

The Politics of Moral Development

If we understand moral education to be a deliberate process by which adults instill or cultivate certain beliefs and values in children, it is immediately apparent that the idea of liberal moral education is inherently problematic. Liberalism is committed to protecting the autonomy of individuals, which means respecting individuals' rights and their capacity to form their own beliefs and values. Just what it can mean to instill liberal values, to work to ensure children will think a certain way, without denying children the very capacity most championed by liberalism is a question that has long bedeviled liberal thinking about education and child rearing.

Famed as a pioneering voice in developmental psychology, Lawrence Kohlberg was also an active voice in debates about the proper content and methods of moral education, and he was uncommonly explicit in tying his own psychological theory to liberal ideals. In working out the pedagogical implications of his "cognitive developmental" theory of moral growth, Kohlberg situated himself in opposition to two competing approaches which he argued were inferior. Since the debates joined by Kohlberg continue to resonate in a growingly pluralistic and diverse culture, it is well worth recalling Kohlberg's arguments and evaluating the actual success of his still very influential model.

Kohlberg on Moral Education

Moral educators must begin by answering a fundamental question: which values should we work to instill in children? Any answer given raises a second: how can such choices be justified? As Kohlberg sees it, the main competitors to his own approach to teaching morality are unable to provide a compelling answer to the second question, and

so any answers they provide to the first will be arbitrary from a philosophical standpoint, and so morally questionable. Though the question of justification is a properly philosophical one, Kohlberg bravely suggests that it can be better answered by psychology. Only by basing our understanding of moral development on an empirically well grounded theory of cognitive development, he argues, can we identify the kinds of values that are can be rightfully taught children. His own theory of moral development, he continues, identifies the essential features of moral growth that allow us to, as he put it, derive ‘ought’ from ‘is’. Since his theory posit liberal values as the outcome of normal psychological development, he contends that this constitutes a justification for teaching them.

The Aristotelian Bag of Virtue

The two approaches Kohlberg identifies as rivals are what he calls the “cultural transmission” model on the one hand, and what he calls “romanticism” on the other.¹ Kohlberg associates the cultural transmission model with more traditional thinking about moral education, particularly with what he notoriously dubbed the ‘bag of virtues’ approach of instilling in children a collection of good character traits such as honesty, responsibility, and self-discipline. Broadly Aristotelian, this approach has never been wanting for advocates, but it had clearly fallen from favor to a great extent by the time of Kohlberg’s ascendancy. Its fundamental shortcomings in Kohlberg’s eyes are an inherent heavy handedness, but also the impossibility of providing either a principled way of identifying which traits should be on the list of virtues or why, or an uncontroversial and compelling account of what virtues amount to in the first place. While most lists of

¹ Kohlberg makes the following arguments in several places. I will be drawing mostly from his paper, co-written with Rochelle Mayer, “Development as the Aim of Education”, originally published in 1972 in *Harvard Educational Review*. See also...

virtues suggested for inclusion in school curriculum will include honesty, for example, according to Kohlberg it is far from clear just *why* honesty is on the list, or just what being honest entails. His skepticism is fueled, in part, by potential disagreements over what the demands of honesty entail—does it require turning in a friend for breaking a trivial rule?—and by the apparent incompatibilities between that virtue and other plausible candidate virtues, such as loyalty. He also leans on the results of psychological studies that suggest there may not be such traits in the first place.²

In the face of these difficulties, Kohlberg argues, the contents of the bag of virtues children are taught is determined *in practice* by little more than cultural inertia—children are taught (ineffectively, he would add) just those virtues that are traditionally taught to children in that particular social world. The effect, or at least intent, is to render children as much like the previous generations as possible on no other grounds than shared cultural expectations. As Kohlberg repeatedly puts it, the bag of virtues strategy assumes *moral relativism*: implicit in the strategy is the view that existing cultural practices are the ultimate arbiters of values, that between competing bags of virtues there is nothing to choose, no standard by which one can be judged preferable or superior.

There is a second worry occasioned by the relativism of the cultural transmission model. According to Kohlberg, as practiced the virtues transmitted in this way are not in any sense chosen or freely endorsed by the children being taught them, and so to this extent at least the traditional approach is deserving of its reputation of being a form of indoctrination. Adopting language that would come to be standard in the psychological

² In particular, Kohlberg make much of ...'s groundbreaking study of honesty which found that subjects were typically likely to cheat in some contexts but not others, so that blanket attributions of traits like "honest" are relatively meaningless. Here Kohlberg anticipates the currently fashionable criticisms of virtue ethics that appeal to the findings of social psychology that stress the comparative strength situation effects over personality in explaining and predicting behavior.

literature on moral development, Kohlberg argues that the direct imposition of values depends on the efficacy of an *external authority* which simply dictates the proper beliefs and values to be adapted. Since there is no warrant for the particular bag of virtues being taught other than its cultural pedigree, there is no reason for children to accept its legitimacy beyond the mere fact that it has been chosen by their elders.

Romanticism

In the middle part of the last century a rival to the bag of virtues approach to moral education emerged in the form of what Kohlberg calls romanticism. The romantic school of moral education stands in sharp contrast to the cultural transmission school in rejecting outright the idea that the traditional acceptance or teaching of a set of values confers on them some kind of validity. Moving to the other extreme, the romantics instead insist that legitimate values can only come from within the individual herself, and this can only happen if children are allowed to develop those values independently of undue outside interference and influence. As characterized by Kohlberg, this school of thought leans heavily on the horticultural metaphors suggested by John Dewey's developmental and educational theories, and welds to them a strong individualism that stresses almost to exclusion the internal, self-guiding forces of psychological maturation and growth. As Kohlberg notes, the logical tendencies of this approach to moral education, which he identifies with the work of such seminal early developmental psychologists as Freud, Arnold Gesell, Stanley H. Hall and A. S. Neill among others, is towards an ever more radical distrust or outright condemnation of any kind of formal, deliberate schooling. What children need from adults is little beyond the care, protection, and resources that enable them to grow. Deliberate attempts to *shape* that growth

towards ends or outcomes chosen by others are seen as distorting or destroying the natural and healthy trajectory of a self-guiding process of moral maturation.

Towards the middle of the 20th century the skepticism of traditional education engendered by these kinds of thoughts became more and more pronounced, giving rise to experimentation with increasingly radical alternatives to traditional schools (as well as, one might add, traditional families). The severity of the condemnation of all aspects of traditional schooling increased accordingly, until by the 1960s there were numerous voices characterizing the familiar trappings of typical schools—lecturing teachers, desks in rows, grades, exams and homework, and certainly anything resembling traditional methods of discipline—as not just pedagogically dubious but downright evil and oppressive, psychologically damaging and morally indefensible relics of less enlightened times. The very idea that adults would presume the authority to try to shape the developing character of children was characterized as an outrageous attempt to “play God”.³

As Kohlberg rightfully notes, as a strategy for moral education, romanticism suffers from a crucial ambiguity. Fundamentally, this approach rests on the claim that what is natural is good. This, however, can be read in two different ways, and on this turns the sense of the definition “good” being offered. This in turn determines the basic contours of any moral education to follow. In particular, Kohlberg argues it is not always clear whether the romantics wish to retain some understanding of an *objective* conception

³ Such was the charge of, for example, Carl Bereiter, in a none too subtle article called “Finding Moral Alternatives to Education”, published in 1972 (*Interchange* 3:1, 1972). It is clear the timing of the most adamant and radical protests against traditional schooling was hardly coincidental and that much of what transpired and was claimed under the banner of ‘free schools’ or ‘de-schooling’ can be understood as reflecting the wider social upheavals and liberationist protests of the 1960s. Like many contemporary debates, continued uncertainty about the place of moral education in public schools reflect the lingering fall out of those more incendiary times.

of “good” that can be used to judge the outcome of a child’s development, the beliefs and values she arrives at and the behaviors they engender, or whether they are willing to concede that “good” is a purely *subjective* value around which we cannot expect to find or build consensus.

If we go with the idea that there is some kind of objective good, the romantic approach would be resting on the claim that children will develop, by nature, morally desirable characters and behavioral tendencies. Perhaps children are by nature prone to being honest, for example, and so absent the ruinous attempts of the adults in their lives to turn children into people they aren’t, this innate honesty will develop and flourish on its own as they grow, leading children to avoid lies and deceit without the threats and pressures more commonly used to keep them in line.⁴ According to this version of romanticism, it is simply a fortuitous fact of human psychology that left to their own devices children will develop in their own ways traits and tendencies we can all praise and commend.⁵

Alternatively, it might be thought instead that there is simply no such thing as objective moral goodness and that we must instead respect and value *any* tendencies and outcomes that issue from natural, unimpeded psychological development. On this reading, moral development is *equated* with healthy development, and both are defined as what happens when individuals are allowed to grow and mature with a minimum of

⁴ Precisely this was argued by Jean Jacques Rousseau, who anticipates much of what Kohlberg would label romanticism. In *Emile* he says: ‘quote’

⁵ An example of a contemporary statement of this conviction can be found in the work of Alfie Kohn. See his *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A’s, Praise and Other Bribes*. Kohn objects strenuously to even positive attempts to “control” the behavior of children and attributes our tendency to rely on methods of control, whether in the form of rewards or punishments, to the mistaken belief that children will run riot without them. According to Kohn the effect of such misguided efforts is to undermine a child’s natural tendency to want to please adults and live within sensible limits. The belief that children’s behavior must be more overtly managed, he asserts, rests on unduly pessimistic assumptions about human nature.

outside interference. So understood, “good” is in effect defined procedurally—whatever results from an upbringing free from coercion and undue outside influence *just is* what is good and proper for the child in question. Her values and beliefs may clash substantially with those of her teachers or parents or peers, but if they are truly and authentically hers, if they issued from healthy and uncorrupted psychological growth, they are right *for her*.

As Kohlberg ably argues, either way romanticism is read it fails to avoid the same kind of moral relativism that he charged plagues the cultural transmission model of moral education. If we read the romantic dictum ‘what is natural is good’ to mean that what is natural tends towards what is objectively good, we are left wanting an account of the latter. Why, again, is it a *good* thing that children tend towards honesty (if indeed they do)? Is it really a virtue if this trait trumps loyalty even in trivial matters?

If the answer is simply that we as a culture or society *prefer* honest children over those who cover for their comrades, romanticism becomes little more than a distinct and novel method of cultural transmission. Moreover, there would seem to be no compelling reasons to prefer *its* methods over more traditional methods of instilling honesty in children, should the latter prove equally or more effective. Distinctly child-centered in its concerns and permissive in its methodology, it’s not clear that romanticism has much to offer in defense of those qualities, other than a virtually a priori faith in the inherent goodness of children and an abiding suspicion of authority. In particular, even if free schoolers and permissive parents are right that children so educated and raised turn out as well as others, given the acknowledged fact that such methods are more difficult and trying for the adults who remain responsible for children’s well being and development, it’s not clear just why the newer ways should be thought to be morally superior.

For these reasons, reading “good” in “what is natural is good” *subjectively* delivers a more consistent position, albeit one with considerable problems of its own. If allowing children great freedom in their moral development is itself morally preferable, no matter the outcome, then romantics can assert the superiority of their methods directly. In other words, if the only values that it is right for a child to learn are those that follow from her own feelings, experiences, and beliefs as these develop under the non-oppressive conditions, then there is no sense in which the values of a teacher or parent can be superior or “more appropriate.” The results of freedom are self-validating.

The fundamental question left unasked in such an approach, however, is just why freedom itself is to be so highly valued. In particular, it’s not clear when push comes to shove whether advocates of such an extreme subjectivism really mean to embrace the result of giving equal moral weight to all beliefs and values so long as they were freely arrived at. Once again, we can suspect, there’s a faith that freedom leads to the *right* values, where what counts as right will have to be identified independently. The difference is that this faith is now left tacit and unspoken. Consider the dubious implications of subjectivism should it turn out that a child tends towards racist or sexist or violently antisocial beliefs and values that educators in fact typically (and surely rightfully) abhor. As appalling as a teacher might find such a tendency, on this version of romanticism she is guilty of “trying to play God” if she exerts any effort in attempting to steer the child towards what most of us would consider *better* values. Employing an anecdote of a sort that would become a staple of conservative critiques of the kinds of moral education that became popular in the 1970s, Kohlberg cites a case of a teacher who feels unable to teach her students not to cheat on exams because she is uncertain she has

any right to “impose her own values.”⁶ However apocryphal the story, it does seem an unlikely leap of faith to suppose that children will *never* embrace, if left on their own, behaviors or values that are noxious in the eyes of most of us. More to the point, it seems perverse to conclude that anything children arrive at on their own must be embraced by the adults in her life, no matter how vile or dubious.

The Cognitive Development Approach

Cultural transmission and romanticism both fail to answer the questions Kohlberg posed to moral educators. This failure would carry over to deliberately liberal versions of either as well. Those who impose a liberal ‘bag of virtues’ on children, a bag containing virtue such as tolerance and skepticism, perhaps, would fail in its inability to justify the choice of liberal values or virtues. Liberal though they may be, such values are little more than *our* values if imposed from a position of authority and from outside. The same would hold for any version of Romanticism that simply assumes the validity of liberal values it simply hopes children will grow to embrace on their own. Reading romanticism as rejecting the existence of objectively defensible values avoids this problem, but at the obvious cost of surrendering any claims for the validity of liberal values in comparison of any other set of values a child might finally endorse. This too would undermine any confidence we might feel as moral educators working towards the cultivation of distinctly liberal sensibilities or tendencies. Together, the options canvassed by Kohlberg leave liberal moral educators unsure of just why, or even whether, they should work to further their own tradition in subsequent generations. Let’s now see if Kohlberg can do better.

⁶ Curiously similar stories are told by, among others, David S. Hunter in his important study of the development of modern moral education, *The Death of Virtue*, and Christina Hoff Sommers in a polemic against the legacy of Kohlberg and others called “Teaching the Virtues”.

Drawing on and extending the work of Jean Piaget, Kohlberg famously identifies six stages of moral development. The theory posits a stepped process in which a child grows ever more aware of her connections to others, to see things from the point of view of others, and the ability to do this in principled rather than in either egocentric or merely socially mandated ways. In moral terms, Kohlberg sees development as a process by which we move away from concerns for what is self-gratifying or what is demanded by external authority and towards a conception of what is *just* and *right*. In Kohlberg's terms, there is a universal tendency among humans to move from "Pre-conventional" or egocentric thinking that focuses only on our own immediate needs and wants, through "Conventional" thinking, or an uncritical acceptance of social rules, to a "Post-conventional" mode of thought that draws on a genuine appreciation of universal principles of justice.

Each of these major stages is subdivided into two, giving us the six stages mentioned. Briefly, the Pre-conventional stage begins with a concern to avoid negative experiences in which a child equates morality with what does and what does not result in her being punished by an adult. The next stage adds a concern to gain reward and curry favor with parents and other authorities in exchange for "good" behavior. The Conventional stage begins with a broader concern not to upset others out of recognition that they have feelings and can be made sad or hurt, etc. This is followed by recognition of social rules that all are expected to follow and are necessary for social cohesion and order—a critical step towards universalizing the circle of moral concern beyond immediate acquaintances. The post-Conventional stage begins with a realization that the social contract itself carries *moral* weight—it's an implicit agreement we have entered

into and applies equally to all in the name of some greater good. This is followed by a realization that ultimately what is served by our rules is what is right and just itself, rather than any societal interest, where this is understood mostly in terms of the realization of basic rights and duties that the social contract serves to protect.

What is most important for our present concerns are the properties of the stages Kohlberg proposes. Specifically, Kohlberg emphasizes the following:

- 1) The six steps of moral development he identifies are proper stages in Piaget's sense. This means they are invariant in the order they are reached, and each successive stage builds on and incorporates the stage prior to it, rather than simply supplanting it in the way that walking replaces crawling.

- 2) The stages are universal in the order achieved and transcend culture: each healthy individual will go through the same stages as they mature, regardless of their cultural background, and in the same order. That is, moral development is the same for humans everywhere, at least at the level described by the theory (More on this qualification shortly). Though there is individual variation in the highest stage reached and some degree of correlation between cultures and the percentage of individuals who reach a given stage, the order and content of the stages themselves is universal.

- 3) Progression through the stages can be facilitated by the right kinds of experiences that exploit and help to develop independently identifiable cognitive abilities, thus allowing for both an integration of moral psychology into cognitive psychology and for a psychologically realistic program of moral education. Of particular importance are the capacity for understanding the world from another's

perspective and the ability to think abstractly, in terms of general principles rather than immediate experiences.

Returning now to the debate about moral education that Kohlberg hoped to settle with this theory of moral development, we can see that in fact he has given himself some considerable resources in comparison with the cultural transmission approach and romanticism as has characterized them. The claimed universality of the stages is used to argue that the cognitive developmental approach alone can avoid the charge of relativism. Since the values inherent in his stages transcend culture, Kohlberg is satisfied that by rooting moral education in normal psychological development charges of relativism or arbitrariness can be turned aside. For its part, the need for proper experiences to spur development gives the educator a job to do—unlike the romantics, Kohlberg has no illusions that children will develop well or acquire the desired moral qualities if simply left to their own devices. Indeed, drawing on Dewey, he distinguishes experiences that the child might find rewarding or enjoyable or most interesting and those that are genuinely *educative*, and he equates at least some kinds of naturally tempting thinking, such as extreme self-centeredness, with moral immaturity. Egoism, he argues, is inadequate no matter how “natural” it might be for the morally undeveloped.

Lastly, because his steps are cognitive stages, Kohlberg can argue that the child herself will welcome each developmental milestone *intellectually*, by appreciating her growing ability to do more in the way of resolving dilemma and making compelling and informed moral judgments. In this way, as Kohlberg sees it his theory bridges the gap between the external imposition of values and the subjective creation of it. Triggered by experiences arranged by others, moral development is nonetheless driven by an

individual's experiences of moral decision making and analysis. Unlike the cultural transmission model, for Kohlberg there is no sense in the charge that his brand of moral education will amount to indoctrination since the validity of each step of moral maturation will be chosen by the child herself—she will be able to see for herself why it is better to think in the more developed ways. Faced with paradoxes or moral difficulties that are unresolvable from within her current stage, the child will be led to see that there is a *better* way to think about things that dissolves the tension. Leading a child to see this does not require telling her what is right, according to Kohlberg, but simply providing her with the opportunities and encouraging her to think things through in a more adequate way. Unlike the bag of virtues approach, the beliefs and values arrived at will have internal validity, having been endorsed by the child herself. At the same time, they will have an objective basis lacking in the uncritical embrace of whatever is arrived at “freely” typical of romanticism.

The Paradox Resolved?

Before turning to an evaluation of Kohlberg's argument, let's consider why Kohlberg's strategy for moral education, if successful, would count as a vindication of a deliberate liberal upbringing. The key, as we might expect, is Kohlberg's assertion that liberal values correspond to the highest level of moral development. Importantly, Kohlberg deliberately characterizes the content of each stage in a highly formal way. He is, in other words, more interested in *how* people at different stages think about moral problems and come to moral conclusions rather than the actual judgments they eventually make. Throughout his method of posing dilemmas, nothing is assumed to be a “right” or “wrong” answer. Nonetheless, even his formal characterization of each stage entails and

indeed assumes a certain characterization of morality itself, as Kohlberg readily appreciates. If both the cultural transmission and romantic models assume a moral relativism, Kohlberg forthrightly connects his own psychological theory with the traditional liberalism of Kant and Rawls.

Kohlberg can justify this identification by pointing to what moral maturation amounts to on his model, namely an increase in autonomy and critical thought. As an individual advances towards Stage VI (something he first acknowledged was only very rarely reached and later said exists only as an ideal), they progressively free themselves first from the morally arbitrary demands of their own needs and wants, and then from the coercive demands of their social and cultural setting, demands which may themselves be equally arbitrary or contingent. As with Kant, genuine moral thinking begins only when individuals transcend egoistical concerns and social pressures and come to appreciate universal principles that apply to all equally. These will be, Kohlberg asserts, principles of justice such as the demand to afford equal consideration to the rights of all.

Should this work, we would have what we've been looking for—a way of justifying the deliberate attempt to instill liberal values. Even better, by deliberately teaching a child to develop those habits of thought that we associate with autonomy, and by deliberately choosing *not* to simply instill a set of values that reflect the forces of tradition, we are not doing violence to the very autonomy we are striving to respect. Rather we are stimulating a child to grow morally in a direction that is innately proper to human beings. Being raised a liberal will have been shown to be good for you and the means of moral education can themselves respect the demands of liberal tolerance.

As this emphasis on autonomy suggests, there's a deeper sense in which Kohlberg's theory incorporates liberal moral and political values, or to put it more strongly, amounts to a psychological reformulation of liberal political theory. The genius of liberalism as a political theory is its ability to accommodate, at least in principle, diversity of moral and religious views within a cohesive and shared social order. Liberalism too strikes a balance between the external demands of a public authority--the rule of law and the exercise of state power--with respect for an individual's ability and right to formulate for herself an *internal* conception of a good life as defined by beliefs and values freely arrived at. The apparent tension between these two facets of a citizen's life is resolved in the belief that at least in principle a legitimate state will not impose laws or act in ways that could not be accepted (if not always embraced) by those being governed. The two extremes in moral education Kohlberg tries to navigate between--the indoctrination of the cultural transmission model and anomie of romanticism--echo the political extremes of tyranny and anarchy avoided by liberalism.

Problems

Does any of this really work? Let's start our evaluation of Kohlberg's ambitious argument by noting the obvious. Kohlberg's is an empirical theory that ultimately lives and dies by its empirical adequacy. Like most influential theories in psychology, the empirical record in this case is at best decidedly mixed, and just how well Kohlberg's work has stood in the face of empirically testing is itself a matter of no small dispute. Suffice to say that Kohlberg has his critics. Among the many complaints lodged against his work are those that object to the methodology he developed for judging subjects' levels of development which requires different experimenters to judge substantial and

free ranging verbal responses according to a common scale. Others object to his reliance on verbal interviews in the first place, which record what people *say* about morality in response to fictional dilemmas, as opposed to actual behavior or real world decisions. It's not clear that verbal reports are the better or truer guide to how people are actually thinking about morality.

More fundamental objections to Kohlberg's work have also been raised, including some that touch upon issues of more direct importance to our concerns. Kohlberg's straightforward identification of moral maturity with liberal values has been turned against him with the charge that he is simply attempting to privilege one moral tradition over others by way of scientific fiat. Isn't it a bit too convenient that the moral and political values personally embraced by Kohlberg himself happen to be those that stand at the pinnacle of moral development according to his own theory? Particularly worrisome for some is the implication, which Kohlberg does not shy from in his early work at least, that *cultures* can be judged on a scale of advancement according to how well or poorly they foster the moral development of their members as measured by Kohlberg's scale, a result that renders Western democracies morally superior to more traditional societies.

Lastly, it has also been argued, most famously by Carol Gilligan and others following her, that even on its own terms Kohlberg's theory captures only a part of moral thinking. While he may have made some important discoveries regarding the development of moral thinking in the realm of justice as relevant to social organization or our political life, these critics argue, Kohlberg's scale either ignores or wrongly slights patterns of moral thinking that are more appropriate to other areas of human affairs, such

as intimate relationships. A significant focus of such criticisms remains Gilligan's claim, itself controversial, that the mode of moral thinking unduly privileged by Kohlberg is more typically male, and that patterns of moral sensitivity more typical of women are dismissed or devalued.

These are all important arguments that ought collectively at least temper our hope that psychology can provide a way to resolve our moral uncertainties. While Kohlberg's work has been refined, supplemented, and surpassed in important ways, on the whole it remains one of the most thoroughly worked out and the most widely appealed to theory of moral development available within empirical psychology. The extent to which it suffers from empirical and theoretical shortcomings as well as the degree to which it has yet to be fully accommodated by other branches of psychology, is more a reflection of psychology's continued fragmentation and limits than failures on Kohlberg's part. Given the fragmentary character of developmental psychology as a whole, it is no surprise that we lack still a fully compelling and uncontroversial account of moral development.⁷

Philosophical Failings

Keeping all this mind, I will now argue that whatever its empirical limitations, Kohlberg's theory fails to do the *philosophical* work he was hoping it could do in the debate about moral education, and that Kohlberg's failures point to continuing

⁷ This is not the place to pursue it, but it seems to me there's a case to be made that the very idea of "moral development" as *psychological* phenomenon needs considerably more scrutiny than it's received to date. Kohlberg is typical of psychologists in trusting that moral philosophers have identified a valid and independently specifiable phenomenon called "morality" and that the concepts and classifications they use to study it—the conceptual apparatus of duties, principles, values, virtues, responsibility, desert, etc.—will map on in empirically interesting ways to what happens when children learn to manage relationships and navigate their social world. This amounts to the assumption that on some level ordinary people think about moral issues the way moral philosophers—or, more precisely, *Western* moral philosophers—think about moral issues. This is not an assumption that should escape very careful questioning.

weaknesses in philosophical attempts to resolve the paradoxes of liberal moral education.

We can begin by recalling a critical feature of Kohlberg's stages, which is that they are defined mostly in formal terms. Kohlberg distinguishes the moral reasoning of a young child in Stage I from a more sophisticated teenager in Stage IV, and both from an adult in Stage V, not in terms of the particular judgments they pass, but the kinds of reasons they offer in explaining those judgments. While all three may agree that stealing is wrong, for example, their respective levels of moral sophistication will differ because the child will advert to the threat of punishment in saying why stealing is wrong—"If I steal something I'll get a spanking"—while the teen will show appreciation for the collective need to follow the law—"we can't all break the law any time we feel like it because that would lead to chaos"—while the adult may recognize a universal duty to abide by laws that goes beyond a simple deference to social authority—"we all benefit from the rule of law and agree to follow the rules, so therefore it's wrong to steal." This is essential to the movement Kohlberg traces from the egocentric concerns of the child, who simply wants to avoid the unpleasantness of a spanking, to the more universal concerns of more mature thinkers who recognize the force of obligations and duties. The further along we move, the more abstract and more universalistic our moral concerns become—what matters in the post-Conventional stages are *principles*, such as justice as rights, rather than particular values (avoiding pain) or rules (it's unlawful to steal).

As Kohlberg duly notes, moral principles are not rules, in the sense that a demand that the rights of all be respected equally doesn't tell us specifically what we can and cannot do in the way that a rule against stealing does. This leaves us with a sizable gap

between the conceptual resources available to thinkers in Stages V or VI and the actual judgments about specific acts we hope they will make. What, exactly, gets us from the realization that we have a duty to respect the rights of all equally to the conclusion that we ought not to steal in this or that setting? Advanced thinkers, in other words, have to have developed some way to judge that stealing constitutes a violation of an individual's rights, and to discern what in this or that context constitutes theft. Given its formalist character, Kohlberg's theory turns out to have little to say about this aspect of our moral thinking.

This gap between Kohlberg's universal principles and actual moral judgment leaves a lot of psychology unexplained. For example, presumably we want to know if, to what extent, and most importantly, *why* a person's moral judgments persist across stages. In particular, it is surely an important question, one we would expect is directly relevant to moral development, whether or not a person's experiences in being punished for stealing as a child, say, has anything to do with her judging stealing wrong as an adult, despite the different justifications she might offer at ages five and twenty five. We should also wonder whether her living in a social setting that consistently and strongly discourages stealing may help to explain the persistence of the belief that stealing is wrong over the course of her moral development.

We can make the same point going in the other way, and this is in fact more important: if Kohlberg's stages are as universal and invariant as he maintains, we surely need an explanation as to why individuals at the same stage of moral development can nonetheless disagree in their moral judgments. This may not often happen with stealing as such, but it is easy to see that Kohlberg is being at best naïve, and at worst begging

questions, when he supposes that morally mature adults will converge on their judgments about the morality of capital punishment or abortion or American foreign policy simply on account of their reliance on abstract principles of justice when confronted with moral dilemmas.⁸ Rather, we should expect actual experiences with shared values and the social transmission of actual beliefs to play an essential role in forming a person's opinions about these much more complex and controversial issues. In short, it seems Kohlberg lacks an account of moral diversity at the level of content. This, I want to suggest, presents a considerable challenge to the idea that his theory provides a basis for moral education.

I suggested above that there are some deep parallels between Kohlberg's theory of moral development and modern liberal thinking. These parallels begin to break down, I think, at the point where the seemingly ineliminable diversity of moral and religious beliefs and values is acknowledged as it was by Kohlberg's colleague at Harvard, John Rawls. Briefly put, Kohlberg underestimated the role of what John Rawls came to call the "burdens of judgment" that lead rational people of good will to disagree profoundly on fundamental moral questions, leading to the pluralism that marks modern democratic societies. These burdens are described by Rawls as "the many hazards involved in the correct (and conscientious) exercise of our powers of reason and judgments in the

⁸ Kohlberg in fact did tend to think that mature thinkers will converge in their judgments on precisely these questions--he plainly expected these thinkers to come to agree with him that abortion can be permissible, while neither capital punishment nor the American war in Viet Nam war could be justified. To read Kohlberg's work from the 1960 and early 1970s is to see just how thoroughly his political leanings were reflected in his work as a psychologist.

ordinary course of...life.”⁹ Among these hazards, Rawls specifically mentions the extent (whatever it is) to which “the way we assess evidence and weigh moral...values is shaped by our total experience, our whole life up to now.” Given a diversity of life experience among citizens in modern liberal democracies, Rawls argues, we can expect a pluralism of moral judgments to be a basic feature of such societies. [Need some footnotes here]

Some striking research in social psychology shows just how deep the burdens of judgment can influence moral judgments and sensibilities. In a celebrated book called *Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Violence in the South*, Richard E. Nisbett and Dov Cohen explore the often subtle but very influential ways in which cultural differences between American males native to the Southern states and those who grow up in the North color moral perceptions on a variety of issues. Southern males are, for example, significantly more likely to express approval of capital punishment, spanking children, and expansive gun rights, and they are also considerably more forgiving of crimes precipitated by insults or predictable sexual jealousy. Nisbett and Cohen offer an interesting and controversial explanation for these differences that draws on the economic differences between the original American North and South, but what is important here is the demonstrable extent to which members of these subcultures can interpret a single event—a jealous husband assaulting an unfaithful wife, for example—in very different ways.

It is a signature feature of modern liberal thought to argue that the proper political response to the pluralism that results from the burdens of judgment is state neutrality between what Rawls called comprehensive doctrines, or the distinct and diverse world

⁹ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* 2nd Edition, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), pg. 56.

views individuals use to navigate and give sense to their respective lives. According to Rawls, political disputes should be voiced using the language of Public Reason, a kind of stripped down moral vocabulary that appeals to constitutional principles of justice and uncontroversial science while itself remaining neutral between comprehensive doctrines. One would hope, for example, that Southern and Northern males could set aside their deeper differences and for political and legal purposes agree on such basics as equal rights when evaluating the legal responsibilities of jealous husbands. Rawls also argues the exercise of state power should always be defensible from a perspective that is neutral between comprehensive doctrines.

What I want to suggest is that the formalism of Kohlberg's stages works as the counterpart to the ideal of state neutrality in Rawls' political theory. Precisely because he wants the beliefs and values of the individual to emerge out of her own (structured) psychological development, Kohlberg's remains silent on just what those beliefs and values ought to be. Instead he focuses on the grounds on which particular beliefs and values will be defended by the morally mature, much in the way that Rawls posits Public Reason as a procedural limit on the exercise of state power among reasonable citizens by abstracting away from particular comprehensive doctrines. For Kohlberg, the rationally structured principles of justice in the Post-Conventional stages allow reasonable people to address moral dilemmas free from social or egocentric distortions by abstracting away from the particular beliefs and values they might have acquired along the way.

The underlying common element that accounts for these parallels is the liberal assumption that individuals are able and so should be free to arrive at their own beliefs and values. How exactly they do this is a process that for Rawls is invisible to politics,

and which for Kohlberg is invisible to developmental psychology. It is not the job of the state to dictate to private citizens what they should believe about contentious matters of morality, and it is not the job of Kohlberg's theory of moral development to dictate the solution to real life Heinz dilemmas (or, more realistically, debates about abortion, war, and capital punishment). But this is the point at which things seem to break down for Kohlberg's attempts to ground a psychologically informed model of moral education. If we are assuming children need some kind of moral education, we should not also be assuming that they are capable of arriving at substantive moral judgments on their own. If even on his own terms Post-conventional moral thinking underdetermines actual moral judgments on controversial issues, Kohlberg has left us with no clear sense of just where those judgments should come from if not from the forces that that thinking is supposed to transcend. Rawls' answer to this question--that an individual's particular moral beliefs and values should come from that individual's particular comprehensive doctrine--isn't available to Kohlberg, at least not so long as what he is offering is a model of moral education. Children don't (yet) *have* comprehensive doctrines and whether they should have one imposed upon them, and if so which one, is precisely the issue.

Whether or not Rawls' insistence that a liberal democratic state remain neutral between comprehensive doctrines makes for a workable political theory, it is clear that Kohlberg's attempts to find a comparable neutrality between the kinds of effects a child's actual experiences will have on her substantive moral thinking is not an option for moral educators, whatever its merits as descriptive psychology. Unlike the state vis-a-vis private citizens, a parent or teacher charged with the moral education of a child cannot avoid taking some responsibility for the particular beliefs and values she arrives at. To

assume that responsibility is what it is to assume the role of a moral educator. In particular, parents and teachers need to decide what sorts of habits of thought and behavior, determinant to whatever extent they are of a child's future moral judgments, ought to be instilled. Even a conscious decision to instill none deliberately is a way of answering this question--it is, in fact, to give the answer defended by romantics. Conversely, to answer it by difference to the prevailing norms of a community seems to take it us, in one way or another, in the direction of a bag of virtues. As the example of differences in the moral judgment of Northerners and Southerners illustrated, just which community is in play can make a substantial difference. For all of Kohlberg's ingenuity, for all he's told us about the stages of growth in moral thought, either the habits that give content to a person's reflection will reflect the moral wishes of the adults doing the educating, or they will default to whatever the child develops if left to her own devices.

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