

PLURALISM, VIRTUES, AND  
THE POST-KOHLBERGIAN ERA  
IN MORAL PSYCHOLOGY

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On February 9, 1987, the following letter appeared in the "voice of the people" section of the *Chicago Tribune*, signed by a juvenile court judge:

American schools always have been . . . deliberately involved in the transmission of moral wisdom. By "moral wisdom" I mean eternal norms or standards of human behavior, beliefs about the rightness or wrongness of human conduct, recognized and affirmed over the generations. It is folly to suggest that one may educate without teaching morality. One may argue quite correctly that in a free society personal moral views may be submitted to the marketplace of ideas in adult society. However, it has never been seriously advocated that in public schools our children should be presented with an adult smorgasbord of morality options . . . for many children in our society, the public school provides the only healthy indoctrination in practical human morality . . . before entering the rough and tumble world of adult pluralism . . . Such "wisdom" is immutable; it does not change from age to age; it does not depend upon public opinion or practice for its efficacy. This "wisdom" is the foundation upon which cultures are built. When the foundation cracks, the lights flicker . . . The lights are flickering, what shall we do? One thing we must not do is to compromise the integrity of our schools by asking them to teach . . . behavior inconsistent with wisdom. We must demand unequivocally that our children practice self-control and self-restraint in all areas of human temptation . . . I for one

vote no to dispensing contraceptive devices in our schools and would be very much opposed to any education not consistent with the ideals of personal purity and self-restraint in all areas of human passion.

This remarkable letter succinctly summarizes much of the anxiety that is evident among educators and theorists as they come to grips with what role, if any, values education should play in the public school curriculum. The author correctly notes, at least implicitly, that the very nature of instruction involves a commitment to certain values, even if the commitment is unrecognized or the values inarticulated. That morality options could be many among adults, that adult society is to be properly characterized as a veritable "smorgasbord of ideas," from which one could freely sample as in a "marketplace" so as to fashion a "personal morality," is not, in itself, recognized as an undesirable thing, but merely a healthy reflection of democratic pluralism, which is itself something to be respected (or at least tolerated as a necessary evil). Lurking among the pluralistic morality options, however, is an immutable wisdom that serves as the foundation of our culture, a wisdom that is impervious to the vagaries of conventional opinion, and so well-understood that it could "deliberately" be passed on to the next generation. The uses of this wisdom are to assist young people in making concrete moral decisions, such as whether to violate the immutable standards of purity and self-restraint by using contraceptives.

The following themes, then, emerge from a consideration of this letter: (1) Although value pluralism is a pervasive feature of American culture, there does exist, nonetheless, a certain foundational moral "wisdom" that is immutable, unchanging, and impervious to passing fashions and tastes. (2) Moral education, the transmission of moral wisdom, should be deliberate, and not left to happenstance, since not to attend to deliberate moral education is to abdicate our educational (and moral) responsibility toward the next generation, and to leave the "lights" of our society "flickering." (3) Finally, moral wisdom so imparted can be usefully deployed in order to *correctly* resolve practical moral dilemmas.

These very themes are a striking feature of Lawrence Kohlberg's approach to moral education, an approach that

has simply dominated the field of moral psychology for the last several decades. Like our editorial writer, Kohlberg was concerned with how one might ground moral judging upon foundational moral principles that transcend conventional opinion and value pluralism. Like our editorial writer, Kohlberg was interested in how one might develop deliberate moral education strategies such that this sort of judging might be accessible to students, and thereby utilized in order to resolve moral dilemmas.

According to Kohlberg, the form or structure of reasoning that one brings to bear on moral dilemmas can be shown to undergo a series of developmental transformations as one moves through adolescence to adulthood. These transformations can be described in terms of six stages. Each succeeding stage in the sequence is said to allow one to better differentiate moral from conventional considerations in any given moral dilemma, a differentiation that is starkly conceived at the highest stages, where the deliberator is said to endorse a "moral ideal." The stage sequence possesses certain properties. For example, the sequence of stages is held to be universal, invariant, and descriptive of qualitative changes in moral thought. Further, developmental progression through the stages is said to reflect not only an advance in the use of sophisticated cognitive operations, but also an advance in the quality of moral reflection as well. That is, reasoning at the highest ("principled") stages (5 and 6) is said to be both psychologically sophisticated *and* morally adequate, with moral adequacy being judged by how well reasoning corresponds to philosophic criteria laid down in the formalist, Kantian tradition. By explicitly appealing to certain ethical principles (e.g., the Kantian categorical imperative), and by engaging in certain dilemma-solving methodologies (e.g., the Rawlsian "original position" or "moral musical chairs") one increases the likelihood that just solutions will be found for hard case dilemmas, solutions that will compel agreement because of their evident rationality and fairness. Indeed, at the highest stages one can expect universal agreement on the solution to moral dilemmas, since the press towards agreement is part of the moral ideal under which one operates, a claim that Kohlberg used as a foil against ethical (and cultural) relativism.



Although more will be said about this aspect of Kohlberg's theory, it is important to point out just how critical the issue of ethical relativism has been to Kohlberg's work. His entire project can be seen as an attempt to provide the psychological resources by which to combat relativism. Indeed, the extent to which any given theory in moral psychology can be seen to give aid or comfort to ethical relativism is to count as the chief mark against it, quite irrespective of whatever empirical evidence can be amassed in its favor. Any approach, for example, that emphasizes moral "socialization," either by manipulating reinforcers or by inculcating virtues, is to be rejected on the grounds that it implicitly reflects a commitment to ethical relativism. This commitment is evident in the behavioral tradition to the extent that ordinary moral language (e.g., good, right, ought) is reduced to value-neutral operational definitions ("positive reinforcement"). Insofar as societies possess different social contingencies for dispensing reinforcement, it follows that what gets called "good" may vary considerably across various cultures. That at least one culture thought it fit to reinforce the extermination of Jews is of some moment to Kohlberg. If what is "good" is a matter of social contingency, then one is hard pressed to provide a rational argument against Nazi morality.

The argument against the virtue tradition follows a similar form. Virtues are often seen as traits of character. Yet by one count there are at least 4,500 words in the English language that could refer to personality traits, and the number applying to specifically virtue traits must be correspondingly large. Consequently, any composition of a desirable list or "bag" of virtues must necessarily be arbitrary. Furthermore, and more to the point, Kohlberg argued that the meaning of virtue words is relative to conventional cultural standards, and is hence "ethically relative." He writes: "Labeling a set of behaviors displayed by a child with positive or negative trait terms does not signify that they are adaptive or of ethical importance. It represents an appeal to particular community conventions, since one person's 'integrity' is another person's 'stubbornness'" (Kohlberg & Mayer 1987). In Kohlberg's view, it was completely inappropriate for moral socialization theorists to pretend that what they described was

simply an objective and empirical psychology of behavior, one that was "scientific" and therefore uncommitted to philosophical assumptions. Yet, by depriving moral behavior of motivational, cognitive, or interpretive elements, and by reducing ordinary moral language to putatively objective value-neutral descriptions of culturally specific patterns of habit-training, one could not help but find culturally relative moral values. In Kohlberg's view, moral socialization theorists take a stand on moral relativity without admitting it.

It should not be surprising that Kohlberg attempted to provide a psychological solution to the problem of ethical relativism in such a way that explicitly acknowledged the value-relevant nature of moral inquiry. Indeed, it remains one of Kohlberg's most significant achievements that his work encouraged a meaningful interpenetration of moral psychology and ethics (see Kohlberg 1981; Boyd 1986). This interpenetration can be described in a number of ways. First, Kohlberg extended the genetic epistemological project of Piaget (1970; see Kitchener 1986) to the moral domain in a more successful way than did Piaget (1932) himself. Thus, Kohlberg described his work as the "rational reconstruction of the ontogenesis of justice reasoning." As such, it was Kohlberg's aim to show that moral stage development yields an increasing appreciation of a "moral point of view," instantiated at Stage 6, that is normative, adequate, and justifiable in terms of relevant deontological theories of justice. In other words, "an adequate psychological theory of stages and stage movement presupposes a normative theory of justice," with the striking implication that "falsification of the empirical hypotheses of [the] psychological theory would . . . cast doubt on the validity of [the] normative theory" (Kohlberg, et al. 1983, 18). The normative theory of justice not only stakes out the psychological domain of inquiry, but also functions as one part of the developmental explanation for stage movement. "For instance, the normative theoretical claim that a higher stage is philosophically a better stage is one necessary part of a psychological explanation of sequential stage movement" (Kohlberg et al. 1983, 18). This entails, of course, that Kohlberg take a stand on the is-ought controversy (see Boyd 1986), and that he articulate the normative theory that grounds his conception of



moral stage development (Kohlberg 1981). It also suggests a means by which ethical (and cultural) relativism is to be combated. Cultural relativity is transcended by locating culturally universal patterns of norms and elements that underlie, at some deep level of discourse and practice, all forms of moral judging and evaluating. These universal norms can be revealed only by sensitive hermeneutic inquiry. This inquiry would reveal, for example, that the seeming relativity of various cultural practices and customs is only apparent, reflecting mere "content" differences among societies, differences that are ultimately "structured" by a deep appreciation of universalizable and prescriptive moral norms. Hence, "the culturally variable customs of monogamy and polygamy are both compatible with the culturally-universal underlying moral norms of personal dignity, commitment, and trust in sexual relationships" (Kohlberg et al. 1983, 72).

Ethical relativity is combated by the natural developing tendency to seek the highest stage of development, at which point one could more easily differentiate the prescriptive and universalizable elements of a moral judgment from mere conventional considerations. When one reasons from the perspective of the moral ideal that Stage 6 describes, then one realizes that moral agreement is a necessary and desirable feature of moral discourse. Value pluralism, then, is something that is evident only to one still trapped in conventional forms of moral reasoning. Moral disagreement is endemic only among those who lack the cognitive developmental abilities to engage in sophisticated, dilemma-solving justice operations, operations that are at the disposal of the principled reasoner. The moral educational task, then, is to provide the contextual supports for motivating development to the highest stage where this sort of reasoning becomes possible.

The Kohlbergian response, then, to the problem of value pluralism is to argue that there are real possibilities for moral consensus if development is sufficiently motivated to the highest stages of moral development. Although there is pervasive empirical support for various aspects of Kohlberg's theory (e.g., Walker 1982; Walker, de Vries, & Bichard 1984) and for his approach to moral education (Power, Kohlberg, & Higgins 1989; Lapsley et al. 1989), it has become increasingly

apparent that his entire approach to moral psychology may be unduly narrow, a narrowness that may, in turn, be based on two kinds of false moves. One of these, or so I will argue, is related to Kohlberg's antipathy for the importance of human virtues. The second regards the mechanics of principled reasoning itself. If Kohlberg has discovered a set of psychological facts about the course of moral development, and if these facts have implications for the validity of a normative theory of justice, then this state of affairs in moral psychology would undoubtedly be of singular importance to ethicists. Yet it is true to say that the facts of moral development, as understood by Kohlberg, have not penetrated very deeply into ethical discourse. I will suggest that the reason that this is the case has less to do with real or imagined deficiencies in moral psychology. Rather, it has more to do with the fact that the ideal Kohlbergian moral agent, adopting as she must the transcendental viewpoint of the (Rawlsian) original position, dislodged as she must then be from every social particularity, is an abstraction, an "epistemic subject," and not a *psychological* being at all. It is difficult to see how any set of psychological facts about human development could matter in an account of ideal rational agents who must become socially disembodied into impartiality and agreement. (And the fact that Kohlberg has never satisfactorily identified such a reasoner is of some importance.)

I should like to argue, then, that the Kohlbergian attempt to provide developmental arguments against ethical relativism is based on two mistakes, and that the project must, therefore, inevitably fail. Each will now be addressed in turn, then I will attempt to articulate what a "post-Kohlbergian era" in moral psychology might look like.

### Stage 6 and the Transcendental Moral Agent

As I just implied there is currently no provision in the extant Kohlbergian interview and scoring procedures for identifying a Stage 6 moral reasoner (Colby, Kohlberg, et al. 1987). Yet the hypothetical nature of the final stage does not constitute sufficient grounds for simply jettisoning it from the

theory. Indeed, the very coherence of the stage sequence, and the very force of the various moral psychological claims that the sequence entails, hinges on the requirement that the sequence be closed by a kind of reasoning that is denoted as Stage 6, even if this reasoning is nowhere descriptive of actual moral agents. Perhaps another way of stating this is to say that the genuinely interesting use of the theory as a foil against ethical relativism depends on Stage 6 being at least a theoretical possibility, even though no adequate procedure currently exists for identifying it. Why is this the case? One reason is related to the nature of developmental explanation in the structural developmental tradition out of which Kohlberg operated. Developmental stages, in this tradition, are imbued with teleological assumptions concerning the patterning and appropriate direction of change. Change is goal-directed towards a state of optimum complexity and adaptation, which is described as the final stage of development. If the developmental *telos* is to be attained, then certain intermediary stages are required. Developmental explanations, then, are not only teleological but functional. Hence, according to Kitchener (1983, 800), developmental explanations are "diachronic pattern explanations in which a part (a stage) is explained when one understands how it fits into the whole (sequence)—that is, how it fits into a temporal process directed towards a goal—and what contributing role (function) it played in the realization of this goal." The transition from earlier to later stages is given sense by understanding how the transitions function as a means for reaching the final stage.

Although Stage 5 involves the use of sophisticated cognitive operations, it is not the most "equilibrated" form of reasoning, and therefore cannot resolve certain problems in a way that is *most* adequate (in a psychological sense). Further, and given the complementarity that is said to exist between cognitive and moral operations, a Stage 5 reasoner cannot be expected to resolve certain moral dilemmas in a way that is either completely adequate, in a moral sense, or in a way that compels agreement, which is the main point of moral deliberation. And it is just this desire to describe how it is possible to generate agreement on rationally justifiable solutions

to moral dilemmas that is at the heart of the Kohlbergian project, a project that clearly requires that Stage 6 be the *telos* of moral development, since it is here that the desire for rational agreement is satisfied.

Stage 6 moral reasoning is a thoroughly Kantian affair. The central point of moral reasoning is to bring about the correct solution to a moral quandary by linking the features of the dilemma to a covering law that is universally applicable, categorical, prescriptive, and rationally justified. Following Schneewind (1983) the covering law might be said to be a "classical first principle" to the extent that it (1) possesses generality and is hence context-free, (2) allows no exceptions, (3) is substantive, and not merely formal, in that concrete solutions to specific moral questions might be derived from it, and (4) is foundational, in the sense that the authority of the principle is "basic" and not therefore derived from any source extrinsic to reason itself. Hence, the moral law is authoritative, objective, and binding on all rational agents in virtue of their rationality. One is an autonomous moral agent to the extent that one takes on the moral law as one's own, and heteronomous to the extent that one acts for reasons other than what the demands of rationality require. It also matters for moral deliberation that the moral relevance of the situation be adequately identified, that moral and nonmoral considerations be carefully distinguished (Norton 1988), and that mechanisms be available for adjudicating appeals to competing moral rules (Solomon 1988), typically in light of the first principle.

Kant's "categorical imperative" is, of course, a vivid example of a classical first principle. It is also paradigmatic of Stage 6 reasoning (although Kohlberg sometimes allowed for other general ethical principles to ground moral problem solving). At this stage one reasons from the perspective of any rational, autonomous individual, in accordance with the "moral point of view," in terms that can be universalized (Meilaender 1984). The moral point of view gives form to Stage 6 deliberations in that it structures the kinds of principles that can be invoked. One takes the moral point of view if one is autonomous, impartial, willing to universalize, and informed about the relevant facts of the matter (Kohlberg et al. 1983).



A moral judgment is justified if it generates agreement by everyone who takes this view. "This means equal consideration of the claim or points of view of each person affected by the moral decision. This prescriptive role-taking is governed by procedures designed to insure fairness, impartiality, or reversibility in role-taking" (Kohlberg 1986, 497). These procedures are deliberately invoked at Stage 6 to serve as procedural justice checks on the validity of a moral judgment.

Kohlberg (1986) describes several of these procedures. One procedure is formalized in terms of Rawls's original position, where one must choose from the "original position" after donning the "veil of ignorance." Indeed, Stage 6 is described (as is Stage 5) in terms of a Rawlsian "prior-to-society" perspective of a rational moral agent who is aware of universalizable values and rights that any agent would choose to build into a society (Kohlberg 1986). Another formalized procedure is called "moral musical chairs," where one systematically determines if a candidate judgment is still acceptable when seen from the perspective of each claimant. One indication that a judgment is inadequate is just when it cannot be "reversed," i.e., when it cannot be consistently maintained from the perspective of other parties. In the famous Heinz dilemma, for example, where Heinz must choose between stealing a drug in order to save the life of his wife (and thereby violate the property rights of a druggist) or not to steal (and thereby violate the imperative to respect life), Kohlberg has determined that every Stage 6 reasoner who adopts the moral point of view will choose to steal the drug. This is so because the druggist would not insist on his property rights if *he* were in the position of Heinz's wife, i.e., his position could not be reversed from the perspective of the other party to the justice dispute. Similarly, Kohlberg has determined that no rational agent would endorse capital punishment from the original position, prior-to-society, since no agent could rationally choose death if it could be the case that it is the agent on death row. The judgment for capital punishment, then, is not reversible if seen from the perspective of the inmate. A fully reversible judgment, one that survives appraisal regardless of who is doing the appraising, will also therefore compel agreement, and will hence be universalizable. And just this perspective

afforded by Stage 6 will allow one to transcend the plurality of moral options and the relativism that merely conventional reasoning is wont to breed.

A third formalization, one recently appended to the theory, emphasizes the dynamics of actual dialogue. Following Habermas, Kohlberg argued that disputants must take the "performative attitude" in actual moral dialogue, an attitude that is characterized as the active attempt to understand the point of view of others, and to coordinate this understanding with one's own reasons in such a way that disputants will yield to convincing arguments. Dialogue of this sort is grounded by a number of presuppositions. Mutual respect, and the freedom and rationality of each disputant, are presupposed. Further, there are pragmatic considerations (understood as rules of argumentation) immanent in the very nature of rational discourse that commit disputants (at least intuitively) to presuppositions with normative content, and which therefore could function as a moral principle. According to Habermas, this principle is a formalization of Kantian intuitions, and assumes that every participant in moral dialogue must take into account the perspective of other disputants. "This principle can be stated in the following way: a valid norm has to satisfy the condition—that the consequences, intended or not, which will (probably) result from its *general* application for the interests of *every* individual affected would be consensually preferred by *all* of those involved" (Habermas, in Kohlberg 1986, 519). Can this principle be rationally justified? Is this a moral point of view that is valid for all cultures? Although Habermas intends this principle to function much like a principle of induction in theoretical discourse, he avoids the Popperian charge that such "first" principles are susceptible to infinite regress and to *apriorism* by claiming that all attempts to justify or refute this principle, by the very fact of entering into rational discourse, inescapably admit to pragmatic considerations governing dialogue that presuppose relevant aspects of the moral principle. Thus, he writes that

everybody who attempts to refute the moral principle will be caught in a performative contradiction to the very pragmatic presuppositions which he cannot escape once he seriously

starts to argue at all. . . . The strategy of this form of argument is to accept the sceptical conclusion that these principles are not open to any proof, being presuppositions of reasoning rather than conclusions from it, but to go on to argue that commitment to them is rationally inescapable, because they must, logically, be assumed if one is to engage in a mode of thought essential to any rational human life. (Habermas, in Kohlberg 1986, 519)

Although Kohlberg formalizes Stage 6 in terms of the original position methodology, and in terms of moral musical chairs, and claims that these formalizations are consensus-seeking approaches to moral dilemmas, he has remarked that actual dialogue under the conditions of the performative attitude, as understood by Habermas, is the most advantageous means by which moral consensus is to be achieved (Kohlberg 1986, 527).

Our best hope, then, of reaching consensus on universal moral principles lies in achieving the moral point of view that is representative of Stage 6, and which is formalized in terms of the original position, moral musical chairs, and the ideal communication situation of actual moral dialogue. This is clearly a most sophisticated account of moral psychology, yet doubts remain concerning the adequacy of Stage 6. MacIntyre (1984, 23) noted that "A moral philosophy characteristically presupposes a sociology. . . . Thus it would generally be a decisive refutation of a moral philosophy to show that moral agency on its own account of the matter could never be socially embodied." I will press a similar claim against that aspect of Stage 6 which appeals to "ideal role-taking," whether it is expressed in terms of the original position or of moral musical chairs. Regarding the formalization of Stage 6 in terms of the performative attitude behind "legitimate speech acts," I will argue that this account of moral rationality is fundamentally incompatible with other formalizations of Stage 6, and whatever else may be said about Habermas's position, it cannot help Stage 6 in its task of transcending ethical relativism.

In his *After Virtue* MacIntyre (1984) argued that the eighteenth-century Enlightenment project of providing rational justification for objective and impersonal moral principles has failed. His account of this failure, and its consequence

for contemporary moral philosophy, is relevant for my task here, for I shall argue that Kohlberg's project is just what one should expect in moral psychology if MacIntyre's thesis is true.

According to MacIntyre the search for foundational moral principles during the Enlightenment was motivated by the fact that the teleological understanding of moral injunctions and of their role in correcting untutored human nature was undermined by the rejection of Aristotelian teleological science and by the onslaught of secular Enlightenment thinking against theistic understandings of a Divine plan. The Enlightenment rejection of any notion of the *telos* of humankind (whether classical or theistic) therefore deprived moral injunctions of their justificatory force, insofar as the whole point of morality was to show how it was possible to bring human nature from how it *is* to how it could be if one were to realize one's *telos*. The categorical nature of moral judgments was lost, since the universal law that grounded such judgments could no longer be that which was commanded by God. The hypothetical nature of moral judgments was lost, since one could no longer justify those judgments regarding moral conduct in terms of what was required in order to reach one's true end. Moral judgments, then, lost any clear status, becoming inherited "linguistic survivals" divorced from a context which gave them force. In MacIntyre's view this was not necessarily seen as a lamentable state of affairs by those who had lived through this period. "Many of those who lived through this change in our predecessor culture saw it as a deliverance both from the burdens of traditional theism and the confusions of teleological thought. . . . The self had been liberated from all those outmoded forms of social organization which had imprisoned it simultaneously within a belief in a theistic and teleological world order and within those hierarchical structures which attempted to legitimate themselves as part of such a world order" (MacIntyre 1984, 60). The modern self, then, emerges emancipated, autonomous, and sovereign as a result of this collapse of classical theism.

Yet the ambiguous status of moral judgments which resulted from the "flight from authority" (Stout 1981) of the Enlightenment project presented modern moral philosophy



with its characteristic problematic. According to MacIntyre (1984, 62):

On the one hand the individual moral agent, freed from hierarchy and teleology, conceives of himself and is conceived of by moral philosophers as sovereign in his moral authority. On the other hand, the inherited, if partially transformed rules of morality have to be found some new status, deprived as they have been of their older teleological character and their even more ancient categorical character as expressions of an ultimately divine law. If such rules cannot be found a new status which will make appeal to them rational, appeal to them will indeed appear as a mere instrument of individual desire and will. Hence, there will be pressure to vindicate them either by devising some new teleology or by finding some new categorical status for them.

By grounding moral judgments on a psychological thesis (i.e., whether actions prescribed by a moral injunction increase happiness or pleasure), utilitarianism attempted to provide a "naturalistic" teleological foundation for morality. And it was the Kantian project that attempted to provide a new categorical status for moral judgments based on the requirements of practical reason. In MacIntyre's (1984) view, both projects failed, resulting in the modern predicament whereby we use moral speech to assert emotivist preferences, though cloaking our preferences behind the veneer of moral principles thought to provide objective "foundations" and "grounding."

Kohlberg's ideal moral agent, reasoning from the perspective of Stage 6, is ultimately an emotivist self as well. Whereas modern moral philosophy, according to MacIntyre (1984), attempts to vindicate the rationality and objectivity of moral judgments by finding some new teleological or categorical status for them, it is of interest to note that Kohlberg incorporates both strategies in his psychological theory. The categorical status is borrowed from the authority of the Kantian categorical imperative. The teleological foundation is found in the very nature of development itself. Recall that the very nature of functional developmental explanation assumes that development tends toward some goal or desired end state, e.g., the final stage. A sequence is explained when

one can show how stage transition functions in such a way as to permit the attainment of the final stage. In the moral development theory the *telos* is realized when one talks like Kant when faced with moral dilemmas.

In traditional or classical politics the *telos* of human life was well understood. In the absence of community consensus on the proper ends of a good life, such as is the case in modern liberal societies, any proposed teleological formulation must necessarily be controversial, and therefore require justification. The choice of the Kantian imperative as a first principle of moral reasoning must remain unargued, however, on pain of infinite regress. In the Kantian scheme, "An agent can only justify a particular judgment by referring to some universal rule from which it may be logically derived, and can only justify that rule in turn by deriving it from some more general rule or principle; but on this view since every chain of reasoning must be finite, such a process of justificatory reasoning must always terminate with the assertion of some rule or principle for which no further reasons can be given" (MacIntyre 1984, 20). The choice of first principles, then, is to be left to the discretion of the moral agent, and has authority precisely because it is chosen.

It would then appear that Kohlberg's Stage 6 reasoner must also adopt unargued first principles and thereby fall prey to the state of affairs described by MacIntyre, whereby the language of impersonal, objective, and rational moral criteria is used to mask emotivist preferences. This perhaps explains the real import behind Kohlberg's desire to postulate the existence of a "soft" Stage 7, where one reflects on "the need to be moral in the first place," a reflection that might appropriately invoke religious or other appropriately cosmic considerations. It is one thing to use first principles in order to digest moral dilemmas, it is one thing to know *how* to be moral, quite another to justify *why* one should digest moral dilemmas in the first place, or *why* one should be moral. Stage 6 cannot tell us why morality is a desirable thing. To answer this question requires an appeal to extramoral considerations, and this is the business of Stage 7. Yet the need to postulate Stage 7 is symptomatic of the desire to provide at least some justification for the use of first



principles other than to leave it to raw preference. That whatever Stage 7 reasons might be invoked would themselves require justification only pushes the infinite regress problem to another level, and would not, on this account, relieve the moral agent from ultimately choosing unargued moral allegiances for unargued Stage 7 considerations. Clearly, then, the elimination by the Enlightenment project of teleological considerations regarding proper and desirable ends of human life make the postulation of Stage 7 inevitable in moral psychology. The necessity for asking "open" or "limit" questions, which is the business of Stage 7, is only an interesting or necessary thing to do when moral judgments lack a clear teleological purpose.

It is also of interest to point out that to the extent that the Stage 6 reasoner might also be free to adopt first principles other than Kantian imperatives, such as the principle of utility or of benevolence (*agape*), it seems doubtful that dialogue on moral matters could be little more than the assertion of moral principles whose premises are incommensurable. It is just this incommensurability, the arguing from incompatible premises, that contributes to the interminability of moral debate, which is then dignified by the term "pluralism." As a result one would not be as sanguine as was Kohlberg that moral dialogue at Stage 6 could produce mere agreement, let alone agreement that was in some sense justified.

Indeed, it is notorious that other ethicists, presumably as skilled as was Kohlberg in using principled reasoning, could quarrel, with Kohlberg's favored solutions to hypothetical moral dilemmas (see, e.g., Locke 1986). One can see the justice, then, of MacIntyre's diagnosis of the predicament of modern moral philosophy, that for all the rhetoric of foundational moral principles there lurks instead the assertion of emotivist preferences, and this is as true in moral psychology as in ethics. It is not hard to see, for example, that our editorial writer, in touting the foundational importance of personal purity and self-restraint in sexual conduct, was doing little more than using the language of universal moral principles ("foundational wisdom") in order to mask an (emotivist) personal preference regarding the proper attitude one should

take towards contraception. Further, it may well be true that monogamy and polygamy represent the identical allegiance to universal principles of dignity and trust in relationships (though what counts as dignity and trust begs for a historical analysis), but what is one to do when these values (or any other) conflict in a practical moral conflict situation? It is little wonder that Kohlberg (1986, 527) came to make a surprising concession, that perhaps his theory is compatible with certain kinds of relativism ("perspectival" or "contextual") after all, though not with "radical" relativism. This concession is surprising since it robs Kohlberg's theory of much that made it interesting, since clearly no appeal to psychological data is needed to refute radical relativism.

There is still the formalization of Stage 6 in terms of "legitimate communication action" that needs to be considered. One should first notice that the performative attitude underlying legitimate communication, and the implicit appeal to normative pragmatic universals governing rational discourse, applies equally well to dialogue about virtues as it does to the kind of moral debates favored by Kohlberg. That universals are presupposed in moral dialogue would entail that any rational discourse concerning, say, the status of "integrity" vs. "stubbornness," would be enough to keep the moral skeptic at bay, and deprive Kohlberg of any rationale for condemning virtues as necessarily "ethically relative."

Kohlberg (1986, 517) has written: "According to Habermas (1982), a Kantian respect for persons is a precondition for argument or dialogue among philosophers and in this sense justifies itself as the ultimate moral principle." He also approvingly cites McCarthy's (1982, 57) summary of Habermas's theory:

Philosophic hermeneutic stress that the interpreter of social phenomena is a member of a life-world, that the interpreter too occupies a specific historical, social, cultural position from which he or she tries to come to terms with the beliefs and practices of others. The understanding achieved is, as a result, inexorably situation-bound, an understanding from a point of view that is on the same level as what is understood. There are . . . no privileged positions outside of or above history from



which to view human life; there can be no interpreter without a language . . .

Three comments are in order. First of all, Habermas does not take recourse to any ultimate foundations or ultimate principles (see, e.g., Habermas, in Kohlberg 1986, 531), or at least foundations that can be justified. Secondly, it is not at all clear that Habermas's challenge to the moral skeptic, appropriated by Kohlberg, can fend off anything more than a kind of radical "epistemological" relativism, which strikes one as a serious attenuation of the Kohlbergian project. As Carter (1986) pointed out, even if the validity claims underlying legitimate dialogue were fulfilled, this would not be sufficient to establish their universal and necessary validity. He writes that "even though analysis reveals what must be assumed for communication to be genuine, it is not clear exactly how we can establish an ideal-observer type objectivity for the content of those validity claims. We must assume that what we say is true, in order to communicate ideally, but this in no way shows that what we assume is, in fact, true, except from a perspective already within the circle of assumptions. [Hence], one's fundamental values, beliefs, methodology and even one's understanding of reason's place in the scheme of things, are taken by us to be true, and that they are *not* evidently universal or necessary, but only assumptive or traditional, or in some other way acceptable or even required by our point of view" (p. 14). On this point Kohlberg (1986) seems to agree, insofar as he now accepts the possibility that Stage 6 is helpless against "perspectival" relativism, a view that does not seem to leave the emotivist self far behind.

My third point is that whatever else can be said about the formalization of Stage 6 as a rational reconstruction of an ideal communication situation, it is incompatible with other formalizations of this stage. As noted above, Habermas does not assume that one must transcend social, cultural, or historical particularities, yet this is precisely what is required in order to reason "prior-to-society." Stage 6 is either a rational reconstruction of ideal and legitimate dialogue, or it is a prior-to-society perspective, but it cannot be both. The latter is assumed when Stage 6 is formalized in terms of the moral

bargaining ("balancing perspectives") that takes place from the original position, after donning the veil of ignorance. One is to achieve impartiality by adopting a moral point of view of any rational individual, a view that represents a transcendental abstraction from one's own view, without knowing who one is. That one must become socially disembodied into impartiality, that one must stand outside of social structures, above history, and outside of time, that one must take the transcendental "perspective from eternity" (Stout 1981) in order to become the autonomous agent, is a view not only at odds with Habermas's assumptions, but one that is psychologically suspicious as well. One has no doubt that the kind of moral autonomy that Kohlberg seeks requires just this kind of social emasculation, but it pays the terrible price of yielding a transcendental self that is impoverished, fictive, and no self worth having. It is also worth noting that such a maneuver may not even achieve impartiality, since it has been argued that the autonomous moral bargainer actually reflects an implicit commitment to rational egoism (Stout 1981) and liberal individualism (MacIntyre 1988).

So the moral agent of Stage 6 is both an emotivist and transcendental self, which is to say no self at all. As MacIntyre noted (1984, 32), the emotivist "democratized" self "has no necessary social content, no necessary social identity, can assume any role or take any point of view, because it is, in and for itself, nothing." Yet Kohlberg is driven to this end because of his anxiety to provide a foundational moral psychology that can resolve disputes and counter ethical relativism. But the search for ultimate moral principles to serve foundational purposes in moral disputes is as reductionistic a strategy as any positivistic search for "basic" statements by which to resolve theoretical disputes in science (Stout 1981). The line of development in the philosophy of science beginning with Popper, and including Kuhn, Lakatos, and Laudan, among others, has shown how futile it is to expect any justificatory strategy to work in the rational appraisal of theories. Foundationalism in ethics fails just as surely as justificationism does in the philosophy of science, and for the same reasons. There is no "gap" between evaluative and descriptive statements, between fact and theory, between analytic and



synthetic, between "is" and "ought."<sup>1</sup> There is no infallible basis that is to serve as the court of appeal in either theoretical or ethical disputes. And to say this is not to leave us helpless against the skeptic or the relativist. Historicist approaches do show how rational appraisal is possible, whether it be of ethical traditions (MacIntyre 1988; also, Stout 1981) or of scientific research programs (Lakatos 1978; see Serlin & Lapsley, 1990, in press, for the psychological case).

### Kohlberg and Virtues

I have argued that Kohlberg, in attempting to provide psychological resources by which to combat relativism, and by which to transcend value pluralism, took the wrong turn into foundationalism, thereby yielding a fictive account of the emotivist, transcendental moral agent as a result. The second wrong turn concerns Kohlberg's treatment of virtues and of character education. Kohlberg objected to character education on two grounds. First, it is an arbitrary "bag of virtues" approach, and is therefore "ethically relative." Second, it does not seem to be the case, if the classic studies of Hartshorne and May (1928-1932) are to be believed, that virtue traits even exist, or cohere into something that could be called "character," since this research appeared to show that children do not consistently display such traits as honesty in various test-taking situations. It is unfortunate that so much weight has been given by Kohlbergians to the research by Hartshorne and May, since no one in the virtue ethics tradition could imagine that young children could have well-formed characters in the first place. This aside, I should want to argue, if only briefly, that a consideration of virtuous character must be prior to any consideration of how one goes about resolving hard case moral dilemmas.

The virtue ethics critique of deontological "quandary" ethics usually begins by noting just how constricted is its vision of the moral life (Norton 1988; Pincoffs 1983). For the quandarist the moral life is taken up with solving moral puzzles, in a juridical way, much like a critic or judge. The emphasis is on the problem, and allowable responses to the

problem in light of the duties and obligations that are specified by general moral rules. In contrast, the virtue theorist is concerned with more than how one responds to borderline, hard case dilemmas, but rather with the problem of how to live well the life that is good for one to live. The emphasis is not so much on duty, but with the inculcation of those traits of character that permit one to live a virtuous life. The emphasis is on the formation of the agent, not with the solution to puzzles. Virtue theorists argue, correctly in my view, that the emphasis on forming the virtuous character must take priority over dilemma-solving as a moral educational task, since our ability to recognize or "see" a dilemma in the first place may well depend on who we are. As Meilaender (1984) points out, we would not be able to recognize hard cases, or determine what ought to be done, or what our duty was, or even whether the situation called for a moral response, unless we were a person of a certain sort. Again, what we see depends on who we are (see also, Dykstra 1981).

A splendid study by Donald R. C. Reed (1986) illustrates the difficulty that Kohlberg's rejection of character education has for his own moral educational project. The prototypic Kohlbergian moral education strategy has been called the "plus-one convention" (see Lapsley et al. 1989, for a review). The general plan is for students to discuss moral dilemmas, with the provision that counter-arguments be presented that reflect reasoning one stage above ("plus-one") the students' own. The discrepancy in views is said to induce "cognitive conflict," which then motivates development to the next highest stage. The plus-one convention was evidently inspired by the apparent success of the Socratic dialectic that was illustrated, for example, by the Socrates of the *Meno*. In this work one observes Socrates bringing a slave boy to an understanding of a principle of geometry through a dialectical ("Socratic") method. According to Reed (1986), however, what went apparently unnoticed by Kohlberg was the fact that Socrates could make little headway with Meno by the use of this method. Indeed, Reed (1986) argues that the purpose of the *Meno* was to illustrate just the limits of the Socratic dialectic. The dialectic will prove unavailing, the *Meno* illustrates, if the subject lacks sufficient character, and this apparently was the case

with Meno (but not the slave boy). It was the Socrates of the *Republic*, a later work than the *Meno*, who described an educational regimen devoted to the task of inculcating those traits of character that would allow one to profit from the dialectic. Hence the two works must be read in tandem, according to Reed (1986). The *Meno* illustrates what can go wrong with the Socratic dialectic when a subject is lacking in character. The *Republic* illustrates how character is to be developed such that one could eventually profit from the dialectic. Although Kohlberg accepted the Socrates of the *Meno*, he rejected the Socrates of the *Republic* on the grounds that the latter was not "dialectical" education, but mere indoctrination. Yet not to see the connection between the *Meno* and the *Republic* is to miss the central Platonic point, that only those who are trained to do the good could be in a position to know the good. Consequently, as Meilaender (1984, 72) points out, "communities which seek simply to remain 'open' and do not inculcate virtuous habits of character will utterly fail at the task of moral education."

### Towards the Post-Kohlbergian Era

I have argued that the Kohlbergian research program has been limited by two false moves. One was the desire to secure a foundation for moral judgments on psychological grounds in the interest of combating ethical relativism. The second was the rejection of virtues and character as the proper aim of moral education. The two false moves are not unrelated. Indeed, it is unremarkable that Kohlberg would eschew the development of virtuous character given his image of the Stage 6 moral agent, who must divest the self of social particularities and stand outside of culture and history for the sake of achieving impartiality. Who could be interested in character if moral rationality requires that it be transcended? Who could be interested in what "I" must do when the real question concerns what *any* (abstract, epistemic) individual must do? The twin moves also seem like quite natural efforts to extend the Piagetian genetic epistemological project into the moral domain, and only look like false moves from the contemporary vantage point, far after the authority of Piaget and

the structural developmental movement has declined. But if my criticism of these twin features of Kohlberg's theory has force, then the post-Kohlbergian era in moral psychology is upon us.

What might this era look like? I can be little more than suggestive on this point, but a number of trends can be discerned already. It would appear that no grand theory of moral development, like Kohlberg's, is to be forthcoming in the post-Kohlbergian era. Indeed, moral psychology will undoubtedly go the way of intellectual development after the collapse of Piaget's theory. The study of intellectual development is now fragmented into numerous local and specific domains. These domains are typically understood by any number of mini-theories of limited generality, and most of these are inspired by the information-processing paradigm, a paradigm that does not have an obvious epistemological agenda. The fragmentation of the moral domain will continue apace and take a similar form. So, for example, developmental studies of moral emotions, forgiveness, prosocial reasoning, empathy, altruism, conceptions of social rules, equity, transgressions, authority, social justice, retribution, among others, will continue to be topics of great interest. Some areas, such as moral rule acquisition, especially of retributive and procedural justice rules, are already yielding to information-processing analyses (see Darley & Shultz 1990).

Although the empirical significance of these particular research domains is not to be doubted, it would not be unfair to say that their implications for moral education are not yet well developed. Even if they were, none would appear able to capitalize on the insight of the virtues ethics tradition that the development of character is the first task of moral education. One option that might seem obvious in light of this insight is that post-Kohlbergian research recover an interest in personological dispositions and traits of character. This suggestion undoubtedly sounds quixotic to those who are familiar with the unhappy status of traits in personality theory. Decades of research have simply failed to support the traditional assumptions underlying the notion of "global traits," e.g., that traits be readily detectable and show cross-situational consistency, stability, and temporal continuity



(see Mischel 1968). It was precisely this notion of "trait" that was assumed by Hartshorne and May (1928-1932), whose results had such an important influence in leading Kohlberg to reject the study of virtue traits.

Yet there is no reason to be wedded to traditional assumptions about traits. Indeed, the conceptualization of personality dispositions has been undergoing remarkable development in recent years. According to Mischel (1990, 116-117) this conceptualization "called attention away from inferences about what broad traits a person *has* [in a context-free sense], to focus instead on what the person *does* in particular conditions in the coping process. Of course, what people do encompasses not just motor acts, but what they do cognitively and affectively, including the constructs they generate, the projects they plan and pursue, and the self-regulatory efforts they attempt in light of long-term goals." The contemporary study of "traits" now emphasizes "person-situation interactionism," and is subsumed under such research headings as competencies, personal constructs, and encoding strategies (schemes, scripts, prototypes, etc), expectancies, subjective values and goals, and self-regulatory systems (see Mischel 1990, for a review). These approaches to personality dispositions should prove useful to virtue theorists as they work out the parameters of character development.

Another promising line of research is being developed by Augusto Blasi (1984; 1985; 1989), in his work on moral identity and the moral personality. Blasi argues that the self is not a collection of traits or characteristics, but is rather an organization of self-related information. This information is ordered according to principles of psychological consistency (central-peripheral, important-unimportant, essential-unessential). To the extent that moral considerations (being good, just, virtuous) are judged to be central, important, and essential to one's self-understanding, and one is committed to living in such a way as to express what is central, important and essential about oneself, then one has a "moral identity." This suggests that one's identity may not include moral considerations, or may include them in degrees, suggesting further that moral identity, like the dispositional approach noted above, is a dimension of individual differences. Blasi's work

also provides a perspective on moral action, which is seen to hinge on notions of fidelity and self-responsibility, i.e., a concern with being authentic or true-to-the-self in action. In his view, moral identity is that which motivates moral action. If moral considerations are self-defining, if they are a part of the "essential self" to the extent that self-integrity hinges on self-consistency in action, then not to act in accordance with one's identity is to risk losing the self.

Blasi's emphasis on identity is a particularly attractive aspect of his work, for it has important implications for our understanding of virtues. Identity, following Erikson, is an inherently "psychosocial" construct that is forged in communities. Identity is not mere self-definition but self-definition that is validated by society (or the communities in which we belong). It implies, among other things, an attempt to integrate and order the elements of our personality for the sake of living a meaningful life, one lived in fidelity to those projects, ideals, and choices that we commit to and "identify" with, and by which we are identified, in turn, by our community.

Virtues, too, make sense only in light of a community which seeks to develop people of a certain kind. The "life that is good for one to live" is social in nature and takes place in accordance with the specifications of community, such that some sort of "adaptation" to it is required in order to flourish (Wong 1988). The development of a virtuous character and of moral identity may not be two different kinds of development. Indeed, one might claim that the kinds of development that lead to the acquisition of moral identity is the minimal grounding of the virtuous character. That this may be so is suggested by the recent interest shown by virtue ethicists in certain "Eriksonian" identity themes (see, e.g., Rorty 1988; Kupperman 1988; Wong 1988). Insofar as a virtue ethic is concerned with the question of what it is to live a life well (i.e., to flourish), and with specifying those virtues the possession of which contributes to the realization of such a life, and to the extent that this specification must be grounded by the meanings and practices of a community, then a commitment to live this life is just what confers moral identity.

A recent work by John Kekes (1989) illustrates just how close is a meaningful dialogue between moral psychology and

philosophy. Kekes argues that good judgment requires one to possess "breadth" and "depth," terms which describe different organizations of "moral idioms." Moral idioms can be described by the terms of approval and disapproval that are provided us by our social context. They are moral, specific, interpretive, and action-guiding, and they also describe character traits. One possesses breadth when one is aware that a range of competing interpretations of relevant idioms are possible when a complex moral situation is to be confronted. Indeed, to have breadth is just to know that a situation is morally complex, and that the actions specified by applicable idioms are contestable. Hence, "the important dimension of breadth is produced by awareness that even within one and the same moral tradition there are genuinely different moral idioms according to which moral situations can be objectively interpreted" (Kekes 1989, 139). No ideal, impartial judge can adjudicate the conflict of interpretations, since, even if all the facts are known, the weight given to the facts will vary as a function of the importance attributed them by participants. Breadth is just this sensitivity to the complexity of moral idiomatic interpretations that moral agents bring to problematic situations.

Insofar as good judgment can be paralyzed by this sensitivity, breadth needs to be complemented by moral depth. According to Kekes, depth is that which allows one to discern the right or appropriate response. It consists partly in the growing awareness that in spite of the diversity of possible moral responses there is an underlying unity that is captured by a particular idiom. "Through depth we can come to see that the unity of these superficially different forms of conduct is provided by steadfast adherence to one's conception of a good life in the face of adversity" (Kekes 1989, 141). To have depth also refers to our appreciation of the role that moral idioms play in our conception of a meaningful life. Kekes urges us to think of our idiomatic commitments as being of two kinds, those that are loose and conditional, and those that are unconditional and infeasible. Depth is just the hierarchical ordering of these kinds of commitments, and such an ordering provides us with a moral perspective. To act contrary to our deepest infeasible, unconditional commitments, to our

moral perspective, is to risk psychological damage and the loss of characterological integrity. He writes "Unconditional commitments are the deepest, the most serious convictions we have; they define what we would not do, what we regard as outrageous and horrible; they are the fundamental conditions of being ourselves" (Kekes 1989, 167). Without these commitments, without depth, the integrity of our character is found wanting.

I mention this feature of Kekes's work in order to show just how similar it is to Blasi's psychological account of the moral personality. Where Kekes speaks of the structured organization of idioms, Blasi speaks of the organization of self-related information. Where Kekes describes this organization in terms of a continuum of self-commitment (conditional-unconditional, defeasible-indefeasible, surface-depth), Blasi describes it in terms of self-consistency (essential-unessential, central-peripheral, important-unimportant). Where Kekes says that our commitment to idioms of sufficient depth provides us with an action-guiding moral perspective, Blasi says that our commitment to the elements of the essential self provides us with action-guiding moral identity. Where Kekes describes this process as the development of a personal morality, Blasi describes it as the development of a moral personality.

Whether one is talking about a moral personality or a personal morality, one gets the sense that both authors would claim (especially Kekes) that essential selves with "deep" moral perspectives are well equipped to navigate their way through the morass of pluralistic conceptions of good lives, such that a life of personal integrity (being true to our commitments, or being true to-the-self-in-action) can be maintained. Kohlbergians might grant that this kind of "personal morality" (or "moral identity") might be action-guiding in the case of complex personal situations, where the question concerns "what am I to do such that my life can be lived with integrity, or that I might be true to my unconditional commitments," but deny that it can be of much help in resolving the kinds of pluralistic moral disputes that arise in the public sphere, in the domain of social morality. Here the task is to forge agreement, even though disputants may bring to the situation incommensurable moral premises. Yet hard cases



are hard for everybody, and this difficulty does not call into question the priority of character education over "decisionism." Being able to enter into legitimate moral dialogue may in fact presuppose deliberate adherence to the imperative to "respect persons," but the disposition to respect persons does not result from having sophisticated role-taking skills (since these skills could just as well be used for swindling or for sophistic ends), but rather from being a person of a certain kind. And, as Kekes points out, and as noted earlier, good judgment depends on correctly characterizing the situation (as one demanding a moral response), and this is seen to hinge on good character.

### Conclusion

I noted much earlier that Kohlberg's theory took moral philosophy seriously. His embrace of the Kantian, deontological tradition was so complete that it is fair to say that his theory could not have been phrased absent these ethical considerations. I also noted, however, that although Kohlberg's appropriation of formalist ethics set the stage for dialogue with ethicists, his findings did not penetrate very deeply into ethical discourse. But there are grounds for thinking that the shoe is now on the other foot. I want to conclude by noting that to the extent that the nature of character traits is a critical feature of reflection in the virtue ethics tradition, then it would seem that the psychological study of personality and identity can hardly be neglected. Indeed, the parallelisms between Kekes and Blasi, the "Eriksonian" themes that show up in recent writings in virtue ethics, are testimony to the common project that is set before psychologists and ethicists. One could even point to the converging interest in "narrative" as a concept for understanding ethical traditions (MacIntyre 1977) and virtue education (Hauerwas 1980), on the one hand, and for understanding self (Gergen & Gergen 1988) and personality (McAdams 1985) development, on the other. As a result of these converging interests there is now real cause for optimism that dialogue among ethicists and psychologists will bring mutual benefits to either discipline, and vindicate Kohlberg's belief in their ultimate penetrability.<sup>2</sup>

### Notes

1. I am endorsing a point made by Stout (1981) that the positing by prescriptivists of an unbridgeable chasm between "is" and "ought" is a product of a discredited foundationalist epistemology. See Hampshire (1983) for more doubts on the putative is-ought gap. For more on the similarity between ethics and the philosophy of science, see Schneewind (1983). For an alternative view, see B. Williams (1985, esp. chap. 8).
2. I am grateful for the comments provided by Owen Flanagan, Donald R. C. Reed, Paul Warren, Albert Howsepian and Augusto Blasi on a draft of this essay.

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