

CHAPTER

2

MORAL STAGE THEORY

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The history of science will record the latter decades of the twentieth century as the apotheosis of the cognitive–developmental tradition in developmental psychology. This tradition has its obvious source in Piaget’s genetic epistemology and in his remarkable research program on the ontogenesis of children’s logicomathematical and scientific reasoning. But the extension of the tradition’s influence to matters of socialization, and to domains of social cognitive development, owe as much to the work of Lawrence Kohlberg and his colleagues. Piaget (1932/1965) did, of course, pioneer the study of moral judgement in children, yet it was Kohlberg’s work that galvanized a whole generation of scholars to pursue the developmental features of moral reasoning in its several sociomoral manifestations, and to explore the implications of sociomoral development for educational (e.g., Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989) and clinical (e.g., Selman, 1980) practice.

Indeed, no developmental psychologist trained in the 1970s and 1980s could safely enter the professional guild without close study of two seminal papers, “Stage and Sequence” (Kohlberg, 1969) and “From Is to Ought” (Kohlberg, 1971). These chapters are the twin pillars on which rest the theoretical aspirations of the cognitive–developmental approach to morality and socialization. Here Kohlberg attempted to show not only that the cognitive–developmental approach was a progressive problem shift over rival accounts (maturationism, associationism, psychoanalysis) of socialization, but that the “doctrine of cognitive stages” (Kohlberg, 1969, p. 352) could also provide the resources to resolve fundamental problems in ethical theory, such as the problem of ethical relativism and how to defeat it. The scope of the doctrine—its range of application and sheer audacity—defined the problematic of its time and established the terms of debate over fundamental developmental questions that still resonate today, if only in vestigial forms.

And yet to speak of an apotheosis that is now past, and of an era in moral psychology that is post-Kohlberg, is to suggest that something has happened to the status of moral stage

theory. Indeed, the claim that moral psychology is at an important crossroad is now being voiced with increasing frequency (e.g., Lapsley & Narvaez, 2005). One senses, given the slight and perfunctory treatment of moral stage theory in contemporary textbooks, and its relative obscurity at professional meetings, that the topic is more a matter of faint historical interest than a source of animated research activity on the cutting edge of developmental science.

Certainly part of the story of the declining influence of Kohlberg's moral stage theory can be traced to the general decline of Piaget's approach in developmental psychology. The influence of Kohlberg's theory has always been inextricably linked to the prestige and authority of the Piagetian paradigm. When Kohlberg talked about stage and sequence, invoked the doctrine of cognitive stages, and articulated the cognitive–developmental position on matters of socialization and education, it was with Piaget's armamentarium of conceptual tools that he staked his claims. Moreover, there is the intimation that Kohlberg's moral stage theory was the completion of Piaget's own intentions in the moral domain were Piaget not to put aside this work for other topics, which is to say that Kohlberg found the “hard” moral stages that somehow eluded Piaget (1932/1965) in his preliminary study of children's moral judgment. Kohlberg's reliance on Piaget's theory to give sense and direction to his project also meant, however, as Piaget's theory waned in influence, or was eclipsed by alternative conceptualizations of intellectual development, that Kohlberg's theory became deprived of much of its paradigmatic support.

Yet lack of paradigmatic support is not the only explanation for the current reduced status of moral stage theory (and, indeed, only shifts the argument to why Piaget's theory has drifted from view; see Lourenço & Machado, 1996). Factors internal to Kohlberg's theory, including its empirical warrant, and doubts about how to understand fundamental concepts, such as stage and structure, also must be part of the story.

This chapter describes the development of moral stage theory as it emerged within the cognitive–developmental tradition. Although the initial focus is largely on the work of Piaget and Kohlberg, as the principle architects of the cognitive developmental tradition, it would be a mistake to limit the consideration of moral stage theory to these pioneers. Indeed, a number of additional sociomoral stage progressions emerged within this tradition describing, for example, distributive justice and prosocial reasoning, along with other stage sequences that have implications for sociomoral judgment, including perspective taking, self-understanding, and interpersonal understanding. The consideration of these stages highlight issues critical to understanding social cognitive–development and the diversity of ways that stage theory has been used to describe it. Some observations about the contours of the next generation of research in moral psychology are also offered.

## PIAGET'S THEORY

### The Cognitive–Developmental Project

Piaget's life's work was an attempt to resolve fundamental problems of epistemology by appealing to the empirical record of how children reason about logical, mathematical, and scientific concepts. Similarly, Kohlberg hoped to undermine the claims for ethical relativism by examining how individuals construct moral meaning when faced with moral dilemmas. Their worked showed that reasoning about scientific and ethical concepts conform to systematic ontogenetic variation that can be characterized as *stages*. If one is to discern criteria for judging progress in science and philosophy (Piaget), or for deciding when some moralities are inadequate or unworthy of us (Kohlberg), then the data of child

development would have to matter. Of course, the stage concept had to be of a certain kind to pull this off. The naturalizing approach to ethics and epistemology required that the concept of stage be fortified with certain stringent criteria that governed when it could be used legitimately to perform the task put to it. These criteria prove less important for developmental researchers who are not as interested in resolving philosophical questions with empirical data.

### **Three Key Concepts**

*Structured wholes.* The stage concept in the cognitive–developmental tradition is inextricably linked to notions of structure and organization. Piaget’s view of structure and organization was heavily influenced by his biological approach to intelligence. In every organized totality, at every level of reality, from the organization of biological and psychological systems to the workings of sociological entities (families, society), there exists a relationship between the structured whole (*structure d’ensemble*) and its constituent parts. Hence, part–whole relationships are evident in logic (between concepts and instances of the concept); in science generally (between facts and theory); in biology (between cells and the whole organism, or between a species type and instances of a species); in psychology (between cognitive operations and the structure of cognition); in sociology (between individuals and society); and in family life (between children and the parental and family system).

But the part–whole relationship is not, however, a static feature of organized totalities. Indeed, part–whole relationships are unstable, resulting in imperfect forms of equilibrium. For example, sometimes the whole predominates over the parts (*syncretism*), and sometimes the parts predominate over the whole (*juxtaposition*). Yet unstable equilibria are capable of transforming and evolving into more stable forms. The basic relationship between parts and the whole is transformative. It is the relationship between parts and the whole that is of primary importance. What is a structured totality at one stage becomes an element or part in new configuration at a succeeding stage, a transformation that moves the structured totality from a less stable and imperfect equilibrium between parts and whole to an equilibrium that is more stable and more agile in its adaptive operations.

Two implications should be emphasized. One is that the boundary between structure and elements, between whole and parts, is a developmental construction. Hence different structural organization cannot be understood apart from the constructive, transformative operations that generate them (Broughton, 1981). A second implication is that the relationship between parts and whole is an evolving equilibrium that tends toward ideal forms that are perfected, stable, and adaptive. In its ideal form, the part–whole configuration is conserved in a dynamic system of perfect compensations that makes successful adaptation possible across a wide range of perturbations. Once more, examples abound at multiple levels of reality. The relationship between organisms (part) and the species (whole) can be described as an evolving equilibrium that tends toward perfected adaptation. In psychology, cognitive operations are organized into *structures d’ensemble* that are increasingly stable with development. In society, an ideal equilibrium between individuals (parts) and society (whole) is characterized by the operations of justice and morality.

*An evaluative criterion.* The tendency of organized totalities to develop in the direction of increasing structural adequacy and more perfected modes of operation provided Piaget with an epistemological criterion by which to make evaluative judgments: Structured totalities that come later are better than earlier forms if the later form is a product of development. To say that something has developed is to say that its mode of operation

is better, because it is more stable, more powerful, and more capable of complex adaptations. Hence, development has an internal standard of adequacy. The developmental process transforms part-whole relations in the direction of increasing articulation and differentiation (Werner, 1957) bringing the transformed *structure d'ensemble* into closer approximation to an ideal equilibrium. Structural organizations that approach the ideal equilibrium are judged more adequate than are organizations that are far from ideal. The developmental criterion of adequacy, then, distinguishes temporally early modes of operation that are unstable and less adaptive from later operations that are enduring, perfected, and adaptive.

Note that statements about development always make two claims. To say that the goal of development is to attain a particular endpoint, say, the endpoint at which a structured totality reaches its perfected mode of operation, its ideal equilibrium, is to make not only an empirical claim about the natural course of development, but also an evaluative or normative claim. One is making implicit reference to a standard that allows one to distinguish progressive development from mere change, and the standard is instantiated in one's conceptualization of the endpoint. Developmental change, if it is to count as an instance of development, is evaluated in terms of how closely it approximates the ideal equilibrium represented by the final stage of the developmental process (Kitchener, 1983). "Thus, the developmental end-state is a normative standard of reference by means of which we can evaluate the direction of development and its degree of progress towards this goal" (Kitchener, 1986, p. 29).

Note, too, that one cannot help conflating empirical claims about what is the case in the natural course of development from value-laden claims about what counts as good development. Our understanding of the end-state of development functions as a touchstone for evaluating progress in the evolution of structured totalities. To make a claim about development is to say that a structured totality has progressed to a more desirable and better mode of operation. It is good and better for *structures d'ensemble* to be adaptive rather than nonadaptive; to be ideal rather than partial; to be enduring rather than temporary; to be stable rather than unstable. In this way, factual-empirical (what is the case) and evaluative-normative (what is good or ought to be the case) issues are always mutually implicated in developmental studies. Kohlberg (1971, 1973a) made use of these claims to assert that later occurring moral stages are better than developmentally prior stages on both psychological (factual-empirical) and ethical (evaluative-normative) grounds, and that the study of moral development necessarily entails mixing factual (*is*) and normative (*ought*) claims, a position that has been denounced as the *naturalistic fallacy* in ethical theory.

*Genetic epistemology.* Piaget's developmental criterion was also crucial to his genetic epistemology, which was an attempt to "explain knowledge on the basis of its history, its sociogenesis and especially the psychological origins of the notions and operations on which it is based" (Piaget, 1970, p. 1). It attempts, in other words, to discover the developmental origins of knowledge to sustain rational claims as to why one system of philosophy, or one branch of logic, or one scientific theory, should be preferred over another. In Piaget's view, there is a complementary relationship between the psychological formation of knowledge as it might occur during the course of child development and the formation of knowledge as it might occur in the history of science. The very criteria that one uses to ascertain progressive change in cognitive development could also be applied, in turn, to explain progressive change in metaphysics, logic, and science. What counts as growth and progress in the developmental history of children's understanding

of reality could also serve as criteria for what is to count as growth and progress in the historical development of the sciences. In this way, epistemological questions about the adequacy of knowledge claims, about the comparability of theoretical systems and the possibility of progress and growth, are turned into psychological questions about children's cognitive development (where *cognitive development* is understood biologically, in terms of structure, equilibrium, and adaptation). In this way, epistemology is naturalized by biologically informed studies of intellectual development.

In his seminal early studies, for example, Piaget showed that children's understanding of reality begins in an egocentric confusion of subjective and objective, but ends with a more scientific understanding of physical objects and causal events. But these developmental facts also bear on the theory of knowledge. Indeed, Piaget argued that two epistemological options are undermined by these stage progressions. The *empiricist* option suggests that children acquire their notions of reality as a result of environmental influence. Children are molded by their context from the outside in. One imagines Bacon's naked facts of nature impressed on Locke's *tabula rasa*. Yet the empiricist option is refuted by the fact that children assimilate objective facts to their own subjective schemes. As Chapman put it, "If all knowledge were directly impressed on children's minds by the external world, then their initial conception of reality would not be intermingled with subjective elements" (1988, p. 56).

A second option suggests that individuals make sense of the world because of preexisting schemas. In the manner of Kant, there exist a priori categories of the mind that structure our experience of the world. As a result sensibility is imposed on the world from the inside out. But a priorism cannot account for the fact that children's conception of reality develops. Surely children assimilate objective reality to subjective schemes, but schemas also change as a result of experience and, indeed, come to reflect completely accurate conceptions of reality.

From Piaget's perspective, then, both empiricism and a priorism are inadequate epistemological options. Empiricism is confounded by evidence of assimilation, a priorism by evidence of imitation and accommodation. In terms of Piaget's developmental criterion both options are examples of partial equilibria, of unstable part-whole configurations. A priorism is an example of syncretism, where the whole predominates over the parts—that is, where one's ideology, one's subjective preferences, one's world view, theory or perspective, deforms reality in acts of cognitive assimilation. In turn, empiricism is an example of juxtaposition, where the parts predominate over the whole. The pattern is missed but for isolated perceptions, impressions, and facts that are not coordinated. We are deceived by whatever isolated fact momentarily dominates our perceptions (what Piaget called *phenomenalism*). The challenge for the theory of knowledge is to develop alternative positions that coordinate these partial and unstable options in ways that approach an ideal equilibrium.

Piaget's naturalized approach to the theory of knowledge held an obvious appeal for Kohlberg. In the way that Piaget appealed to developmental criteria to dispense with unstable and inadequate epistemological positions (a priorism, empiricism), so too did Kohlberg press developmental claims against inadequate psychological positions (maturationism, associationism). For example, because a priorism is false, one cannot claim that moral structures are innate categories. They are not Kantian forms into which specific experiences are molded (or else how to account for their developmental transformation?). Moreover, because empiricism is false, one cannot account for moral structures by appealing to direct adult instruction, specific pairings of objects and responses, or to reinforcement history, because this sort of learning is merely assimilated to children's moral structures but cannot change them (Kohlberg, 1969, 1987).

But, more importantly, Kohlberg could use Piaget's developmental criterion to show why some forms of moral reasoning are to be preferred and some rejected. Kohlberg could now take on the ethical relativist who asserts that no such criterion is possible and that moral perspectives are incommensurable. Indeed, one can view movement through Kohlberg's stages as the dawning awareness that some moral perspectives are errant and inadequate, that others are preferred, and that there is a way to know the difference. It is the growing realization, as one approaches the moral ideal, as one closes in on the final stage, that moral dilemmas are not insolvable, that moral conflict is not intractable, and that consensus is possible if disputants are motivated by the moral point of view.

### **Piaget's Moral Judgment of the Child**

As a genetic epistemologist, Piaget (1932/1965) was interested in how children come to understand and respect moral rules, and whether these developmental facts can help us to understand the form and transformation of ethical codes in society. One standard view is that children are socialized into morality by the exertion of parents and authorities—a folk theory of parenting that favors empiricism. Children are raised, brought up, or socialized by others. It is something that happens to children from the outside in. So, under this view children become morally socialized when they are suitably constrained by the greater power of adults. Children become morally socialized when they accept the discipline and authority of the group, when they come to respect its rules and fear its sanctions. Moral socialization is a matter of one generation imposing its will on the next.

Piaget (1932/1965) argued, however, that this view of moral socialization was partial and one sided (just as empiricism is partial and one sided). This view of socialization does not allow for reciprocity and coordination of parts and wholes, and hence is an unstable equilibrium. Although he did not deny that moral socialization inevitably begins with children accepting the authority of adults, he also claimed that moral socialization does not end there; children eventually engage in new forms of social relationships that are reciprocal and equal, where relationships are balanced and in stable equilibrium, and where rules take on new meaning. In the context of peers, for example, one constructs ideas about fairness, justice, and moral responsibility, and about the function of rules in social life, that are at once different and developmentally advanced over the sort of moral understandings coerced by the huff and puff of adult authority.

Hence, the sense of moral obligation has two sources, each derived from a particular form of social relationship, and one is better than the other. The heteronomous orientation emerges within the context of adult-child relationships, and yields a morality of constraint that confirms and sustains childish egocentrism and moral realism. The autonomous orientation emerges within a peer society of equals, and yields a morality of cooperation that makes possible a more equilibrated understanding of justice.

*Heteronomy.* In the *heteronomous stage*, the young child has unilateral respect for the power and magnificence of adults and is thereby constrained. The inherent inequality of this relationship requires children to subordinate their interests to the perspective of adults (syncretism), but this results in a cluster of moral notions that reveal the tendency of young children to subordinate the social interest to their own subjective point of view (juxtaposition). Put differently, the more completely a child's interest is subordinated to the often opaque and inscrutable perspective of adults, the more completely does the child subordinate adult strictures to her or his idiosyncratic point of view. The more a child feels

the grip of adult constraint (syncretism), the more likely is her or his moral thinking to be infused with subjectivity, egocentrism, and realism (juxtaposition).

The heteronomous stage, then, is a partial and unstable equilibrium, characterized by syncretism and juxtaposition, and a lack of reciprocity between parts (children) and whole (parents). On the one hand parents constrain children by their greater social power, yielding a moral perspective that, for the child, reduces moral duty to obedience. And yet, on the other hand, childish cognitive notions persist that subordinate adult interests to a personal and subjective point of view. It encourages, for example, moral realism and a belief that justice is immanent in the workings of nature. It identifies fairness with egocentric desires ("sharing is fair if I get more"). It judges moral culpability by objective consequences rather than by intentions, and by physicalistic criteria (e.g., saying that a dog is as big as a cow is a more grievous "lie" than is fibbing about the marks one gets in school).

Hence the child submits to moral rules out of deference to adult constraint, and yet does not understand them. Rules are binding but do not constrain. The child intends to conform as moral duty requires but for subjective adherences, deforming assimilations and egocentrism. As Piaget put it, "The child is, on the one hand, too apt to have the illusion of agreement when actually he is only following his own fantasy; the adult, on the other, takes advantage of the situation instead of seeking 'equality'" (1932/1965, pp. 61–62). In this way does constraint act as an ally of egocentrism (and equality as its adversary).

This illusion of agreement is evident in Piaget's analysis of children's practice and understanding of the rules to the game of marbles. Young children are aware that marbles is played according to a set of rules and that these rules are inviolable, unchanging, and sacred, insofar as they have been handed down by Noah, by God, the elders, or some other external authority. But in practice children assimilate these inviolable rules to subjective schemes, resulting in idiosyncratic play that is uncoordinated with playmates. So, there is only the illusion of agreement with rules. Children feel the constraint of rules but rules do not govern conduct. Rules are sacred and unchanging, but play is idiosyncratic and variable, assimilated to individual schemes. Later, in the morality of cooperation, children come to see that rules are flexible, cooperative arrangements that have their source in mutual consent (rather than external authority) and serve the cause of solidarity (rather than the interests of constraint).

*Autonomy.* In contrast to heteronomy, then, the morality of cooperation emerges within a context of peer solidarity among equals. Notions of equality and mutual respect drive it. In the society of equals one must negotiate, settle conflicts, win over friends with reason, and otherwise sort out the benefits and burdens of cooperation in ways that are judged fair and equitable (Rest, 1983). In social relationships marked by equality there emerges a sense of moral obligation that warrants cooperation and reciprocity. Indeed, peer relations are a more perfect social equilibrium, and moral notions forged in the heat of mutual respect are hence more rational than the moral realism and heteronomy of the previous stage.

For Piaget, rational development is movement away from external imposition of inviolable injunctions, sacred laws, or the strictures of elders or of tradition, away from heteronomy and unilateral respect, to autonomy, mutual respect, and democratic cooperation. And this holds not just in ontogenesis but in political development as well. That is, rational development in the organization of societies is movement away from unstable equilibrium to more stable forms, away from the syncretism and unilateral respect of theocracy and gerontocracy to the mutual respect and reciprocity of political democracy. Rationality in political governance is the moral judgment of the child writ large.

### The Empirical Warrant

Piaget's moral stage theory was the center of contention among three clashing psychological paradigms. Researchers in the cognitive–developmental tradition undertook studies to document the stage properties of the theory. Social learning theorists wanted to show that performance on Piaget's tasks revealed not the progressive articulation of cognitive structures but rather the “laws of learning” governing reinforcement, imitation, and modeling. Information-processing researchers wanted to show that moral judgment is better explained by the mechanisms of encoding and memory retrieval. Each camp could claim its share of vindication.

The cognitive–developmental literature, for its part, showed that the various features of moral judgment investigated by Piaget (1932/1965) did not coalesce into tightly knit stages. This is a lethal finding only if one insists on a strong reading of what *structures d'ensemble* entail. Piaget (1932/1965) did not seem to have a strong reading in mind. “There are,” he writes, “no inclusive stages which define the whole of a subject's mental life at a given point in his evolution” (Piaget, 1932/1965, p. 85). Indeed, Piaget's findings pointed to significant stage overlap in children's responses. In his studies of children's understanding of the rules of the game, Piaget concluded “the mixture of elements is a further bar to our arranging these phenomena in a strict sequence” (p. 86).

Moreover, he complained that too much emphasis is placed on the expectation of discontinuity in moral judgment. “Let it be understood once and for all,” he writes, “that any over-sharp discontinuities are analytical devices and not objective results” (Piaget, 1932/1965, p. 87). In later investigations of adult constraint and moral realism, he could not point to any stages “properly so called which followed one another in a necessary order” although there were processes evident that represented “the broad divisions of moral development” (p. 175). And in numerous places throughout the book Piaget noted that the results of his investigation might turn out quite differently if conducted among children with a different socio-economic background or different educational or religious upbringing than the “children from the poorer parts of Geneva” (p. 46) that were his subjects.

Subsequent research tended to support Piaget's developmental account of moral judgment, at least in broad outline. Indeed, Lickona suggested that the verdict of a generation of research is that more research is not needed and that Piaget's intuition “is probably sound” (1976, p. 239). A number of studies showed, for example, that young children do seem to believe in immanent justice, and that this belief attenuates with age, a developmental phenomena that is “real and robust” (Jose, 1991, p. 611). Moral judgment is improved with advances in perspective-taking (DeRemer & Gruen, 1979) and peer group participation (Brody & Shaffer, 1982; Enright & Sutterfield, 1980). The claim that children gradually come to understand intentions and to forsake objective responsibility when judging moral culpability is “the best documented of all of Piaget's moral judgment dimensions” (Lickona, 1976, p. 224).

Other aspects of Piaget's moral stage theory have not fared as well. The moral realism characteristic of the heteronomous stage is supposed to lead children to (a) define moral duty in terms of obedience to authority; (b) view rules as immutable and unchangeable insofar as they are invested with the prestige of adult authority; and (c) call for punishment the violation of any rule. There are empirical reasons to doubt each of these features of moral realism (Killen, 1991; Turiel, 1983). Children appear to make differentiated judgments about the legitimacy of punishment (Smetana, 1981, 1983) and parental injunctions (Tisak, 1986) depending on whether the rule concerns moral or social conventional



violations. Moreover, children do not view rules as sacred and immutable, nor do they regard everything that the adult commands as moral (Weston & Turiel, 1980). Children are sensitive to the distinction between moral and conventional rules from an early age (Smetana, 1983), and their judgment about obligation, legitimacy, and punishment depend on the nature of the social events in question. Indeed, Turiel (1983) argued that Piaget's moral judgment research got off on the wrong foot by studying children's understanding of the rules to the game of marbles, which by its very nature involves considerations of social convention and not of morality.

Social learning research appeared to show that children's moral orientation could be influenced by exposure to live (Bandura, 1991; Bandura & McDonald, 1963; Cowan, Langer, Heavenrich, & Nathanson, 1969) and even narrated (Walker & Richards, 1976) models. In the Bandura and McDonald (1963) studies, for example, children changed their judgments about moral culpability in the direction modeled by adults. The fact that children's moral judgment could be readily modified through adult modeling cues was thought to undermine Piaget's "demarcated sequential stages of moral development" (Bandura & McDonald, 1963, p. 280), a conclusion that Turiel (1966) contested.

Finally, the information-processing paradigm generated a voluminous literature attempting to show that children's performance on the various dimensions of moral judgment can be explained in terms of how children come to encode, store, process, and retrieve information, rather than by the Piagetian notions of stage and structure. This research is reviewed elsewhere (Lapsley, 1996), but its general conclusion can be noted here, which is that appeal to global cognitive developmental variables, such as realism and egocentrism, are unnecessary encumbrances, and that developmental differences in moral judgment can often be attributed to the complex nature of Piagetian tasks that overtax the information-processing capabilities of young children.

### KOHLBERG'S THEORY

One might suppose that because of the convergence of their respective intellectual projects that Piaget and Kohlberg also shared the same understanding of stage development. But Kohlberg appeared to have a more stringent reading of what *structures d'ensemble* required than did Piaget. According to Kohlberg (1969) cognitive stages, if they are to count as true stages, must meet the following exacting criteria:

1. Stages must describe qualitative differences in modes of reasoning.
2. Stages must follow an invariant sequence, which is to say, a constant order of succession: "Stage theory holds that every single individual, studied longitudinally, should only move one step at a time through the stage sequence and always in the same order. Any deviations from this order not due to obvious errors in observation or to dramatic regression-inducing stress or damage questions the validity of the stage sequence itself" (Kohlberg, 1987, p. 30).
3. Each stage must describe an underlying thought-organization or structured whole (Piaget's *structure d'ensemble*). These *structures d'ensemble* should underwrite the manifestation of a "logically and empirically related cluster of responses in development" (Kohlberg, 1969, p. 353).
4. The structured totality characteristic of a given stage is not simply replaced by emergent thought-organizations during the course of development but is instead taken up within the new structure by a process of hierarchical integration. Although hierarchical integration displaces the structures of earlier stages, these early structures are not entirely lost and, indeed, may be used when a situation warrants (made available or deployed, one gathers, from the perspective of the higher

stage) or when attempts to use a higher form of reasoning is unavailing. Nonetheless, “there is a hierarchical preference within the individual, i.e., a *disposition to prefer* a solution of a problem at the highest level available to him” (Kohlberg, 1969, p. 353, emphasis added).

Kohlberg argued that the stages of moral judgment identified by Piaget (1932/1965) do not meet these criteria. Piaget’s stages are ideal–typical and age–developmental but not true structural–developmental stages. By ideal–typical, he means that the stages are defined by certain clusters of themes that hang together to form orientations or ideal types, but are not organized structurally (in the sense that content–function and form–structure are cleanly distinguished). These orientations are also age–developmental in the sense that the heteronomous orientation tends to give way to the autonomous type with age, although a heteronomous orientation may persist even into adulthood.

But Kohlberg does not consider these to be true structural–developmental stages for two reasons. First, the progression from heteronomy to autonomy lacks an inner logic. That is, the autonomous stage is not a transformation or hierarchical integration of the heteronomous stage. Rather, the two moralities are simply in opposition, with the autonomous orientation replacing heteronomy but not growing out of it. Second, the two moralities are linked to certain forms of social relationship, and, in addition, are influenced by other forms of social influence, such as social class, religious upbringing, forms of education, and the like. For Kohlberg, this means that structure is contaminated with content, or that the highest form of moral judgment “is dependent upon the kind of social relations or society in which the child lives” (Kohlberg, Higgins, Tappan, & Schrader, 1984, p. 655), which is precisely what one does not want to see in a stage sequence if one’s purpose is to frustrate moral relativism.

Still, the movement from heteronomy to autonomy does represent movement from partial to more stable equilibrium. It does appeal to reciprocity as the mechanism that transforms part–whole relations in the direction of greater equilibrium. Its ontogenetic insights about the moral judgment of children are pressed into the service of genetic epistemological conclusions about ethical development in society. Whether the sequence is also true, logical or hard may be more of a concern to Kohlberg’s project than to Piaget’s.

### Levels and Stages

Kohlberg describes the development of justice reasoning as the progressive elaboration of a sociomoral perspective across three levels of development (see Gibbs [2003] for a criticism of Kohlberg’s use of levels). Within each level are two stages, the second of which is a more complete articulation of the sociomoral perspective than the first.

The preconventional level begins with a sociomoral perspective that is egocentric and heteronomous (Stage 1) and ends with a perspective that values the pursuit of self-interest by striking pragmatic exchanges with like-minded others (Stage 2). Preconventional justice, then, is an exchange system of favors, goods, and sanctions that are engaged to meet selfish, concrete–individualistic goals, quite apart from the norms and expectations of the larger group. At the next level there is a marked awareness of group membership and of the value of shared relationships (Stage 3). Indeed, the self identifies with conventional expectations that attach to social roles (e.g., being the good husband, the dutiful son, the loving wife, the loyal friend, etc.), and accepts the necessity of subordinating one’s concrete–individualistic preferences for the needs of the shared relationship. This perspective is more fully realized at Stage 4, when the expectations that attach to being a good member of the shared relationship expand to include the impersonal collectivity of

citizens in a shared polity. What regulates conduct here is not a set of shared expectations of “us friends,” as in Stage 3, but rather a perspective that takes on the perspective of the system as whole, a perspective that is reflected in shared support for social institutions and equal treatment of citizen-strangers before the law.

In contrast to preconventional morality, then, the hallmark of conventional morality is the fact that self-interest is subordinated to the interests of the shared relationship (Stage 3) and of society itself (Stage 4). One conforms to these expectations and identifies with them just because they are conventional. At the final level, however, one identifies not with rules, laws, expectations or conventions per se, but rather with the general moral principle(s) that motivate them. One differentiates a commitment to uphold moral principles from the requirements of being a member of society, which is to say that one differentiates moral and legal points of view. Laws and conventions make sense only to the extent that they are staked to defensible moral considerations. A moral point of view is considered prior to social conventions and legal regulation, so that when principle and legality clash, the moral point of view bids one to uphold the former and reject the latter (Stage 5). At Stage 6, this perspective is formalized in terms of universal moral obligations, and the self-conscious use of procedural justice checks on the validity of one’s moral deliberation. It is at this principled level of justice reasoning where moral consensus and agreement become a real possibility (because it transcends commitments to conventionality and because it seeks prescriptive, universalizable moral judgments). It is at this stage where ethical relativism is most firmly rejected.

*Stage scoring and validation.* In addition to the level of sociomoral reflection, each stage can also be described in terms of how certain justice operations (e.g., equality, reciprocity, equity, prescriptive role taking, and universalizability) are understood and deployed. The description of moral stages in terms of level of sociomoral perspective and of justice operations is the result of an evolution in the method of scoring interview protocols (Colby, 1978; Colby & Kohlberg, 1987). The early protocol scoring systems (Sentence Scoring and Global Story Rating) generated anomalous data at odds with the assumptions of invariant sequence and holistic consistency. As Rest put it, “Given the clash between his hard-line stage model and the disconfirming data, rather than soften his stage model, Kohlberg’s response was to revise the scoring system, assuming that the fault must be in confusing content with structure” (1985, p. 461).

Hence later scoring systems (Structural Issue and Standard Issue Scoring) were designed to dissolve these anomalies by making a cleaner differentiation between structure and content. In effect, what the previous scoring systems considered structure was now deemed content in the new systems. For example interview, material is parsed into four levels of classification before a stage score is assigned. Take the famous Heinz dilemma. First the protocol is sorted into one of two issues (saving a life versus upholding the law) then into norms (12 possible for each issue) that represent the areas of concern for the subject in justifying why Heinz should or should not steal the drug; then into elements (17 possible for each norm), which identify why the norm has value. So, one might argue that Heinz should steal the drug (issue: life) because he loves his wife (norm: affiliation) and could not live with himself if he did not try his best (element: upholding self-respect). Once one makes these decisions the Standard Issue Scoring Manual presents options for stage assignment.

*Empirical validity of stages.* Kohlberg argued “the most important validity criterion of a stage test is evidence for it meeting the criterion of invariant sequence” (1987, p. 300). This

implies no stage skipping and no stage regression. The second most important criterion is structured wholeness. By these criteria the results of validation research (e.g., Colby, Kohlberg, Gibbs, & Lieberman, 1983) are said to be “spectacular” (Rest, 1986, p. 466). Rest (1986) continues:

the studies on these aspects of the new scoring system are very impressive—the findings are without parallel in all of social-cognitive development. For no other measurement procedure in the field have such strong confirmatory trends been reported (p. 464). . . . If one is not favorably impressed with these findings, it is difficult to know what would be impressive in all of social development literature. (p. 466)

But Rest (1986) also notes that developmental progress through the sequence is glacial; that the principled stages have largely disappeared from the empirical record; that evidence of holistic consistency might be an artifact of certain decision rules of standard issue scoring (see also Krebs, Denton, Vermueulen, Carpendale, & Bush, 1991). Hence, “one must be wary of how strong a claim can be made for the ‘hard stage model’ of development based on the longitudinal data” (Rest, 1985, p. 467).

*Stage six and substages.* It is a matter of significance for a structural developmental stage theory that some doubt attaches to the empirical reality of its final stage. After all, the final stage is the ideal equilibrium that makes developmental explanation possible. Stage transition makes sense only as gradual approximations of the ideal form instantiated as the final stage (Kitchener, 1983). If the final stage is not well attested, then one has grounds for doubting the coherence of the developmental model. One consequence of standard issue scoring, however, was that Stage 6 was dropped from the scoring manual and treated as a hypothetical endpoint of the sequence (but revised to include sympathy operations as well as justice operations; see Kohlberg, Boyd, & Levine, 1990). Moreover, the estrangement of Stage 6 was accompanied by a second theoretical development, which was the discovery of A and B substages at the remaining stages. Both the attenuation of Stage 6 and the appearance of substages were consequences of Kohlberg’s attempt to tame unruly developmental trends in justice reasoning with the discipline of hard stage criteria.

Kramer (1968) reported, for example, that interviews scored with the early scoring systems did not coalesce around internally consistent stages (casting doubt on the structured whole assumption). Moreover, adolescents who were once classified at the principled levels (Stage 5 and Stage 6) in high school were found to embrace a kind of relativism more characteristic of Stage 2 upon entering college (a stage regression that violates the invariant sequence assumption). Recall that invariant sequence and holistic consistency are the only evidence of construct validity of interest to the structural developmental tradition. Hence these data presented Kohlberg with a prima facie refutation of his moral stage theory.

However, on further examination of the protocols (and with new scoring procedures) Kohlberg concluded that the relativism of the university students was quite different from the concrete-individualistic thinking of Stage 2 subjects. The university subjects seemed to be wrestling with relativism as part of an overall moral theory. Although these subjects were once considered principled reasoners in high school, their reasoning could not now be considered principled (because it embraced relativism), although it seemed more sophisticated than conventional reasoning (because it was theoretical). Hence Kohlberg deemed their reasoning to be at a transitional stage  $4\frac{1}{2}$  (Kohlberg, 1973b, 1984; Kohlberg & Kramer, 1969). But the appearance of a transition stage forced other revisions. For

example, if transitional stage subjects were wrestling with relativistic moral notions but in a theoretical way, should we not also expect principled subjects to be more theoretical in their moral reflection?

The problem was resolved by defining the principled stages in a philosophical-theoretical way (with the consequence that Stage 6 receded from empirical view), and the theoretical discourse of transitional subjects was downsized into a species of conventional reasoning. This meant that the universalizing tendencies once considered the sole province of principled reasoning could now be found among conventional subjects who otherwise have a member-of-society perspective. To make room for this sort of reasoning at the conventional level required the creation of A and B substages. The traditional description of conventional reasoning was relegated to the A substage, and the more theoretical kind was denoted as substage B.

The B substage reflects a better appreciation of the prescriptive and universalizable nature of moral judgments, and is oriented toward fairness, equality, and reciprocity, much like Piaget's autonomous orientation. In turn, the A substage was linked with the heteronomous orientation to rules, authority, and conventions. This means that the B substage is more equilibrated than the A substage, and that moral development can now be said to occur within stages (e.g., moving from Stage 3A to 3B) as well as between stages.

Kohlberg believed that the anomalous data reported by Kramer (1968) could be resolved by changing the scoring systems to allow a cleaner distinction between structure and content. The more effectively this was done the more Stage 6, the moral ideal, faded from view as an empirical possibility. As Gibbs (1979) put it, Stage 6 became "stranded" in an ethereal philosophical realm that made it difficult to see how it could be understood in terms of Piagetian structures. Indeed, even Stage 5 is vanishingly rare in the extant longitudinal data. But now the existence of the B substage provides a way of reintroducing ethical criteria of moral adequacy into a stage theory that has seemingly lost its moral ideal.

Moreover, it is hard not to see the attenuation of Stage 6 and the emergence of the B substage as a related development. Just when Kantian moral adequacy is lost as an empirical possibility with the reduction of Stage 6 to a hypothetical endpoint, it is regained with the discovery of the B substage. Although Stage 6 seems beyond the pale of most reasoners, some of its properties seep down into the B substages of lower stages. In this way, some semblance of moral rationality is recovered, indeed, is made more generally available even at conventional levels of moral reasoning. The more Stage 6 receded from view, stranded in a philosophical realm, the more its key features became a real possibility in the B substages of conventional reasoning. Curiously, then, principled reasoning, or some semblance of it, is at once exceedingly rare, yet quite common (Lapsley, 1996).

*Decalage and the structured whole assumption.* Kohlberg interpreted Piaget's notion of *structure d'ensemble* to require the observation of synchrony in development. A cognitive structure is supposed to organize diverse content just because it is a structured whole. It is supposed to underwrite behavioral consistency among clusters of related content domains, providing for consistency in problem solving, reasoning, and judgment. This is a misinterpretation of Piaget's intention (Chapman, 1988). Yet testing the structured whole assumption was a vast empirical enterprise for almost three decades, peaking in the 1970s.

Two issues were symptomatic of this period. First, there was the matter of *content decalage*—tasks that shared the same underlying logical structure were nonetheless solved at different ages. Indeed, some researchers were so exercised by evidence of content decalage that they devised elaborate neo-Piagetian theories to account for them, suggesting, for example, that asynchronous mastery of different content manifestations of an

underlying structure could be accounted for by the differential demands these tasks place on working memory, attentional resources, and mental capacity (e.g., Case, 1985; Pascual-Leone, 1970). Second, there was the matter of *procedural decalage*—when tasks are simplified, stripped of unnecessary performance demands, children could be shown to solve cognitive tasks at ages inexplicable from Piaget’s developmental expectations. Both content and procedural decalage were thought to undermine the structured whole assumption of stages, which meant that it had important implications for the moral domain as well.

In the moral domain, Kohlberg held out for the received view on the structured whole assumption. It requires consistency across content domains. He writes that “stages must meet the criterion of consistency implied by the notion of ‘structured whole’” (1969, p. 388). Indeed, tracking variations of stage usage by type of dilemma (e.g., hypothetical versus real life) has been an important line of moral development research that has not typically favored a strong reading of the structured whole assumption (Carpendale & Krebs, 1992; Krebs, Denton et al., 1991; Krebs, Vermuelen, Carpendale, & Denton, 1991; Leming, 1978). Substantial stage variation as a function of dilemma type was often reported, sometimes on the same dilemma argued from opposite sides of the issue (de Vries & Walker, 1986).

The issue of procedural decalage was also explored in studies that showed that the incidence of principled reasoning varies depending on the mode of assessment (e.g., Rest, Cooper, Coder, Masanz, & Anderson, 1974; Rest, Davison, & Robbins, 1978). The most commonly used alternative assessment of moral judgment is the Defining Issues Test (DIT), a standardized procedure that requires subjects first to read a moral dilemma, then a series of statements prototypic of moral stages that one might consider in resolving the dilemma, then, finally, to rank order the top four statements by importance. These four preferences are then scored to yield a percentage score (the *p*-score) of postconventional reasoning.

Note that the DIT is a comprehension and preference task. Individuals have to comprehend the moral stage statements in the list provided for them, and then rank order their top four preferences. This is in stark contrast to the Kohlberg assessment, which requires individuals to produce moral judgments during the course of an oral interview. Indeed, Rest (1973) considered the three tasks of production, comprehension and preference as a kind of Piagetian decalage, with production being more difficult than comprehension, which is more difficult than merely indicating a preference. Not surprisingly, the DIT literature typically shows a far greater incidence of postconventional reasoning than does research using clinical interview methods (e.g., Rogers, 2002).

But these findings have important implications for the structured whole assumption of moral stages. One enduring problem that plagues the cognitive–developmental tradition is how to determine the proper extension of a holistic structure. Colby and Kohlberg (1987) concluded that spontaneous production of moral judgments (as in an oral interview) could be characterized by hard stages, with hierarchical transformation, integration, and displacement, and all the rest, but that hard stages do not characterize comprehension and preference. In their view, “the development of moral judgment as a whole (including comprehension and preference as well as spontaneous production) is too broad in scope to be described by a single model” (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987, p. 7).

In other words, *structures d’ensemble* of justice reasoning are not so structured, or so holistic, as to encompass the sort of judgments assessed by the DIT. Apparently the justice structure does not respond to dilemmas that pull for caring and benevolence issues, either (Kohlberg, Levine, & Hewer, 1983). The structure of justice reasoning, and its ontogenesis, is specific to spontaneous production data that result from oral interviews, and not to moral

judgments derived in any other way. This means that production, comprehension, and preference (let alone benevolence and caring) cannot even be considered a content decalage of the same deep justice structure, because only moral judgments that are spontaneous derivations of oral interviews qualify for hard stage classification (although perhaps the decalage evident here is procedural rather than contextual). In this way, the moral domain is narrowed to only those aspects that can be stage typed, and with the most stringent understanding of stage, and this provides the most secure basis for confronting ethical relativism.

*Hierarchical integration and the structured whole assumption.* The discussion of the size of the unit over which a structured whole extends also entails taking a stand on how to interpret the claim that stage developmental requires hierarchical integration. The Kohlberg group interprets hierarchical integration to mean that earlier moral structures are displaced or transformed and are no longer accessible once one has developed to a higher stage. This transformative–displacement model is in contrast to an *additive stage model* (e.g. Rest, 1979), whereby lower stages are still accessible, even when one advances to a higher stage. Additive models further assume that actual stage usage may depend on a number of variables, including the demand characteristics of situations, the pull of different types of dilemmas, the nature of the testing instrument, the response mode it requires, the way it is scored, and other contextual sources of influence. Clearly, the additive model has greater tolerance for stage heterogeneity than does the transformative model, which assumes “*very great internal consistency of reasoning*” (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987, p. 7, my emphasis) as befits strongly holistic stages.

However, as noted, “*very great internal consistency*” of moral reasoning is restricted to spontaneous production of moral arguments, and does not include comprehension or evaluation of moral arguments made by others or to preference judgments. “In fact, it is quite clear,” write Colby and Kohlberg (1987, p. 7), “that a transformational model entailing a great degree of structured wholeness is not appropriate to describe comprehension and preference of moral judgments.”

*Fortified stages.* One notices that, as the Kohlberg research program developed over time, the insistence on hard stage criteria also entailed a narrowing of the range of extension of a moral structure to something narrow and cramped, so long as it could be stage typed, and with the most rigorous understanding of stage. This methodological commitment must be understood as part of the larger project to provide the developmental resources with which to confront the ethical relativist. Along similar lines, Kohlberg made certain claims about the logical status of cognitive developmental stages, although his use of *logic* and its cognate terms was varied and sometimes problematic (see, e.g., Locke, 1986; Phillips & Nicolayev, 1978). The order of stages is one of logical necessity, it was claimed, just because the sequence is defined in terms of increasing articulation, differentiation, and integration. Clearly, if later stages are partly defined in terms of the elements of earlier stages, then, of course, later stages must follow early stages by definition. This is a matter of logic, not of psychological theory (Kohlberg, 1984).

But Kohlberg also suggested that stages are defined by a logical analysis of what children say, which is quite different from the claim that the sequence of stages is attested by logical necessity. When one makes the internal connections in children’s ideas, when one puts it all together into some sensible form, then the coherence of a stage is revealed. He writes “The ideas used to define the stages are the subjects’, not ours. The logical analysis of the connections in a child’s thinking is itself theoretically neutral” (Kohlberg,

1984, p. 196). And, for good measure, he adds, “*the stages themselves are not a theory*” (Kohlberg, 1984, p. 196, emphasis in original).

Kohlberg (1987) seems to be claiming that one can discern the meaning of a child’s interview without prior theoretical commitments. The stages are not theoretical, cannot be derived from hypothetical constructs, and are plainly evident to anyone who cares to analyze the text of child’s mind. This claim for stages is unfortunate. The claim that the stage sequence is vouchsafed by logical necessity, or that the stages themselves are not theoretical (and hence not open to question), are maneuvers to secure the foundations of justice reasoning against skeptics and relativists. The notion that scientific analysis is possible without theory is a Baconian fantasy long discarded in modern science and philosophy of science. It is a fantasy of positivist behavioral science that Kohlberg rejected on other grounds. Other stage theories of justice reasoning were disinclined to use Kohlberg’s highly fortified notion of hard stages, perhaps because these they were not intended to address problems in ethics.

## **POSITIVE JUSTICE STAGE THEORIES: DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE AND PROSOCIAL REASONING**

### **Positive Justice**

The sort of concerns that Kohlberg targets in his theory is sometimes called *prohibition moral reasoning* (Eisenberg, 1982) because it focuses on rights, duties, norms, and formal obligations. It focuses on issues (e.g., property rights versus the right to life) that are some distance from the moral world of young children. In contrast, the domain of positive justice focuses on issues of fairness that arise in the context of prosocial interactions. Sharing is the prototypic prosocial behavior that arises naturally in the social ecology of children. Indeed, children are often enjoined to share their belongings to benefit another, yet it is not often clear how to do this when there are many claimants and resources are few. To develop a scheme of sharing that is fair, then, is a problem of distributive justice.

Damon (1973, 1975) investigated children’s understanding of the fair distribution of property, presenting sharing dilemmas to youngsters who ranged in age from 4 to 10 years. In the course of a clinical interview children are confronted with various distributive criteria. Should sharing be governed by strict equality (everyone gets the same), merit (whoever does the best or the most should get more), equity (should we permit special allowances for extenuating need), self-interest (whoever wants it most should get it), or other behavioral (best behaved) or physicalistic (all the girls get more, or the oldest ones)?

*Stages of distributive justice reasoning.* Damon showed that children’s reasoning about fair sharing followed a stage progression. At level 0-A, self-interest is the governing distributive criteria (“I should get more because that is what I want.”). At 0-B, self-interest is backed up with an appeal to external, physicalistic, and observable features, such as size, age, and gender (“All us boys should get more”). At 1A, notions of strict equality (“Everyone should get the same”) govern sharing. At 1B, merit and just deserts enters the distributive calculation (“If you did the best, you should get more; if you were lazy or did a lousy job, you should get less”). At 2A, one attempts to balance competing claims to merit by working out some equitable compromises. At 2B, the compromise between equity and reciprocity is worked out in light of the demands of the situation or the larger goals and purposes of the group.



One notices first that the three levels of Damon's sequence align tolerably well with the general progression noted by Piaget: from egocentrism and physicalistic notions of fairness (Level 0), to notions of strict equality (Level 1), and then equity (Level 2). A crucial research goal was to show that distributive justice reasoning was related to general cognitive development and displayed the requisite sequential properties. In one study, Damon (1975) showed a strong association between distributive justice reasoning and performance on operational tasks involving classification, logical compensation, coordination of perspectives and ratio, and proportions. Moreover, the three levels of distributive justice reasoning could be aligned with pre-operations (Level 0), concrete operations (Level 1), and transitional formal operations (Level 2). Hence, there is something distinctly Piagetian about the sequence. However, there was no indication that reasoning in the logical domain was a prerequisite for reasoning in the distributive justice domain. Although logical and moral reasoning are strongly associated, "the priority of logical and moral reasoning does not appear to be necessary in development: even among normal subjects the pattern may be quite the reverse" (Damon, 1975, p. 312).

The developmental properties of the sequence were explored in two longitudinal studies. In one study (Damon, 1977), children who showed change over 1 year tended to move to the next highest stage. But many children showed no change at all during this interval, and some reported a lower stage of reasoning. One explanation for the turgid pace of developmental change was that a 1-year interval was simply not sufficient to capture social-cognitive development in middle childhood. Perhaps testing children after a 2-year interval would see more instances of upward stage movement. This was indeed reported by Damon (1980) in a second longitudinal assessment. In this study, nearly 86% of children who changed showed progressive development over the 2-year interval. Moreover, children who showed an initial downward reversal after 1 year corrected themselves by the second year. Damon (1980) also showed that the best predictor of stage transition was not consolidation of reasoning at one's current stage but rather stage mixture as determined by the spread of scores above the mode. This finding, along with more recent studies (Walker, Gustafson, & Hennig, 2001; Walker & Taylor, 1991), supports Turiel's (1974) contention that stage mixture is an indication of readiness to develop, especially if the distribution of scores is tilted in favor of the next highest stage.

*Distributive justice scale.* Enright, Franklin, and Mannheim (1980) opened up a second research front by designing a standardized, objective assessment of distributive justice reasoning called the Distributive Justice Scale (DJS), consisting of two sharing dilemmas that are similar to Damon's (1977). After an initial attempt to resolve the dilemma the child is shown pairs of pictures, each representing a particular stage in the sequence. All combinations of stages are paired in this way, and the child is asked to select the picture that resolves the sharing dilemma in the fairest way.

Research using the DJS reported strong age trends and an association with logical reciprocity (Enright, Franklin, & Mannheim, 1980), a pattern that was replicated in Sweden (Enright et al., 1984). When distributive justice issues involve family members rather than peers, reasoning is typically at higher levels (Enright et al., 1984, Study Two). Longitudinal comparisons documented upward stage progression that is uncontaminated by cohort effects and reveals a more rapid pace to development at younger ages than in middle childhood (Enright et al., 1984, Study 3). Social class differences were also evident, with lower class children lagging behind their middle-class peers regardless of race (Enright, Enright, & Lapsley, 1981). This suggests that children's understanding of distributive fairness is sensitive to contextual factors.

What is striking about this literature is the convergence of findings revealed by Damon's clinical method and the findings the DJS yields. Clearly the sequence enjoys strong empirical support. There are strong longitudinal age trends: The sequence is associated with other indices of cognitive development, is evident in at least two cultures, and shows an interesting sensitivity to contextual factors. Although there is some inevitable warble in findings across the two methodologies, one is more impressed by the similarity than by the differences. Hence, unlike the studies of moral reasoning conducted with Kohlberg's clinical interview and objective measures like the DIT, there appears to be little evidence of significant procedural decalage between Damon's clinical assessment of distributive justice and Enright's use of a standardized, objective instrument.

*The partial structures issue.* The distributive justice sequence represents yet another option in moral stage theory. Damon (1977) argued that moral structures always maintain an element of content specificity, which means that different moral domains or concepts may be organized in different ways. Along similar lines Turiel argued, "Cognitive structures are partial in that they encompass delimited domains of knowledge; thinking is organized within the boundaries of fundamental categories" (1983, p. 20).

According to Rest (1983), however, this agnostic position with respect to general structures is problematic because it pays insufficient attention to the systemic qualities of thought. Thought is not, in his view, a jumble of disconnected concepts. Damon's sequence certainly tells us something about how children come to resolve specific problems of sharing, but how does this help us to understand

children's moral thinking regarding lying, promise-keeping, fighting and self-defense, punishment, cheating on games or school tests, being disruptive and unruly, special responsibilities to family and kin, performing assigned chores, and all the other situations in a child's life that involve moral issues. (Rest, 1983, p. 604)

This would be quite a general structure that could meet this exacting standard, although the main point is well taken: that as much effort go into specifying the system of organization as in identifying partial-structure domains. Another criticism is that the distributive justice sequence lacks an inner logic. It lacks a clear notion of hierarchical integration, or an explanation as to why one way of resolving a distributive dilemma should override another (Rest, 1983). Why, for example, should a compromise between merit and equality trump a reliance on equality or equity alone as a distributive criterion? On what grounds are succeeding levels of reasoning more adequate than lower levels (and in what sense are they lower)?

Hence our look at the distributive justice sequence illustrates the key debates about stage theory in the moral domain. Are stages general or partial? Is there an inner logic? Is development additive or transformative? How is the internal standard of adequacy to be understood in both psychological and moral terms? Whether the partial-structures perspective is an adequate conceptualization of development depends largely on how one understands Piaget's notion of *structure d'ensemble*. There is a case to be made that the partial-structures notion is closer to the Piagetian mark than the ostensible Piagetian orthodoxy that has grown up around hard stage criteria. Stages are bounded, delimited by domains, and content specific, but this does not commit one to the view that stages are a messy jumble of disconnected domains either, or that they constitute "autonomous, self-contained units manifested across tasks and situations" (Turiel, 1983, p. 21). In the

next section, we see how another positive justice stage progression pushes even the notion of partial structure and loose readings of *structures d'ensemble* to the extreme.

### Prosocial Moral Reasoning

Prosocial moral reasoning is another aspect of positive justice (Eisenberg-Berg, 1979). It emerges when we face the problem of whether to help others, typically at some cost to ourselves, when there is no formal obligation to do so. Take the problem facing the poor farmers of Circleville. Should they give most of their harvest to a neighboring community whose farmlands had been flooded, even if it meant that the residents of Circleville might go hungry? Should one donate blood even if one is physically weak or if it interferes with one's studies or costs one a job? Should one come to the aid of a victim even if it might be dangerous to do so?

*Moral consideration categories.* Children presented with prosocial dilemmas like these generate a large number of moral considerations that can be taxonomically organized (Eisenberg-Berg, 1979). Some moral considerations include punishment and obedience (one might get punished if one does not help); hedonistic reasoning involving pragmatic self-gain ("I wouldn't help because I might be hungry") or direct reciprocity ("She'd help because they'd give her food the next time"); a needs orientation that shows a concern for another's physical-material ("He needs blood") or psychological ("They'd be happy if they had food") needs; stereotyped reasoning ("It's only natural to help"); an empathic orientation involving sympathetic caring ("He would feel sorry for them") or role taking ("I'm trying to put myself in their shoes"); a concern for social approval and acceptance ("His parents would be proud of him if he helped"), internalized affect ("Seeing the villagers fed would make her feel good"), and abstract reasoning that invokes internalized norms, laws, and values ("She has a duty to help others"), the rights of others ("I'd help because she has the right to walk down the street without being mugged"), generalized reciprocity ("If everyone helps one another, we'd all be better off"), or the conditions of society ("If everybody helps, society would be a lot better").

*Developmental trends.* In an early cross-sectional study, Eisenberg-Berg (1979) showed that the prosocial reasoning of elementary school children tended to focus on hedonistic, stereotyped, and needs-oriented concerns. High school students also invoked these considerations, but more often included abstract reasoning and internalized values and norms as considerations. The developmental trend was clarified by two longitudinal studies that tracked prosocial reasoning from preschool to ages 7 or 8. These data showed that the use of hedonistic reasoning steadily declined over this period, while empathic needs- and approval-oriented reasoning increased (Eisenberg, Lennon, & Roth, 1983; Eisenberg-Berg & Roth, 1980).

Subsequent longitudinal follow-up studies tracked changes in prosocial reasoning after 7 years (Eisenberg et al., 1987), 11 years (Eisenberg, Miller, Shell, McNalley, & Shea, 1991), and 15 years (Eisenberg, Carlo, Murphy, & Van Court, 1995), ranging from middle childhood to the cusp of early adulthood. Across this period, hedonistic reasoning decreased until adolescence, but then increased somewhat by late adolescence and early adulthood. Needs-oriented and stereotyped reasoning increased until middle childhood and early adolescence, and then declined in use. Direct reciprocity and approval reasoning declined until middle adolescence, but remained stable thereafter. Several modes of higher

level reasoning, such as internalized norms and generalized reciprocity, emerged in late childhood and increased in use across adolescence and early adulthood.

*Levels of prosocial reasoning.* It became clear that age-related changes in the use of the various moral consideration categories could be conceptualized as levels of prosocial reasoning (Eisenberg, 1986). At Level 1 (Hedonistic and Self-Focused Orientation) the motive for helping is linked to self-interest or possible consequences for the self. At Level 2 (Needs Oriented), a concern is expressed for the needs of others, even when it conflicts with one's own, although the concern is expressed without clear evidence of sympathy, guilt, or self-reflection. At Level 3 (Approval-Interpersonal Orientation and/or Stereotypic Orientation), prosocial intentions are judged in light of stereotypic notions of good and bad persons; one should help persons who are nice or good, but not persons who are not nice or bad. Prosocial behavior should also secure approval or acceptance. At Level 4 (Self-Reflective Empathic Orientation), there is evidence of self-reflective role taking, an empathic concern for the other's humanity, and whether one's actions would engender positive feelings or incur guilt. A transitional level (4B) follows where one's self-reflection begins to consider internalized norms and a sense of duty or responsibility. There is an inarticulate concern for the welfare of society or the dignity of persons. These concerns are better articulated at Level 5 (Strongly Internalized Stage). At this level, the appeal to internalized norms, duties, responsibilities, and rights is clearly stated. Issues of self-respect and living up to one's values are also commonly expressed at this stage.

*Stage issues.* Prosocial reasoning begins, then, in a fog of hedonism and egoism, but then expands to take an ever-widening social perspective that duly considers the needs and welfare of society. The developmental movement is from self-preoccupation to other-regard, from internal and private concerns to external and social concerns. But prosocial reasoning also moves in the opposite direction, from an external preoccupation with social stereotypy, approval, and acceptance, to strongly internalized commitments where the sense of self hangs in the balance.

Eisenberg's impressive commitment to longitudinal research has demonstrated amply the age-related changes in prosocial reasoning. The sequence conforms to an additive model, and is age–developmental rather than structural–developmental. Indeed, Eisenberg (1986) does not make strong hard stage assumptions about the sequence, nor has she shown much interest in the usual conceptual desiderata of moral stage theory. There is no attempt, for example, to differentiate structure and content, a goal that animated the Kohlberg team for decades. Instead the prosocial sequence was identified inductively from a taxonomy of motives that emerged in the content responses. There is little concern with whether each developmental level is a structured whole. Indeed, wondering whether prosocial reasoning is governed by general or partial structures seems hardly the right question in a sequence where children appeal to prosocial justifications from a variety of levels. There is little concern, too, with whether levels of prosocial reasoning conform to an invariant sequence. Notice, for example, how hedonistic motives decline in importance from early childhood to adolescence, but then are reasserted in late adolescence and early adulthood.

So here we have levels of prosocial moral judgment contaminated by content, without proper structural foundation, aligned in a sequence with shifting emphases and absent an inner logic that gives rise to hierarchical integration. From the perspective of cognitive–developmental orthodoxy this is quite alarming. This is sure to fail Kohlberg's test of what is to count as true structural–developmental stages. Yet stringent orthodoxy about these

matters seems only required when the aim of research is other than simply documenting empirical realities but for also wanting to use data to score philosophical points.

*Two promising directions.* Two additional features of this research program should be noted briefly. First, there is now promising research on standardized assessments of prosocial reasoning (PROM; Carlo, Eisenberg, & Knight, 1992) and prosocial behavior (PTM; Carlo & Randall, 2002; Carlo, Hausmann, Christiansen, & Randall, 2003) in adolescents. Second, unlike any other research program in the moral domain, the study of prosocial reasoning has always been conducted in concert with studies of prosocial emotion, such as empathy, caring, and sympathetic concern (Eisenberg, in press, 1986; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Eisenberg & Morris, 2004). In recent years, this has led to important investigations of whether there is a dispositional or personological basis for prosocial behavior. In one study, spontaneous, other-oriented prosocial sharing behavior (but not low-cost helping or compliant prosocial behavior) observed at ages 4 and 5 predicted actual and self-reported prosocial behavior up to 17 years later, a relationship that was partially mediated by sympathy (Eisenberg et al., 1999). Similarly, self-reports of prosocial dispositions in early adulthood often related to self-reports of sympathy, empathy, and prosocial behavior 10 to 16 years earlier (Eisenberg et al., 2002). These studies support the claim that there is a prosocial personality disposition that emerges in early childhood and is consistent over time, although the manifestation of the altruistic personality may vary with the demand characteristics of social contexts (Carlo, Eisenberg, Troyer, Switzer, & Speer, 1991).

## OTHER SOCIAL COGNITIVE STAGE MODELS

As we have seen, the stage concept has been used in a varying ways in the moral development domain, from Kohlberg's structural developmental model, with its exacting demand for qualitative change, structural unity, and invariant sequence, to the partial-structure model of distributive justice reasoning, to the additive age-developmental models of prosocial reasoning and Piagetian moral judgment. Moral judgment, positive justice, and prosocial reasoning do not exhaust the domains to which the stage concept has been deployed within the study of social cognitive development. One could also point to stage theories of self-development (Kegan, 1982; Noam, 1985, 1988), self-understanding (Damon & Hart, 1982; Hart & Damon, 1986), perspective taking, interpersonal understanding (Selman, 1980), social conventional reasoning (Turiel, 1983), religious judgment (Oser, 1985), and faith development (Fowler, 1981), among others. The accounts of stage development in these domains contend with the same sort of issues that were evident in the moral domain, although some of them also introduce additional options for characterizing developmental change.

### Social Conventional Reasoning

For example, the social conventional stage sequence formalizes the disequilibrating role of cognitive conflict in developmental growth by inserting negation stages throughout the sequence, so that developmental change unfolds dialectically through successive phases of affirmation and negation (Turiel, 1983). For example, at Stage 1 (age 6 to 7) a child is aware of broad social uniformities ("men are doctors, women are nurses"), but these are thought natural of the social order and the conventional uniformity is affirmed for this reason. At Stage 2 (age 8 to 9), however, this understanding is negated. Conventional acts are arbitrary and the fact that everybody does it is not sufficient to maintain the convention. At Stage

3 (age 10 to 11), conventional uniformities affirm the system of rules. Although rules are arbitrary, we follow them because this is what those in authority expect of us. At Stage 4 (age 12 to 13), this affirmation is negated. Conventions are nothing but social expectations that have no rule-like hold over us. At Stage 5 (age 14 to 16), conventions are affirmed as social norms characterized by fixed roles in a static hierarchical organization. Society is a complex organization of role statuses, some have more than others, and there is a system of conventions that regulate interactions among individuals who vary in status. These social conventions affirm the status hierarchy because codified standards of conduct maintain the social group. At Stage 6 (age 17 to 18), this understanding is negated. Conventions are nothing but societal expectations that have become codified through habitual use and inertia, but otherwise serve no function with respect to maintaining the social system. Finally, at Stage 7 (age 18 to 25), social convention is reaffirmed. Here one understands that social conventions are not societal codes that define the social group or regulate the distribution of status (Stage 5), but rather are shared, agreed upon uniformities that serve a functional purpose, such as the need for efficiency and coordination.

### Perspective Taking

The root developmental achievement that underlies every domain of social cognitive development is perspective taking, it unfolds along two fronts—conceptions of relations and conceptions of persons (Selman, 1980). For example, with respect to conceptions of social relations, the young child, beset by egocentrism, is unable to infer another's perspective (Level 0). At Level 1, the child can accurately infer the other's point of view. At Level 2, the child can reciprocally assume self–other perspectives; at Level 3, a third-party perspective of the dyadic interaction; and at Level 4, the perspective of the social system as a whole. The developing capacity to take ever-widening social perspectives, from the preoccupation of the egocentric self, to local self–other perspectives, to third-party and then systems perspectives, is what underlies the growing sophistication of justice and prosocial reasoning (and every other instance of social cognitive development).

In addition to describing developing conceptions of relationships, from egocentric (Level 0) to societal perspective taking (Level 4), the sequence also charts parallel conceptions of persons. At Level 0, the egocentric child is unable to differentiate a psychological self from physicalistic qualities, and confuses what is subjective–psychological with what is objective–physical. At Level 1, this differentiation is now a possibility. One is aware of subjective states of both self and other and can differentiate intentional and unintentional actions, although the subjective life of persons (thoughts, feelings, opinions) is considered a unitary whole. At Level 2, one can be self-reflective about one's subjective–psychological life, and one realizes that others can do this as well. Persons are understood to have a covert inner life that reflects the true self, which can differ from the overt self presented to others. Deception, then, is now a possibility. Moreover, the subjective life of persons is conceived more complexly; it is possible, for example, to have multiple and conflicting thoughts and feelings, although these are mostly grouped, weighted, or isolated with respect to each other (e.g., “mostly happy but sometimes scared”). At Level 3, the person is understood as a fairly stable system of attitudes and values. One is able to monitor and reflect on the self by assuming the third-party perspective of the observing ego. This allows one to simultaneously perceive oneself as actor and object in ongoing interactions. At Level 4, there is a keen awareness of the subjective–psychological basis of behavior, that the self has an interior depth that cannot always be penetrated by a self-reflective observing ego. We sometimes have conflicting motives and contradictory subjective states that are opaque to

self-reflection. Moreover, there is a new notion of personality as a product of dispositions that have a developmental history.

At the summit of social perspective taking, then, one can assume both a societal and in-depth perspective. There is simultaneous awareness of the broadest social point of view, of the social system as a whole (*conception of relations*), but also of the deepest complexities of the subjective self (*conception of persons*). The developing sophistication of one's understanding of selfhood, personality, and subjectivity is reciprocally linked to one's developing understanding of relations. This clearly matters to moral functioning. To monitor just how our decisions and actions influence the broadest social polity while being simultaneously aware of our intentions and motives, and how our actions reflect the sort of person we have come to be, should be one mark of moral maturity. We saw this dual movement of social perspective taking most clearly in the levels of prosocial reasoning noted, although it is clear that advances in social perspective taking should underwrite mature functioning across all of the moral domains. Indeed, the traditional formula is that advances in social perspective taking are necessary but not sufficient for advances in moral judgment, although the empirical basis for the interdependency formula has not always been demonstrated conclusively (Lapsley, 1996).

### Self-Understanding

A similar point can be made with respect to the stage sequences that describe self-understanding. According to Hart and Damon (1986; Damon & Hart, 1982), *self-understanding* is a conceptual system that focuses on "the totality of characteristics that define the self and distinguish the self from others" (p. 388). The self-as-subject, the I-self, includes one's sense of continuity, distinctiveness, volitional agency, and self-reflectivity (see Blasi [1988], for a similar scheme). The self-as-object, the me-self (the self-concept), includes four schemes that define the self: physical self (bodily and material possessions), active self (activities and abilities), social self (social personality characteristics), and the psychological self (emotions, thoughts, cognitive processes). Developmental change in self-understanding in each of these domains unfolds across four levels.

Take the physical self, for example (all stage descriptions and prototypic statements are from Hart and Damon, 1986). Across development the physical self is understood in terms of bodily properties or material possessions (Level 1); then as activity related physical attributes (Level 2); then in terms of physical attributes that influence social appeal and social interactions (Level 3); and then finally as physical attributes reflecting volitional choices and moral standards (Level 4: "It's not fair to have a lot of things when some people don't have anything").

Similarly, one's first understanding of the active self is in terms of typical behaviors (Level 1), then capabilities relative to others (Level 2), then as attributes that influence social standing (Level 3), then finally as active attributes that reflect choices and personal or moral standards (Level 4: "I want to be a faithful Christian."). The social self is first understood by the fact of one's membership in a particular group or social relationship (Level 1); then by activities that are considered with reference to the approval or disapproval of others (Level 2), then by social-personality characteristics (Level 3), then by moral or personal choices concerning social relations or social-personality characteristics (Level 4: "I try not to hurt my friends because you should treat people with respect"). Finally, the psychological self is first linked with momentary moods, feelings, preferences, and aversions (Level 1); then with knowledge, learned skills, or activity related emotional states (Level 2); then with psychologically related social skills (e.g., social sensitivity,

communicative competence; Level 3); then with belief systems that reflect a personal philosophy (Level 4: "I believe in world peace. I don't think wars solve anything and we should try to keep from fighting.").

What is strikingly obvious about these developmental trends is that progress in self-understanding, no matter the domain, leads one to morality. Mature self-understanding, at the highest level of developmental complexity, reflects on the moral implications of self-hood. Social cognitive development leads us, in other words, to the moral self, to a self that cannot be understood apart from the moral point of view. This suggests that the formation of the moral self is the clear goal of self-development. And this is true not just in social cognitive development but in psychosocial development as well. Erik Erikson argued, for example, that morality and identity stand in a mutually supportive relationship. An ethical capacity is the "true criterion of identity" (Erikson, 1968, p. 39), but also "identity and fidelity are necessary for ethical strength" (Erikson, 1964, p. 126). This suggests that the formation of moral identity is the clear goal of both moral and identity development, too, just as it is for the moral self, and that the trajectories of moral and self-identity development are ideally conjoined in the moral personality (Lapsley & Lasky, 2001).

## SUMMARY AND PROSPECTS

In this chapter, we considered the variety of ways that stage theory has been used within the moral domain. The concept of stage played an important role in the larger aims of both Piaget and Kohlberg. For Piaget, the stage concept was an analytical device that allowed him to draw certain conclusions with respect to genetic epistemology. For this purpose an age-development or ideal-typical sequence was sufficient. For Kohlberg, quite a different stage concept was required to provide a developmental grounding to the moral point of view, and to undermine philosophical positions that were incompatible with it. The orthodoxy that has grown up around this notion of hard stages must be understood in light of this project. To pull this off required not only exacting criteria to determine when structural developmental change is true, but also a narrowing of the field of study to that aspect of moral judgment that could satisfy it. Kohlberg's use of stage theory to address philosophical problems, indeed, his insistence that ethical theory be part of the very conceptualization of moral stages, had the effect of promoting productive reflection on ethics and philosophy, although it also involved the field with the sort of issues that psychologists are ill-equipped to address with the empirical and conceptual tools of their discipline. Indeed, it is doubtful that psychological data can ever resolve philosophical problems (Blasi, 1990).

In contrast to the transformative developmental stage model embraced by Kohlberg we also examined a partial-structure stage model in the positive justice domain, and the age-developmental approach to prosocial reasoning. These models are some distance from the strict notions of invariant sequence, hierarchical integration, and structural unity Kohlberg laid down, although perhaps apostasy in these matters simply reflects the lack of philosophical ambition evident in these stage theories.

In addition to distributive justice and prosocial reasoning, three additional stage theories were considered. The social-conventional stage sequence was examined to illustrate another option for characterizing transformative stage development. This sequence is distinctive for the way that it characterizes developmental growth in terms of successive periods of affirmation and negation. In this way, cognitive disequilibria are built into the very core of the stage theory. Finally, the stage sequences describing social perspective taking and self-understanding were reviewed, and both were found critical for understanding



moral selfhood and identity. Indeed, we concluded that moral and self-development aim for the same goal, and are ideally conjoined in the moral personality.

One evident trend in the moral domain is the effort to supplement clinical interviews with standardized and objective assessments of moral judgment. Kohlberg's elaborate methodology for interviewing participants and assigning stage scores is joined by Rest's Defining Issues Test. Enright's Distributive Justice Scale stands alongside Damon's oral assessment of children's understanding of fair sharing. And Carlo and his colleagues' recent development of objective measures of prosocial reasoning (PROM) and behavior (PTM) complete the trend in the prosocial domain. The DIT has generated a substantial literature over the years, and is the core of a neo-Kohlbergian view of moral judgment development that has modified stage theory to schema theory, integrating notions from cognitive science (Narvaez & Bock, 2002; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999). The availability of objective measures should facilitate new lines of research in the prosocial domain as well.

A related trend is that researchers are showing increased interest with individual differences in moral thought and behavior, perhaps eclipsing the more traditional concern with mapping developmental change. This is perhaps seen most clearly in the prosocial domain, where a full range of methodologies, including laboratory experimental manipulations, are probing for the dispositional basis of prosocial behavior. What is telling about this research is that it is informed by the best insights of developmental science, or at least an ecological-contextualist version of it, in its insistence of locating dispositional consistency at the intersection of person–context interactions.

But it is also clear that the desire to understand moral functioning in the context of larger developmental processes, including self, identity, and personality development, is now the unmistakable next wave in moral psychological research. Indeed, we have seen how advances in social perspective taking and self-understanding point in the direction of moral maturity, and attempts to articulate the parameters of moral self and moral identity are increasingly common (Blasi, 1995; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004).

Finally, as the present volume illustrates, the moral domain has expanded its interest beyond a concern with the sort of reasoning that can be captured by stage theory. Indeed, it is now clear that findings regarding the stage-developmental patterning of moral reasoning must be understood in the context of what we know from other developmental literatures regarding, say, motivational processes, self-regulation, the construction of autobiographical memory, self-development, social information processing, and expertise, among other literatures. Research on social-contextual variation, including cultural studies, will provide new insights concerning the moral formation of children (e.g., Killen & Hart, 1995; Turiel, 1997). All of this makes clear that research in the post-Kohlberg era is far from reaching its final stage.

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