics:

1. Stages are “structured wholes,” or organized systems of thought. This means individuals are consistent in their level of moral judgment.
2. Stages form an invariant sequence. Under all conditions except extreme trauma, movement is always forward, never backward. Individuals never skip stages, and movement is always to the next stage up. This is true in all cultures.
3. Stages are “hierarchical integrations.” Thinking at a higher stage includes or comprehends within it lower stage thinking. There is a tendency to function at or prefer the highest stage available.

The stages of moral development are defined by the following characteristics:

Definition of Moral Stages

I. Preconventional Level

At this level, the child is responsive to cultural rules and labels of good and bad, right or wrong, but interprets these labels either in terms of the physical or the hedonistic consequences of action (punishment, reward, exchange of favors) or in terms of the physical power of those who enunciate the rules and labels. The level is divided into the following two stages:

Stage 1: The punishment-and-obedience orientation. The physical consequences of action determine its goodness or badness, regardless of the human meaning or value of these consequences. Avoidance of punishment and unquestioning deference to power are valued in their own right, not in terms of respect for an underlying moral order supported by punishment and authority (the latter being Stage 4).

Stage 2: The instrumental-relativist orientation. Right action consists of that which instrumentally satisfies one’s own needs and oc-

asionally the needs of others. Human relations are viewed in terms like those of the marketplace. Elements of fairness, of reciprocity, and of equal sharing are present, but they are always interpreted in a physical, pragmatic way. Reciprocity is a matter of "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours," not of loyalty, gratitude, or justice.

II. Conventional Level

At this level, maintaining the expectations of the individual's family, group, or nation is perceived as valuable in its own right, regardless of immediate and obvious consequences. The attitude is not only one of conformity to personal expectations and social order, but of loyalty to it, of actively maintaining, supporting, and justifying the order, and of identifying with the persons or group involved in it. At this level, there are the following two stages:

Stage 3: The interpersonal concordance or "good boy – nice girl" orientation. Good behavior is that which pleases or helps others and is approved by them. There is much conformity to stereotypical images of what is majority or "natural" behavior. Behavior is frequently judged by intention — "he means well" becomes important for the first time. One earns approval by being "nice."

Stage 4: The "law and order" orientation. There is orientation toward authority, fixed rules, and the maintenance of the social order. Right behavior consists of doing one's duty, showing respect for authority, and maintaining the given social order for its own sake.

III. Postconventional, Autonomous, or Principled Level

At this level, there is a clear effort to define moral values and principles that have validity and application apart from the authority of the groups or persons holding these principles and apart from the individual's own identification with these groups. This level also has two stages:

Stage 5: The social-contract, legalistic orientation, generally with utilitarian overtones. Right action tends to be defined in terms of general individual rights and standards which have been critically examined and agreed upon by the whole society. There is a clear awareness of the relativism of personal values

and opinions and a corresponding emphasis upon procedural rules for reaching consensus. Aside from what is constitutionally and democratically agreed upon, the right is a matter of personal "values" and "opinion." The result is an emphasis upon the "legal point of view," but with an emphasis upon the possibility of changing law in terms of rational considerations of social utility (rather than freezing it in terms of Stage 4 "law and order"). Outside the legal realm, free agreement and contract is the binding element of obligation. This is the "official" morality of the American government and constitution.

Stage 6: The universal-ethical-principle orientation. Right is defined by the decision of conscience in accord with self-chosen ethical principles appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency. These principles are abstract and ethical (the Golden Rule, the categorical imperative); they are not concrete moral rules like the Ten Commandments. At heart, these are universal principles of justice, of the reciprocity and equality of human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons.⁵

Given that people have the psychological capacity to progress to higher (and therefore more adequate) stages of moral reasoning, the aim of education ought to be the personal development of students toward more complex ways of reasoning. This philosophical argument is based on the earlier contributions of John Dewey:

The aim of education is growth or development, both intellectual and moral. Ethical and psychological principles can aid the school in the greatest of all constructions — the building of a free and powerful character. Only knowledge of the order and connection of stages in psychological development can insure this. Education is the work of supplying the conditions which will enable the psychological functions to mature in the freest and fullest manner.⁶

Like Piaget, Dewey's idea of development does not reflect an increase in the content of thinking (e.g., cultural values) but instead, a qualitative transformation in the form of the child's thought or action. This distinction has been elaborated elsewhere:

What we examine in our work has to do

with form rather than content. We are not describing or classifying what people think is right or wrong in situations of moral conflict, for example, whether draft-evading exiles should be given amnesty or thrown in prison if and when they return to this country, or even changes in what individuals think as they grow older. Nor are we assuming that we can specify a certain behavioral response as necessarily "moral" (in the descriptive or category sense, as distinguished from non-moral), for example, "cheating," and then discuss moral-development in terms of the frequency with which individuals engage in this behavior as they grow older, perhaps in different kinds of situations ranging from spelling tests to income tax. As distinguished from either of these two avenues of research that might be said to be dealing with moral content, our work focuses on the cognitive structures which underlie such content and give it its claim to the category "moral," where "structure" refers to "the general characteristics of shape, pattern or organization of response rather than to the rate of intensity of response or its pairing with particular stimuli," and "cognitive structure" refers to "rules for processing information or for connecting experienced events." From our point of view it is not any artificially specified set of responses, or degree of intensity of such responses, which characterizes morality as an area of study. Rather, it is the cognitive moral structurings, or the organized systems of assumptions and rules about the nature of moral-conflict situations which give such situations their meaning, that constitute the objects of our developmental study.⁷

Based on this crucial difference between form and content, the aim of moral education should be to stimulate people's thinking ability over time in ways which will enable them to use more adequate and complex reasoning patterns to solve moral problems. The principle central to the development of stages of moral judgment, and hence to proposals for moral education, is that of justice. Justice, the primary regard for the value and equality of all human beings and for reciprocity in human relations, is a basic and universal standard. Using justice as the organizing principal for moral education meets the fol-

lowing criteria: It guarantees freedom of belief; it employs a philosophically justifiable concept of morality, and it is based on the psychological facts of human development. The stages may be seen as representing increasingly adequate conceptions of justice and as reflecting an expanding capacity for empathy, for taking the role of the other. And in the end the two are the same thing because the most just solution is the one which takes into account the positions or rights of all the individuals involved. The expansion of empathy thus, in turn, leads to an expansion of points of view and this expansion defines the three levels of moral judgement into which the six stages subdivide.

At the first or pre-conventional level the individual sees moral dilemmas in terms of the individual needs of the people involved. Situations of moral conflict are seen as situations in which needs collide and are resolved either in terms of who has the most power in the situation (Stage 1) or in terms of simple individual responsibility for one's own welfare (Stage 2) except where bound by simple market-place notions of reciprocity.

These formulations are perfectly consonant with the child's experience. For a young child power is perhaps the most salient characteristic of his social world (Stage 1) and as he learns to see conflicts between conformity to power and individual interests, he shifts to a notion of right as serving individual interests. However, as the child becomes increasingly involved in mutual relationships and sees himself as a sharing and participating member of groups, he sees the individual point of view toward morality as inadequate to deal with the kinds of moral conflicts which confront him. He has then two choices: he can hold on to his pre-conventional philosophy and simplify experience, or he can expand his philosophy so that it can take into account the expanding complexity of his experience.

The second two stages of moral development are termed "conventional" in that moral conflicts are now seen and resolved in group or social terms rather than in individual terms. Right or justice is seen to reside in interpersonal social relationships (Stage 3) or in the community (Stage 4). At the conventional levels there is an appeal to authority but the authority derives its right to define the good not from greater power as at Stage 1, but from its social sharedness and legitimacy.

However, if society defines the right and the good, what is one to think when one recognizes that different societies choose differently in what they label as good and bad, right and wrong? Eskimos think it is right to leave old people out in the snow to die. When abortions were illegal in this country, they were legal in Sweden. With the increasing exposure of everyone to how others live, there is a greater recognition of the fact that our way is only one among many.

If one cannot simply equate the right with the societal and the legal, then what is one to do? We have found that adolescents may go through a period of ethical relativism during which they question the premises of any moral system. If there are many ways to live, who can presume to say which is best? Perhaps everyone should do as he or she chooses.

The way out of this moral relativism or moral nihilism lies through the perception that underneath the rules of any given society lie moral principles and universal moral rights, and the validity of any moral choice rests on the principles that choice embodies. Such moral principles are universal in their application and constitute a viable standard against which the particular laws or conventions of any society can and should be judged. When obedience to laws violates moral principles or rights, it is right to violate such laws.

At the last two stages, then, choice is based on the principles that supercede convention, just as previously the claims of society or convention were seen as the grounds for adjudicating differences between individuals. This, then, is the sequence of moral development.

What spurs progress from one stage to another and why do some individuals reach the principled stages while others do not? Moral judgment, while primarily a rational operation, is influenced by affective factors such as the ability to empathize and the capacity for guilt. But moral situations are defined cognitively by the judging individual in social interactions. It is this interaction with one's environment which determines development of moral reasoning.

Social interaction requires the assumption of a variety of roles and the entering into a variety of reciprocal relationships. Such relationships demand that one take others' perspectives (role-taking). It is this reworking of one's role-

taking experiences into successively more complex and adequate forms of justice which is called moral development. Thus moral development results from the dialogue between the person's cognitive structure and the complexity presented by environment. This interactionist definition of moral development demands an environment which will facilitate dialogue between the self and others. The more one encounters situations of moral conflict that are not adequately resolved by one's present reasoning structure, the more likely one is to develop more complex ways of thinking about and resolving such conflicts.

What can teachers and schools do to stimulate moral development? The teacher must help the student to consider genuine moral conflicts, think about the reasoning he uses in solving such conflicts, see inconsistencies and inadequacies in his way of thinking and find ways of resolving them. Classroom moral discussions are one example of how the cognitive-developmental approach can be applied in the school. Much of the moral development research in schools has focused on moral discussions as the vehicle for stimulating cognitive conflict. But such discussions, if too often used, will become pedantic. The classroom discussion approach should be part of a broader, more enduring involvement of students in the social and moral functioning of the school. Rather than attempting to inculcate a predetermined and unquestioned set of values, teachers should challenge students with the moral issues faced by the school community as problems to be solved, not merely situations in which rules are mechanically applied. One must create a "just community."

At present, the schools themselves are not especially moral institutions. Institutional relationships tend to be based more on authority than on ideas of justice. Adults are often less interested in discovering *how* children are thinking than in telling them *what* to think. The school atmosphere is generally a blend of Stage 1, punishment morality, and Stage 4, "law and order," which fails to impress or stimulate children involved in their own Stage 2 or Stage 3 moral philosophies. Children and adults stop communicating with one another, horizons are narrowed and development is stunted. If schools wish to foster morality, they will have to provide an atmosphere in which interpersonal issues are settled on the basis of principle rather

than power. They will have to take moral questions seriously and provide food for thought instead of conventional "right answers."

We do not claim that the theory of cognitive moral development is sufficient to the task of moral education. Other articles in this issue (particularly those by Mosher, Reimer and Boyd) articulate this insufficiency quite clearly and correctly. There are three major areas in which the cognitive developmental approach to moral education is incomplete: 1) the stress placed on form rather than content 2) the focus on concepts of rights and duties rather than issues of the good 3) the emphasis on moral judgment rather than behavior.

We have previously mentioned the distinction between form and content. That we have chosen to delineate the form or structure of moral judgements does not deny the importance of the moral content of school curriculum. That textbooks and other curricula materials have reflected and perhaps reinforced racism, sexism and ethnocentrism to be decried. It is imperative that the content of curriculum for moral education be constructed so as to avoid unfair characterizations of others as well as promote opportunities for structural development. The integration of curriculum content is exemplified by articles in this issue by Lickona, Bramble and Garrod, and the Ladenburgs. Additional work in this content dimension is required if educators wish to incorporate the cognitive developmental approach to moral education in the curriculum.

We have stressed in this "theory" the concern for what is right, what is just or fair. To ask "what is right?" or "what ought I do in this situation?" presumes that notions of what is "good" are in conflict. But,

We are not describing how men formulate different conceptions of the good, the good life, intrinsic value, or purpose. Nor are we discussing how men develop certain kinds of character traits and learn to recognize these traits in judgments of approbation and disapprobation. Instead, we are concentrating on that aspect of morality that is brought to the fore by problematic situations of conflicting claims, whether the conflict is between individuals, groups, societies, or institutions, and whether the source of the conflict lies in incompatible claims based on conceptions of the good,

beliefs about human purpose, or character assessments. In short, we intend the term "moral" to be understood in the restricted sense of referring to situations which call for judgments involving denotological concepts such as right and wrong, duty and obligation, having a right, fairness, etc., although such judgments may (or may not) involve either or both of the other two basic concepts or their derivatives.⁸

This is not to say that questions of "good" are less important or need not to be asked. Rather it is an acknowledgement that the cognitive developmental approach is limited in scope and requires that attention be paid to such issues in the development of any moral education program.

The relationship between moral judgment and moral behavior is not fully defined. That is, moral judgment is a necessary but not sufficient condition for moral action. Other variables come into play such as emotion, and a general sense of will, purpose or ego strength. Moral judgment is the only distinctive moral factor in moral behavior but not the only factor in such behavior. Educators who are looking for answers as to how to "get children to behave" often meaning to rid themselves of discipline problems will not find the answer in one theory. We hypothesize that behavior when informed by mature moral judgment is influenced by level of moral development.⁹ Further research in this crucial area is needed.

Cognitive developmental moral education is rooted in a substantial empirical and philosophical base. The theory is complex and as suggested above insufficient to the task claimed by "moral education." Within limits, however, the theory has informing power for the practitioner. Resourceful practice is required both to validate and inform the theory.

NOTES

1. P. Jackson, *Life in the Classrooms*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968).
2. J. Piaget, *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (1932), (New York: Free Press, 1965).
3. L. Kohlberg, "Stages of Moral Development as a Basis for Moral Education," In C. Beck and E. Sullivan (eds.), *Moral Education*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970).
4. L. Kohlberg, "Moral Stages and Moralization: The Cognitive Developmental Approach," In T. Lickona (ed.), *Moral development and behavior: Theory, Research, and Social Issues*, New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1976.

5. L. Kohlberg, "From Is to Ought," In T. Mischel (ed.), *Cognitive Development and Epistemology*, (New York: Academic Press, 1971), pp. 164-165.

6. J. Dewey, "What Psychology Can Do for the Teacher," In R. Archambault (ed.), *John Dewey on Education: Selected Writings*, New York: Random House, 1964), p. 207.

7. D. Boyd and L. Kohlberg, "The Is-Ought Problem: A Developmental Perspective," *Zygon*, 1973, 8, 360-361.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 360.

9. The relationship between moral judgment and moral behavior is more fully discussed in: Kohlberg, 1976 "Moral Stages," L. Kohlberg, "Stage and Sequence: The Cognitive Developmental Approach to Socialization," in D.A. Goslin (ed.) *Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research*, vol. I (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1964), pp 383-432.

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