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Moral Development Theories and the Teaching of Ethics

DENI ELLIOTT

Imagine for a minute that you could choose your next door neighbor. During an interview, you ask Jones, a potential neighbor, how he feels about murder.

Jones assures you that he doesn't kill people. When you ask why he refrains, he answers, "I'm afraid I'd get caught and put in jail."

You put the same questions to Smith, your other potential neighbor, and she replies, "I could never kill a person because I believe in the sanctity of human life. I don't think I could kill even in self defense."

It takes little reflection for most people to decide that they prefer Smith to Jones as a neighbor. There is always a chance that Jones might come up with a way to murder a noisy neighbor without getting caught. Smith, on the other hand, appears to be motivated by an internal principle rather than fear of external consequences.

Ethics involves the judging of actions as right or wrong, but motivations count as well. Some reasons for actions seem better or worse than others. It is this intuition that provides the fundamental basis for theories of moral development.

Here, I discuss some uses of moral development theories in the teaching of

journalism ethics. Theories proposed by developmental psychologists Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan, are presented along with some interpretations of them within journalism ethics instruction. The theories differ from one another but are not contradictory; each theory has special insights for the professor or student.

Students enrolled in a journalism ethics class may benefit from explicit introduction to theories of moral development, but my primary focus here is the professor. The general ideas behind moral development theories — progression, universality, appreciation of various styles of reasoning, and the goal of autonomy of thought — provide a pedagogical basis from which to structure discussions of ethics.

Common beliefs

Moral development theories hold that people *progress* through a series of stages from more simplistic to more sophisticated styles of moral reasoning. This progression is analogous to the way that humans progress physically in ability to use their bodies' potentials and in the way that they progress from more simplistic to more complex cognitive processes.

Just as a child must develop recipro-

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cal leg motion before becoming able to perform the more complex physical motions of crawling or walking, moral development theorists would argue that the child must progress through stages. Just as the simplistic cognitive ability to manipulate concrete relationships broadens to include abstraction, the morally developing child acts first out of self-interest and then progresses to take other persons' concerns into account.

Second, the stages of moral development apply *universally*; theories that seek to describe human moral development are necessarily flawed if they are culturally bound. By analogy, children must make the conceptual link of word to object before they can express the more abstract comparisons between ideas. This pattern of moving from more simple to more sophisticated manipulation of language applies regardless of whether the child is developing native proficiency in English or in Arabic. No matter what language, children develop along a certain path; no matter what specific moral expectations of a community or profession, people develop along a certain path.

We can extend this analogy as a way of explaining why people develop to different levels along the moral hierarchy. A child will naturally develop a rudimentary use of his or her potentials, but will not develop more sophisticated manners of expression, cognition, or even physical prowess without the appropriate conditions for such development. As with physical or cognitive skills, people can become proficient with sophisticated moral reasoning only through practice.

Third, a person is limited by a particular stage of development. The individual will not be able to understand or appreciate reasoning that is much more sophisticated than his or her current level. On the other hand, that same person will understand, will sometimes use, and will recognize the inadequacies of reasoning that is more simplistic than the current

stage.

By analogy, someone who has picked up a tennis racquet for the first time will not be able to appreciate or use the highly refined moves of a tennis pro. But, the pro has an understanding of the more basic rudimentary skills and will, on occasion, make very basic mistakes.

A last component that is common to all theories of moral development is the natural inclination toward *autonomy*. This is the belief that individuals develop from a heteronomous view of self and goodness (controlled by external factors and other people) to an autonomous view, with the individual able and willing to take responsibility for his or her own choices.

Assumptions for journalism

Moral development theories and processes serve pedagogical purposes for the teaching of journalism ethics, if a goal for the class is the development and encouragement of morally sophisticated practitioners. While most teachers of ethical theory bristle at the thought that such instruction be intended to make their students "good," classes dedicated to the teaching of applied ethics to pre-professional students usually have some notion of encouraging careful reflection on the part of future practitioners.

And, in any case, no teaching or learning is value-free. Applied ethics, as a branch of applied philosophy, "sensitizes individuals to the goals, attitudes and values which underlie the discipline of philosophy and encourages their inculcation." This sensitizing includes the explicit expectation that students will be receptive to and tolerant of others' ideas (Bowie, p. 13), and that they will be better equipped to handle arguments at the end of the course than they were at the beginning (p. 14).

Moral development theories are consistent then with a pedagogical assumption that students should become more adept at thinking through ethical issues in the profession.

The guidelines suggested by such a perspective include:

1. The teacher of ethics should focus students' attention on how decisions in ethical quandaries are made rather than concentrating on what the decision turns out to be.

2. The teacher should help students identify and articulate the structures they are using for moral reasoning.

3. The teacher should encourage students to "try on" other styles of moral reasoning. This will both help students recognize inadequacies and challenge them to move beyond their current "stage".

4. The teacher should create a classroom environment that allows for students to practice more sophisticated levels of moral reasoning. No skill is learned through lecture.

5. The ethics classroom itself should model a highly ethical environment. The ethics teacher may not want to hold herself up as a "moral mentor," but, it is contradictory for her not to be an ethical educator. What lessons do students of ethics learn when the professor says "Don't plagiarize," and "Be an honest journalist," while showing pirated videotapes and distributing homemade anthologies in violation of copyright law? This is as important an inconsistency as if a writing course were taught by a teacher sloppy in sentence construction or disinclined to proofread his or her own work.

6. The teacher should motivate students to take responsibility for their decision-making. Indoctrination does not lead to moral growth.

Kohlberg's theory

Lawrence Kohlberg, a professor at Harvard's Graduate School of Education until his death in January 1987, devoted his professional life to the validation and refinement of Jean Piaget's discovery of children's stages of moral reasoning. Piaget, a developmental psychologist, recognized that children used a progressively more

sophisticated manner of both cognitive and moral reasoning. Kohlberg (1981, pp.409-412) describes six stages of development with three societal levels

Here I will provide a primer of Kohlberg's stage theory, using journalistic examples to clarify each stage. But, these are only examples of statements, none of which alone could be used to determine one's stage of moral development. It is possible to score an individual's stage orientation only through careful probing during an interview. For example, a reporter who says that she performs a particular task because it is her journalistic "duty" may be perceived to be operating at a higher developmental stage than if she explains to the interviewer that she does her "duty" to avoid getting fired.

Preconventional level. The two preconventional levels of moral reasoning are egocentric and dependent on some external authority.

Stage 1. Fear of Punishment. At this stage, people reason that the right action is the one that avoids punishment. A reporter who completes an assignment because he fears he will be fired if he objects may be exemplifying a Stage 1 approach.

Stage 2. Desire for Reward. At this stage, people decide that an action is right because they think they will be rewarded for the action. A photographer who takes a picture because he hopes for a Pulitzer may be illustrating a Stage 2 approach.

Conventional level. The moral agent who operates at Level B has moved beyond accepting an authority as determining right or wrong. Now, rightness or wrongness is decided by a societal, cultural, or community group.

Stage 3. Peer Approval. At this stage, a person chooses to do what's right out of a motivation of being perceived as acceptable by a peer group. The authority has broadened out from one who provides punishment or reward to include acceptance by others. The person functioning at Stage 3 gives high priority to loyalty and

conformity. The conventions of the newsroom provide the final word of how she ought to do her job, and when uncertain will do what her peers dictate as right.

Stage 4. It's the law. At Stage 4, loyalty to the system replaces loyalty to the group as motivation for doing right. The reporter who is operating at Stage 4 will obey the law or follow company policy without questioning the appropriateness of those rules.

Postconventional level. Moral agents operating at the postconventional level set aside appeals to authority or to community dictates to reason through to their own sense of what makes an action right. At this level, they have become autonomous, able to distinguish morality from self-interest or systemic rules.

Stage 5. Social Utility. What makes an action right for the person operating at Stage 5 is that the right action can be decided impartially, without appeal to specific loyalties. What is right is what brings about the greatest amount of social benefit, usually expressed as the greatest good for the greatest number. The reporter who argues that certain information ought to be published because "the public needs to know" that information may be illustrating Stage 5 reasoning.

Stage 6. Justice. The moral agent recognizes that principles of justice (understood to mean fairness and equity) form the foundation for social rules. When societal rules conflict, the agent follows the principles of justice and assumes that all humans have equal rights and that each individual should be treated as having worth and respect equal to every other person. A reporter who argues that certain information should be left out of a news story to protect the privacy of the story's subject may be acting out of a Stage 6 orientation.

Kohlberg's theory is a morality based on the concepts of individual rights and equity. Fairness, for a morally developed person within the Kohlberg schema, is

based on the notion of equal distribution. Everyone gets his or her share.

Gilligan's theory

Carol Gilligan, a student of Kohlberg's, argued (1982b) that Kohlberg's morality of rights is inadequate to explain the whole territory of moral development. That he missed certain elements of relevant morality is not surprising to Gilligan, since she charges him with failing to take into account half the world's population.

Beginning with Freud's theory that tied superego formation to castration anxiety, extending through Piaget's study of boys' conceptions of the rules of their games, and culminating in Kohlberg's derivation of six stages of moral development form research on adolescent males, the line of development has been shaped by the pattern of male experience and thought...

The notion that moral development witnesses the replacement of the rule of brute force with the rule of law, bringing isolated and endangered individuals into a tempered connection with one other, then leads to the observation that women, less aggressive and thus less preoccupied with rules, are as a result less morally developed. (p. 201).

Gilligan's analysis of the moral development of women leads her to identify a language of morality different from the Kohlberg's "language of rights that protects separation." She proposes, as an alternative, "the language of responsibilities that sustains connection" (1982b, p. 210).

Gilligan's colleague, Nona Lyons (1983), provided a comparison between Kohlberg's Morality of Justice and Gilligan's Morality of Response and Care.

Within a *morality of justice*, Lyons notes the following aspects:

1. individuals are defined as separate in relation to others;
2. relationships are grounded

in reciprocity;

3. conflicting claims are resolved by invoking impartial rules or standards; and

4. the morality of action is determined by whether each party was treated with equity.

Within a *morality of care*,

1. individuals are defined as connected in relation to others;

2. relationships are grounded in response to others on their terms;

3. moral problems are considered as issues or relationship or response; and

4. the morality of action is determined by whether relationships were maintained or restored (p. 136).

Gilligan described her "morality of care" based on an examination of women's moral development, but she does not believe that morality is a gender-based difference. In fact, Gilligan argues that the morality of justice and the morality of care form complementary aspects of the morally mature individual:

To understand how the tension between responsibilities and rights sustains the dialectic of human development is to see the integrity of two disparate modes of experience that are in the end connected. While an ethic of justice proceeds from the premise of equality — that everyone should be treated the same — an ethic of care rests on the premise of nonviolence — that no one should be hurt. In the representation of maturity, both perspectives converge in the realization that just as inequality adversely affects both parties in an unequal relationship, so too violence is destructive for everyone involved (1982a, p. 174).

Persons developing "the morality of care" described by Gilligan move from care of self to care of others to a final, mature level of integrating the caring for self with

the caring for others (1978, pp. 65-80). Gilligan describes three levels of moral development:

Level I: Orientation to Individual Survival. At this level, the person is concerned solely with herself, a self perceived as powerless.

First Transition: Selfishness to Responsibility. During the transition, the person tries on, for the first time, the feelings of others. The person in transition decides that it is responsible and mature to think about others and selfish and immature to act based on one's own desires. Yet, she still tends to blame others when she fails to do this rather than take responsibility for her own action.

Level II: Self-Sacrifice. At this level, the moral agent determines that being 'good' is sacrificing self for the good of others. Since she perceives herself as good if she is being a good caretaker, she considers "herself responsible for the actions of others, while holding others responsible for the choices she makes" (p.69).

Second Transition: Goodness to Truth. Here, the person decides that considering oneself in moral decisions is not selfish, but honest. She questions whether her caretaking can involve her *own self*. The moral agent develops a new sense of herself as also worthy of consideration. She is no longer dependent on outside perceptions of herself as caretaker to judge her adequacy.

Level III: Nonviolence. At this level, the moral agent is no longer troubled by a perceived conflict of caring for self or caring for others. Once obligation to care for all persons is understood, it automatically includes the self. The person accepts nonviolence as the ultimate principle; being moral means minimizing pain and harm for everyone.

Comparison of theories

These theories of moral development should be construed not as conflicting structures, but rather as complementary visions

of the same landscape.

Metaphorically, we might say that Kohlberg provides a highway map through the territory of morality. Gilligan provides a map of secondary roads. One can reach moral maturity by either route, but the trip will be different depending on the road chosen. Looking at a map that contains both sets of roads gives a more complete understanding of the territory. The maps can be used separately, but we naturally understand the terrain better the more cartographic interpretations we study.

Some applications

Application #1: For the teacher. An ethics teacher who has a grounding in moral development theory can analyze classroom discussion in such a way that leads to better understanding of students and thus to better discussion.

For example, I would have done a better job conducting a business ethics discussion with 8th graders recently, if I had not ignored learnings from moral development theory.

The question before the discussion group was whether or not a manufacturer of skateboards ought to place warning labels on the products. After a short but intense discussion that quickly laid the issues bare, I introduced a decision-making process based on the work of philosopher John Rawls. The Rawls Game (Green 1986) ultimately asks the decision-makers to take on an "omni-partial" view — a view that takes in the perspectives of all interested parties.

The approach, which invariably invoked thoughtful discussion on the method of ethical decision-making when presented in adult seminar groups, resulted in quiet puzzlement among the 13-year-olds. When I backed away from this approach, they again became animated. At the end of the session, they were still arguing over whether there was any moral difference if the manufacturers 1) included the labels because they were afraid they would be

punished (sued) or 2) if they including the labels because of the community goodwill generated through cooperating with the civic group lobbying for the labels.

It was not until after the discussion, when the classroom teacher remarked to me that she felt she was watching Kohlbergian development in process, that I realized why the students were puzzled. Rawls, who forms the philosophical basis for Kohlberg's most advanced stage of moral development, provided too complex a moral approach for the students. However, they were intrigued by whether or not doing something for community goodwill (Stage 2/3) made the decision-makers more moral than acting out of fear of punishment (Stage 1).

An understanding of how the morality of care orientation differs from the morality of justice orientation can help the teacher listen for alternative approaches. Is a student not 'buying into' the discussion because he or she is missing the point, or is it because the student is considering an equally valid moral question, but one different in kind from the one being discussed? When students are stuck in the argument of whose rights should be favored in a conflict, the teacher may help them find a way out by offering a different perspective: "Let's think of a way out of this dilemma that protects everyone from harm."

The teacher can also use understandings from moral development theory to guide discussions away from the content questions to the process questions. Publish or not is a relatively easy decision to make about a hypothetical case. After all, nothing is really at stake. Answering *why* publish or not is far more difficult. The 'why' questions and clarification of assumptions helps the students analyze their own methods of decision-making. Suddenly, they are on the spot instead of some hypothetical editor 'out there'.

An understanding of moral development theory can help the teacher encour-

age students to consider more sophisticated reasoning. For example, if a student says that she would follow through an assignment because she is afraid she'd get fired if she didn't (Stage 1), the teacher can ask what would be worth getting fired over.

If the student says that she would do an assignment because she might curry favor from the editor (Stage 2), the facilitator can ask in what situations would that favor not be worth the action.

If a student offers "good for society" as a reason for action (Stage 5) the facilitator can ask what assumptions are inherent in determining these specific things as good for society. If a student offers "duty" or "my principles" as a reason for action (Stage 6), the facilitator should probe to help the student differentiate among acting out of authority-dictated rules — "I'll be rewarded in heaven for doing what God says is right" (Stage 2) — and acting out autonomy. Students who are facile with considering all parties' rights might be asked how a morality of care approach might differ.

Application #2: for the students.

Moral development theories are complex; teachers should be cautioned against asking students to judge the stage orientation of decision-makers based on an hour's lecture. But, an introduction to moral development theory can help students interpret their own decision-making.

Students who are conscious of their own reasoning structure are better able to consider alternatives. The probes suggested here push students to study their processes of decision-making in new ways. An introduction to moral development theories can give students a structure within which to understand both their reasoning and the facilitator's probing.

Moral development theories can also provide tools for the students who have a tendency to resist analysis of the judgments made by news organizations. For example, some students balk at the questions, "Was that decision right? Is that

what you would have done?"

Because of their own developmental level, some students will be suspicious of ANY claim to a right answer (Perry, 1968). If students are asked instead to analyze the reasoning behind decisions, they can avoid their relativistic blocks.

A discussion plan that includes the following questions: "On what basis did the news organization decide to go for publication? Do you think that's a good reason for doing it? What might be better reason? How does this fit into Kohlberg's schema? What might Gilligan say about the relationships here?" stimulates students' moral imaginations and encourages them to manipulate the process of moral reasoning.

The lively discussion process that marks a successful ethics class can also be its downfall. Moral development theories can provide ways through the maze of ideas, concepts, and opinions that are characteristic of such courses. An unstructured discussion may pass the time but leave the students no better at thinking through problems than they were at the beginning of the course.□

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