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Taking Development Seriously: Critique of the 2008 *JME* Special Issue on Moral Functioning

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Abstract

This essay comments on articles that composed a *Journal of Moral Education* Special Issue (September, 2008, 37[3]). The issue was intended to honor the 50th anniversary of Lawrence Kohlberg's doctoral dissertation and his subsequent impact on the field of moral development and education. The articles were characterized by the issue editor (Don Collins Reed) as providing a "look forward" from Kohlberg's work toward a more comprehensive or integrated model of moral functioning. Prominent were culturally pluralist and biologically based themes, such as cultural learning; expert skill; culturally shaped and neurobiologically based predispositions or intuitions; and moral self-relevance or centrality. Inadequately represented, however, was Kohlberg's (and Piaget's) key concept of development as the construction of a deeper or more adequate understanding not reducible to particular socialization practices or cultural contexts. Also neglected were related cognitive-developmental themes, along with supportive evidence. Robert Coles's account of a sudden rescue is used as a heuristic to depict Piaget's/Kohlberg's approach to the development of moral functioning. We conclude that, insofar as the Special Issue does not take development seriously, it moves us not forward but,

instead, back to the problems of moral relativism and moral paralysis that Kohlberg sought to redress from the start of his work more than 50 years ago.

Introduction

Children around the world grow beyond the superficial in their moral understanding as they become adolescents and adults. Perhaps no developmental psychologist has advanced this moral developmental thesis more boldly and extensively than did Lawrence Kohlberg. His "choice of topics" in the 1960s, namely, moral development, "made him something of an 'odd duck' within American psychology" (Brown & Herrnstein, 1975, p. 307). Social scientists at the time might have spoken of cultural learning, internalization, and value transmission—but not of moral development. Kohlberg's insight, as Elliot Turiel (2008) pointed out in a foreword for a recent *Journal of Moral Education* (*JME*) Special Issue, was that culturally pluralist and biologically based socialization approaches—although relevant—are not tantamount to basic cognitive moral development (pp. 281, 285). Although the Special Issue was dedicated to commemorating Kohlberg's legacy (its publication was timed to coincide with the 50th anniversary of Kohlberg's 1958 dissertation), Kohlberg's developmental thesis and insight—indeed, the key themes of his cognitive developmental approach—were scarcely represented.

This essay provides a critical commentary on that Special Issue. Issue authors Daniel Lapsley and Patrick Hill (2008) acknowledged Kohlberg's aim of using universally evident, progressively adequate stages of moral judgement as a bulwark against the moral relativism implicit in socialization approaches. With his challenge to cultural relativism, his universality claims, and his empirical work on moral judgement stage development across cultures, Kohlberg eventually became one of the most frequently cited names in the social and behavioral sciences (Haggbloom et al., 2000). Also contributing to his prominence were his articulation of the legitimacy of the study of morality beyond the humanities and in the social sciences; his defense of the cognitive-logical aspect of morality; his work on morality in practice (especially, his Just Community work in moral education); and his integration of ethical philosophy with social science, especially to justify the study of moral universals. His (and Piaget's) cognitive developmental approach to morality continues to be represented in virtually every contemporary developmental psychology textbook.

According to its guest editor (Don Collins Reed), the *JME* Special Issue provided a "look forward" from Kohlberg's work toward a more comprehensive or integrated model of moral functioning. Contributing toward an ostensibly new, more integrated model were emphases on culturally pluralist and biologically based socialization themes, such as cultural learning; expert skills; culturally shaped and neurobiologically based predispositions or intuitions; and moral self-relevance or centrality. Absent from these themes, however, was the Piagetian/Kohlbergian concept of development as the cross-cultural construction of a deeper or more adequate understanding. This omission may have been intentional. Although they acknowledged Kohlberg's nonrelativistic aim, Lapsley and Hill (2008) declared that Piaget's and Kohlberg's cognitive developmental approach has suffered "collapse" and must give way to new approaches such as those articulated in the Special Issue (p. 314).

Did the Special Issue in fact succeed in its "look forward" to a genuinely new, comprehensive model of moral functioning? Does the Piagetian/Kohlbergian approach to morality as growth beyond the superficial in fact reflect a collapsed or failed approach that should now be discarded as the field progresses? Or did the Special Issue largely obscure the value of and evidence for the cognitive-developmental model, including its compatibility with other psychological processes (e.g., Berkowitz, 1997; Gibbs, 2010)? Turiel (2008) also noted in his foreword to the issue that "we are seeing [in the current moral development literature] some reversions to old ways in the guise of the new" (p. 285). We will argue that such reversions to the "old" (pre-Kohlbergian) way of thinking about moral development as entirely reducible to particular cultural contexts and socialization practices are evident in the ostensibly new approaches of the Special Issue. We further argue that the Special Issue inadequately represents the cognitive developmental approach. In essence, we argue for taking development seriously in the study of morality.

To make its main points, our critique uses as its vehicle Robert Coles's (1986) account of an incident in which one youth suddenly rescued another from an imminent attack. The context of the narrative is that of the desegregation movement in the United States in the 1970s. As we will see, the Coles narrative is richly complex. Although questions of race and social history are important, particularly pertinent to our use of this narrative is its heuristic value for this commentary.

Features of this sudden rescue resonate with the crucial theoretical points of our commentary. Noted at this point is simply that the rescuer (White) and rescued (African American) were both students at a previously segregated high school in Atlanta, Georgia, USA, in the 1970s. As we progressively relate this incident, three of its features will be related to important theoretical themes in the cognitive developmental approach to morality. First, although sudden, the White youth's moral act owed much to the (unconscious) consequences of conscious deliberation. Second, the youth's new moral perception was basically more adequate or profound. And finally, a primary motivational source of the youth's sudden action pertained to a perceived injustice or violation of ideal reciprocity. These points and their implications for taking development seriously are articulated in the following.

Conscious and unconscious processes are both important in the cognitive developmental approach to morality

Interestingly, the White youth described his sudden act of intervention as "the strangest moment of my life." In the weeks prior to the incident, the White youth, an "ordinary" 14-year-old in a so-called "redneck" family, had "meant it" as he had joined his "buddies" in shouting taunts and epithets at the Black youth. His "strange" moment of intervention happened as he subsequently came upon a scene of trouble:

> I saw a few people cuss at him. "The dirty nigger," they kept on calling him, and soon they were pushing him in a corner, and it looked like trouble, bad trouble. I went over and broke it up. I said, "Hey, cut it out." They all looked at me as if I was crazy. . . . But my buddies stopped. . . . Before [he] left, I spoke to him. I didn't mean to, actually! It just came out of my mouth. I was surprised to hear

> the words myself: "I'm sorry." As soon as he was gone, my friends gave it to me:
> "What do you mean, 'I'm sorry'!" I didn't know what to say. (Coles, 1986, p. 28)

We agree with Lapsley and Hill (2008) that dual processing approaches to cognition, which distinguish automatic ("System 1") from deliberative ("System 2") processes, are helpful in understanding social behavior, including this rescue. Piaget and Kohlberg did focus on the study of reasoning or explanations that tend to be "rulebased, explicit, analytical, 'rational,' conscious and controlled" (Lapsley & Hill, 2008, p. 316). On the face of it, Lapsley and Hill would seem to be correct that such a slow system—tantamount, they implied, to Piaget's and Kohlberg's entire approach to development and behavior—could have little relevance to behavior such as the White youth's sudden act of intervention. Akin to his peers' perplexed response, the youth found himself baffled at his sudden intervention and apology ("I didn't mean to . . . I was surprised to hear the words myself."). Whatever motivated his sudden act would seem to have had much more to do with the "fast" processing characterized as System 1: "heuristic processing that is associative, implicit, intuitive, experiential, automatic and tacit" (p. 316). As Special Issue authors Darcia Narvaez and Jenny Vaydich (2008) wrote in another context, "unconscious systems were directing action before the person was consciously aware" (p. 292). Again, the youth was no less surprised and baffled by his sudden behavior than were his racist peers! So conscious processes did not play an important role in the rescue—or did they?

Coles's (1986) further accounting of the incident suggests that System 2 processing may actually have played an important role. Although the 14-year-old had "meant it" as he had joined in the taunting, he had also noticed that the Black youth was someone who "knew how to smile when it was rough going [from the taunts] and who walked straight and tall, and was polite" (p. 26). The White youth had remarked to his parents, "It's a real shame that someone like him has to pay for the trouble caused by all those federal judges" (p. 26). Concurrently, he "began to see a kid, not a nigger" (p. 26). Although the prosocial moment seemed at first strange and inexplicable, he did recognize its preparation in those crucial prior weeks:

> I'd be as I was, I guess, except for being there in school that year and seeing that
> kid—seeing him behave himself, no matter what we called him and seeing him
> being insulted so bad, so real bad. Something in me just drew the line, and some-
> thing in me began to change, I think. (Coles, 1986, p. 28)

Did the youth's prior moral concern and deliberation ("It's a real shame . . .") go underground, as it were? Did "System 2" processing infiltrate "System 1" processing, such that the youth was unconsciously primed to act upon seeing the scene of physical (not just verbal) "trouble"? Lapsley and Hill did note possible "non-conscious consequences of conscious thought," that is, postconscious automaticity (p. 323; Bargh, 1996). David Pizzaro and Paul Bloom (2003) cited evidence (e.g., Moskowitz et al., 1999) that once an individual has sufficiently considered an issue such as social equality or a situation of harm and injustice, "all subsequent responses . . . might be fast and automatic, independent of any conscious reasoning" (p. 195). In the Moskowitz et al. study, high commitment to the ideal

of gender equality was associated with the fast, automatic, preconscious control of pejorative gender stereotypes. Is it accurate to imply that postconscious automaticity was not recognized in Piaget and Kohlberg's approach to moral development and social behavior?

Despite its methodological prominence, conscious reasoning does not exhaust Piaget's and Kohlberg's cognitive developmental understanding of cognitive processes and structures. These theorists were not so naïve as to think that moral functioning entails only conscious concepts. Piaget's (1972/1973) work on the "cognitive unconscious" (p. 31), for example, may help us with an intriguing question: Why didn't the youth initially recall his prior lament to his parents at the unfair treatment accorded the African American youth? Piaget wrote that a person's conscious thought and action are "directed by structures whose existence he ignores [cf. System 1] and which determine . . . what he 'must' do." Especially ignored—even suppressed from awareness—are cognitive structures that contradict the person's conscious beliefs, self-concept, or ideology: an incompatible scheme cannot, of course, be integrated into the system of conscious concepts [cf. System 2] (pp. 33, 39). Did such a cognitive "scheme" or structure prompt the White youth's sudden action (see below)? Did he initially forget his earlier recognition of unfairness to the Black youth because that injustice concern was "incompatible" with his still-in-place "system of conscious concepts," that is, his segregationist beliefs? That possibility is certainly consistent with Piaget's analysis (along with Pizzaro and Bloom's [2003] critique and Moskovitz et al.'s [1999] research).

The interplay of conscious and unconscious processes is in fact central to the cognitive developmental approach. Piaget (1977/2001) saw development as an ongoing process involving "reflecting abstraction" in which implicit knowledge is reconstructed at explicit levels, thus generating new structures (with new implicit knowledge subject to further reconstruction at still higher levels). Incompatibilities are resolved as the new explicit structures consolidate (the rescuer began to "advocate 'an end to the whole lousy business of segregation'"; Coles, 1986, p. 28; see below). As a developmentalist, Piaget focused on what develops and how; thus he highlighted the grasp of consciousness. He never doubted, however, that nonconscious structures and processes profoundly and pervasively influence human behavior.

Cognitive moral development is progressive, evident across cultures and relevant to social behavior

At least as important as the processes or dynamics illustrated in the rescue are the basic patterns or structures of moral understanding, judgment, and perception. The White youth seems to have been impressed with the African-American youth's dignity "no matter what we called him." He even came to see "a kid, not a nigger." He seemed to appreciate a fine person, an authentic moral character morally above the level of trading insults. Could the rescuer's new perception have been more adequate or profound?

The *JME* Special Issue authors characterized more "developed" moral functioning as more "complex" (Haste & Abrahams, 2008, pp. 378, 384; Reed, 2008, p. 373), "sophisticated" (Haste & Abrahams, 2008, p. 383; Frimer & Walker, 2008, p. 340), expert or skilled (Haste & Abrahams, 2008, pp. 379, 383; Narvaez & Vaydich, 2008, p. 303), "comprehensive"

(Reed, 2008, p. 359) and more fully "transmitted," "mediated," "appropriated," or "internalized" within a given "social-cultural and institutional context" (Haste & Abrahams, 2008, pp. 379–380, 389; cf. Reed & Stoermer, 2008, p. 423). Absent from these characterizations, however, is the chief cognitive developmental characterization of more developed functioning as identifiably *more adequate or profound across contexts*. In other words, beyond the acquisitions of learning relative to culture, or intuitions differently shaped in different societies, one can identify a basic development that is *progressive* (Moshman, 2005). John Flavell and colleagues (2002; cf. Gibbs, 2010) have for many years emphasized that "both social and non-social cognitive development tend to proceed from surface appearances" or "salient features of the here-and-now," to "the construction of an inferred underlying reality" (p. 181). Sociomoral developmentalists, such as Piaget (1932/1965) and Kohlberg (1964, 1984), identified young children's characteristic tendency to conflate morality with size, power, impressive appearances and outcomes, instrumental considerations or egocentric desires. Preschoolers' accounts of having been hurt or having hurt another person "lack depth" and tend to be "utterly behavioral," featuring simple one-way acts of physical harm (e.g., "Um, Jack hit me. And he also, he also kicked me") (Wainryb et al., 2005, p. 54). In contrast, older children and adolescents are increasingly likely to coordinate or shift perspectives, to refer to subtle mental states such as intentions, and to describe violations of trust in recounting interpersonal conflicts (Wainryb et al., 2005, pp. 43–54). These latter concerns are not just "different"; adolescents and adults prefer as *better* or more mature the higher-stage (versus lower-stage) moral considerations (e.g., Boom et al., 2001; Rest et al., 1969; Walker et al., 1984).

In Piaget's work, the mature morality evidenced by the older child or adolescent entails mutuality, forgiveness, and ideal moral reciprocity:

> [The child's] concern with reciprocity leads [him or her] beyond . . . short-sighted justice. . . . The child begins by simply practising reciprocity, in itself not so easy a thing as one might think. Then, once one has grown accustomed to this form of equilibrium in his action, his behavior is altered from within, its form reacting, as it were, upon its content. What is regarded as just is no longer merely reciprocal action, but primarily behavior that admits of indefinitely sustained reciprocity. The motto "Do as you would be done by," thus comes to replace the conception of crude equality. The child sets forgiveness above revenge, not out of weakness but because "there is no end" to revenge (a boy of 10). Just as in logic, we can see a sort of reaction of the form of the proposition upon its content when the principle of contradiction leads to a simplification and purification of its initial definitions, so in ethics, reciprocity implies a purification of the deeper trend of conduct, guiding it . . . to . . . the more refined forms of justice. (Piaget, 1932/1965, pp. 323–324)

In these terms, we may surmise that the African American youth's level or stage of moral functioning may have been *deeper* than that of trading insults, revenge, and "merely reciprocal action." Gibbs's (2010) neo-Kohlbergian stage typology suggests that, beyond the

superficial moralities of Stage 1 or 2, mature moralities grasp the subtle bases of interpersonal relationships (Stage 3) and social systems (Stage 4).

It is true that we must "take cultural pluralism seriously," as Special Issue authors Haste and Abrahams urge. We must keep in mind that "the 'universals' we wish to claim may be the extrapolation of our own cultural heritage" (Haste & Abrahams, 2008, p. 391) and, accordingly, must reach out to understand others in the context of *their* cultural heritages (e.g., social perspective taking). Similarly, we must not "mistake our heuristics [intuitions] for universal truths" (Lapsley & Hill, 2008, p. 319). That is, we must take care not to assert "naïve universalisms," that is, "project [our] local model of flourishing onto the species as a whole" (Reed & Stoermer, 2008, p. 425).

Yet it is also true we must take *development* seriously and not ignore substantial evidence for developmental universals. Whatever else the rescuer may have been thinking, he did seem to perceive the humanity shared with this fine person who was wronged and about to be harmed. And that profound perception of humanity and injustice prompted him to act (as we elaborate below).

This basically more adequate perception and action resonates with a key cognitive developmental theme neglected in the Special Issue. With the possible exception of the Oser et al. (2008) article on individual and group moral development through Just Community interventions, the *JME* Special Issue articles offer little or no encouragement to the broad Piagetian-Kohlbergian universality aim of identifying a basic age trend toward more adequate morality of the right (equality, equity, fairness, justice, reciprocity) and even of the good, a growth beyond the superficial that may be common to humanity. And why should there be any such encouragement? Recall, after all, Lapsley and Hill's (2008) pronouncement of the Piagetian-Kohlbergian approach as a "collapsed" model, plagued with "doubts about its empirical warrant" (p. 314). The allegedly "new" model declares that moral functioning "is always situated within the agent's own developmental history and within the social-cultural and institutional context in which it occurs" (Haste & Abrahams, 2008, p. 383). How broadly does such a declaration extend? Does it apply not only to moral but also to kindred logical ideals (see below)? In any event, given this declaration, why would one bother to look for developmental universals? And without appeal to developmental universals, with only "situated" histories and culturally specific contexts, how can one morally evaluate as wrong and act against such human functioning such as genocide, human trafficking, rape, or child abuse?

Notwithstanding the Special Issue authors' pronouncements and declarations, substantial cross-cultural evidence is consistent with moral developmental progress and maturity in a nonrelative sense. Although scarcely noted in the Special Issue, extensive reviews of more than 100 studies in over 40 countries have identified basic qualitative levels or stages of progressively more adequate moral judgment across many diverse cultures (see Gibbs et al., 2007; Gielen & Markoulis, 2001; Lind, 2008; Naito et al., 2001; Snarey, 1985).

Furthermore, these cross-culturally evident moral judgment stages do relate to social behavior. In the case at hand, the White youth not only acted but the two youths subsequently became friends as the rescuer began to "advocate 'an end to the whole lousy business of segregation'" (Coles 1986, p. 28). And what of the judgment-behavior linkage of the rescuer's peers? Could the would-be assailants have been less mature in moral judgment?

We do not know, of course, but the possibility exists given the link between anti-outgroup ideology or distortion and moral judgment delay (Krettenauer & Becker, 2001; Larden et al., 2006). Regarding moral judgment stages and antisocial behavior, a German study (Brumlik, 1998) cited by Oser et al. (2008) reporting no relation is contradicted by two other German studies (Krettenauer & Becker, 2001; Stadler et al., 2007). Moreover, two meta-analyses (Nelson et al., 1990; Stams et al., 2006) found medium to large effect sizes for moral judgment developmental delay among juvenile delinquents versus same-aged comparison samples, even after controlling for socioeconomic status, intelligence, and other correlates (Gibbs, 2006). A review by Gibbs et al. (2007) found pervasive cross-cultural moral judgment delay among delinquents relative to matched or group-selected comparison controls.

Such developmental delay, associated as it is with diminished social perspective-taking opportunities (Gibbs et al., 2007), has obvious educational or treatment implications. Hence, the cognitive developmental approach does satisfy the "Berkowitz rule" (Lapsley & Hill, 2008, p. 313) that a worthwhile approach to morality should be supportable by educational implications. Adequately implemented intervention programs for providing social perspective-taking opportunities to antisocial youth have effected significant reductions in recidivism (see Gibbs et al., 2009).

Justice or equality is a moral motive in its own right

Given the documented relevance of moral cognition to social behavior, the White youth's moral concerns prior to the rescue warrant further discussion. He seemed to have discerned an injustice, a violation of how people should treat one another. Could that perceived unfairness have generated a (conscious or unconscious) desire to right the wrong? Could it at least have primed him potentially to intervene? The cognitive developmental claim of justice or equality as a moral motive in its own right, as elaborated below, should at least have been acknowledged in the Special Issue.

Of course, a cognitive moral motive is not exclusive, in this case or others. Certainly, the White youth's intervention would seem, from his conscious recollections, to have derived at least in part from empathic distress and other neurobiologically based dispositions or intuitions (see Gibbs, 2010; Hoffman, 2000; Snarey, 2008; cf. Narvaez & Vaydich, 2008, in the Special Issue): "seeing him insulted so bad, so real bad"; "it looked like trouble, bad trouble"; "I'm sorry." And moral attributes such as moral self-relevance or "moral centrality" may also have subsequently played a role (cf. Frimer & Walker, 2008).

But the White youth also seemed to have been perplexed by an unfairness to the Black youth, a violation of Piaget's ideal moral reciprocity: the youth recollected "seeing him behave himself, no matter what we called him." This "contrast between the Black youth's admirable conduct and the way he was treated" generated the inference that he was "a fine person who deserved better" and represented an "obvious lack of reciprocity between character and outcome"—especially, the prospective outcome of physical harm (Hoffman, 2000, p. 108). This reciprocity imbalance violated logical and moral ideals. As Piaget (1932/1965) put it, "everyone is aware of the kinship between logical and ethical norms [ideals]. Logic is the morality of thought just as morality is the logic of action" (p. 398). Justice or its violation may be a moral motive in its own right, generating its own motivating affect

known as the feeling of logical or moral necessity (see Gibbs, 2010). As Kohlberg (1984) put the point, "Violation of logic and violation of justice may arouse strong affects" (p. 63). The White youth's inference of nonreciprocity, his perception of *in*justice generated a distress akin to that of "conservational" children confronted with (spurious) nonreciprocity outcomes in the conservation task (Smedslund, 1961). Generally, the commitment of moral exemplars to moral equality "evokes a quality similar to numerical [or logicomathematical] necessity, as when one realizes that two plus two must equal four and therefore simply cannot be convinced to say that it equals something else. . . . [It is] the certainty established by logical necessity once the truth is found" (Colby & Damon, 1992, pp. 75–76).

Conclusion

In the *JME* Special Issue's concluding overview, the authors (Reed & Stoermer, 2008) suggested that the Special Issue has provided a "prospective look forward . . . from [Kohlberg's cognitive developmental] work toward a more comprehensive account of moral functioning" (pp. 417–418). The overview authors declared that the issue articles "are cognitive developmental in the general sense that they recognise the central importance of how moral agents construe their situations and of how agents' construals develop during their lives" (p. 419). Despite Reed and Stoermer's use of the word "develop," it is hard to see how "development" in the Piagetian or Kohlbergian sense is taken seriously in most of the articles. Instead of being more adequate or profound in a generic sense, "developed" moral functioning is merely more complex, sophisticated, skilled, expert, etc.—and even at that, "the very nature of 'complexity' within any domain is culture-specific" (Haste & Abrahams, 2008, p. 384). Reed and Stoermer (2008) even declare that "features of moral cognition unaffected by culture"—presumably including even logic-related features—do not exist (p. 425). It is fortunate for the rescued youth that the rescuer's moral cognition was not (segregationist) culture-specific but instead had begun to grow beyond that culture toward a more mature and veridical moral perception.

Again, individual and cultural contexts are important, but would not truly "commemorative" (Reed & Stoermer, 2008, p. 417) contributions adequately represent the themes of the cognitive developmental approach? Would not the articles seek to advance Kohlberg's efforts to move the field beyond the noncognitive reductionism (Dodge & Schwartz, 1997, p. 176) of "biological emergence" or the moral relativism of "learning [one's particular] culture" (see Turiel, 2008, p. 281)? Would not the articles acknowledge that unconscious as well as conscious processes are important in Kohlberg's and Piaget's cognitive developmental approach to morality? Would not they consider the substantial cross-cultural evidence pertaining to basic stages of moral judgment development and their relationship to social behavior? Would not they at least acknowledge the cognitive developmental claim that justice or equality is a moral motive in its own right?

In this supposed commemoration of Kohlberg's developmental enterprise with its universality aim, overview authors Reed and Stoermer (2008) even declare that moral relativism is, after all, "not so menacing" (p. 425). No more are we to develop (through social perspective-taking and reflection) a more profound moral understanding and act on it, as the White youth did. Instead, we are to gain skill in negotiating "multiple discourses" (p. 425).

By not taking development seriously, the *JME* Special Issue moves us not forward but, instead, back to the very problem of moral relativism and associated moral paralysis that Kohlberg sought to redress with his dissertation more than 50 years ago.

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