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SOME PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS
IN THE
COGNITIVE-DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH
TO MORALITY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines some of the philosophical problems which underlie the cognitive-developmental approach to morality as it has been presented in the Piaget-Kohlberg theory. This theory of moralization is reviewed, synthesized and evaluated in order to demonstrate the substantial body of empirical research on which it is founded and to focus on some of the unresolved theoretical issues and methodological problems such as stage generality, motivation, decalage and cross-cultural validity.

The problem of explanation is discussed in relation to the appropriateness of alternative modes and it is concluded that, as cognitive-developmentalism is a theory of human action, it requires an explanatory paradigm which takes cognizance of (i) the agent's viewpoint and reasons for acting, (ii) a molar level of behavioural analysis, (iii) enabling conditions for choice, and (iv) cognitive processes of appraisal and judgment. The assumptions underlying the cognitive-developmental explanation of moral judgment are examined in relation to the proposed paradigm. It is contended that the concept of judgment, which is central to the theory, is not adequately defined and its logical status within the practical reasoning process is not explicated within the cognitive-developmental theory. The prescriptivism which is assumed by the theory does not explain the logical connection between reasons for action and the universalizable imperative; nor does it adequately account for discrepancies between judgment and action.

Kohlberg's approach to morality lies within the Kantian tradition but even within this context his theory entails a number of metaethical problems. In the present thesis, it is argued that the theory provides no adequate criteria for defining the moral domain and that its claim for formal universality of moral principles cannot be supported. Kohlberg's moral position is inconsistent and shifts between formal prescriptivism and a naturalistic claim for the place of justice as the supreme moral principle. The problem of justification for moral principles is evaded. By emphasizing

the cognitive aspects of moral judgment and the place of prescriptive principles at the highest stage, the theory neglects the affective and motivational features of morality and the influence of beliefs, habits and personal ideals on moral conduct. It is argued that Kohlberg's claim for the isomorphism of psychological and normative structure cannot be supported and his argument for the solution of the is/ought problem remains untenable.

Finally, Kohlberg's developmentalist ideology is discussed with special reference to educational implications. It is argued that there is a sufficiency fallacy in cognitive-developmentalism and that the theory is equivocal in its employment of the concepts of rationality and autonomy. An attempt is made to define these concepts in relation to development and education in order to illustrate the limitations of Kohlberg's concept of 'cognitive stimulation' and his advocacy of 'development' as an aim for education.

The importance of Kohlberg's theory is not disputed in this thesis but it is argued that he claims too much for it in relation to the philosophical problems which it entails and the relevance to moral education which it implies.

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The germination of this thesis occurred while I was attending the Annual Conference of The Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia in August, 1972. Professor R.S. Peters was present at that conference and his papers on freedom and moral education showed that he had given considerable attention to the work of Lawrence Kohlberg. He recognized the important contribution which this psychological theory had made to education, but he intimated a number of philosophical reservations.

As I was then employed as a practising educational psychologist as well as engaged in the study of educational philosophy, I became aware of the important relationship between these two disciplines and the need to ensure that psychological research and theory is built on sound philosophical foundations. The philosopher can enlighten the psychologist's view not by the answers he can provide but rather, by the questions which he asks. This thesis has not aimed at providing answers but it is hoped that the questions which have been raised will contribute to the understanding and application of Kohlberg's important work.

I hope that the finished product is worthy of the excellent guidance and learned support which I have received during the writing of it from Dr G.R. Bassett and Mr. A.W. Cooper. Not only has their time and attention been generously given, but their passion for the canons of reason has been infectious. Acknowledgement is due also to Dr. D.M. McAlpine who made some valuable comments on the initial proposal and to Professor C.G.N. Hill who has been a guiding influence in the background.

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CHAPTER 1

AN INTRODUCTION

The main stream of theoretical psychology up until the mid 1950's appears to have intentionally avoided the use of such words as "moral" and "morality." Indeed, it is only in the past decade that these words have appeared with growing frequency in the lists of contents of the most eminent psychological journals.¹

The reason is partly historical. In establishing independence from the mother-discipline psychology needed a language of its own and the concept of morality was too deeply imbedded in the long tradition of Western Philosophy to acquire a new meaning within the aspiring science of psychology. Consequently, to even speak of the psychology of morality involved difficulties for both the psychologist and the philosopher. For the former it suggested a subject which was too clouded by subjective uncertainty to ever be studied by empirical methods: for the latter it suggested an ill-considered advocacy of some kind of naturalistic ethical position. However, the really great thinkers in modern social science (Durkheim, Weber, Freud, William James, George Herbert Mead) have recognized the fundamental place of morality in any study of human behaviour which claims to be comprehensive.

In the 1920's there was great interest, particularly amongst American psychologists, in the "psychology of moral conduct." However, the Character Education Enquiry (Hartshorne and May, 1928-30) appeared to demonstrate that most so-called moral behaviour is situation specific and not explained by underlying psychological traits. The subject fell into neglect although, in 1932, Piaget's work, "The Moral Judgment of the Child" was first published in English. The impact of this work was not felt for at least twenty years.

1. For recent comprehensive reviews of these studies see Hoffman, 1970; Wright, 1971; Graham, 1972; Hogan, 1973. Research in the cognitive-developmental field is reviewed in Chapter 2.

The revival of interest in moral psychology has been generated to a great extent by the work of Lawrence Kohlberg and his colleagues in a number of recent studies beginning with his own doctoral thesis in 1958.

At the very beginning of his work, Kohlberg makes the point that the central problem of developmental psychology is an answer to the question: "How does man become moral?" rather than the traditional question: "How does the child learn his culture?" (Kohlberg, 1958 p.1.). He claims that traditional approaches to morality have either (a) taken morality as being conformity to culture-bound norms (eg Durkheim or (b) equated conscience and morality with concepts such as "superego" or "unconscious guilt" (eg Freud).

Both of these approaches are denounced as inadequate and a conception of morality as action based on moral judgment is advanced.

"An action, regardless of its consequences or its classification by the culture, is neither good nor bad unless it has been preceded by a judgment of right or wrong" (Kohlberg, 1958, p.5.)

A statement of this kind requires a changed view of the subject-matter of psychology. To use the terms of a psychologist writing about the complex and fundamental subject of motivation, it requires a change from a view of man as a PAWN to a view of him as an ORIGIN. (DeCharms, 1968, pp 272-74). The emphasis moves from what is done to the individual to what the individual does.

Such a change in emphasis now goes virtually unquestioned in the literature. The following statement, for example, is given as a definition of the subject-matter in a recent book on "The Psychology of Moral Behaviour" which makes the prior claim to being committed to the empirical approach.

"Moral behaviour consists of all the various things people do in connection with moral rules."
(Wright 1971, p. 15).

It is significant that nearly all the research covered in Wright's cogent and useful synthesis has been carried out since 1958, which is the year of Kohlberg's thesis. This is not to say that Kohlberg's influence is responsible for stimulating all recent research into moral behaviour, but it is to recognize that Kohlberg's work has coincided with a

very important and basic shift in the philosophical assumptions underlying the explanation of human behaviour in social science.

Extending on the work of Piaget (1932) Kohlberg has carried out extensive research into the development of moral judgment and has gradually built up, over a fifteen year period, an elaborate cognitive-developmental theory of morality which has produced an important approach to moral education. The essence of this theory is that there are culturally invariant sequences in the development of moral thinking which arise from the interaction between the child's conceptual scheme and the particular experiences with which he is confronted.

The cognitive-developmental approach to morality is now widely accepted by psychologists and educators, but there have always been expressions of reservation from the philosophers, particularly those who have a special interest in the field of education (eg Peters and Wilson). The philosophical problems which are involved in Kohlberg's theory of moral development, as with most psychological theories, are extremely complex and not easily defined. But they are problems which demand consideration and, even if ultimate solution is not possible, the theory gains in credibility if it is able to withstand critical analysis of its constituent concepts.

It can be fairly said that, in moving from empirical research findings concerning the nature of children's moral thinking to statements about the concept of morality (both in its formal and substantive aspects) and assertions about the aims, methods and content of moral education, the cognitive-developmentalists make a number of assumptions of a metaethical and epistemological kind which are largely unstated or, where they are discussed, the treatment of which is lacking in logical clarity or philosophical rigour.

Kohlberg has been accused of prescribing a morality. He makes use of an explanatory paradigm in which man is regarded as an agent of action, yet he seems to avoid dealing with some of the perennial problems of moral philosophy such as definition, justification, the logic of choice, weakness of will - even though his empirical findings have a direct bearing on these vexed questions.

If the discipline of moral philosophy and the practice of moral education are to be enriched by the research findings of developmental psychology, then it is important to expose ambiguities and examine unstated non-empirical assumptions.

It is the aim of this thesis to move some of the way along this difficult interdisciplinary path. It is recognized that the task of erecting a conceptual bridge between the psychology of morality and the philosophy of morality is not able to be achieved within the limits of the present thesis but it is intended to lay out some of the necessary building materials.

It is important at the outset to examine and review the Piaget-Kohlberg theory and provide a critical account of the research which has been carried out on its internal validity and the external correlates of moral maturity, which is the central dimension. Chapter 2, therefore, will comprise a synthesis of the research and theory which constitutes the cognitive-developmental approach to morality.

The purpose of Chapter 3 is to consider a problem which is of utmost importance to any scientific theory, namely, the problem of explanation. We can only begin to appreciate the validity and usefulness of any theory when we have some understanding of what it is setting out to explain and what kind of explanatory model it employs. It is argued that the cognitive-developmental theory is a theory of human action and such a theory rests on certain assumptions about man as a subject for science. An attempt will be made to explicate these assumptions.

The concept of judgment is one which entails many problems, yet it has a central place in theories of moral development. Philosophers have given considerable attention to the analysis of these problems, but psychologists have tended to employ the concept with some kind of operational definition, but with insufficient consideration of its logical status. In Chapter 4 of the present thesis an attempt will be made to examine the meaning of this concept within the cognitive-developmental framework.

The aim of Chapter 5 is to open up some of the problems of moral philosophy which are embedded in Kohlberg's theory.

It is not possible to consider these problems from all points of view, therefore, an attempt is made to examine the moral statements which Kohlberg makes and to analyse these within the contexts of the ethical theories to which he claims allegiance. Because his approach is essentially Kantian, most of the discussion will occur within a context of this moral tradition. It is recognized, however, that it would be possible to examine Kohlberg's moral position in relation to a number of other philosophical traditions.

Finally, in Chapter 6, Kohlberg's ideological perspective as a developmentalist is discussed, particularly as it relates to education. Kohlberg has claimed that "a cognitive-developmental psychological theory can be translated into a rational and viable progressive educational ideology" (Kohlberg and Mayer, 1972, p. 450). This is an acknowledgment that there are unavoidable metaphysical assumptions about the nature of moral freedom and, ultimately, human existence itself, in any theory which asserts that some individuals are more morally mature than others and therefore are more autonomous and morally superior. Kohlberg doesn't evade this problem entirely, but his expressed understanding of it is both inconsistent and somewhat confused.

The present thesis does not set out to diminish the stature of a theory which has added more to our understanding of moral development than any other single contribution in the psychological literature. The aim is merely to expose some nerves with the hope that the relevance and value of the cognitive-developmental approach can be better understood.