

## Chapter 18

# The Use of Developmental Psychology in Ethics: Beyond Kohlberg and Seligman?

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter argues that a developmental psychology based in a wider notion of reason and ultimate flourishing can employ both duty and virtue in the service of the common good. It identifies several important differences between cognitive structuralism and virtue-based approaches concerning the pre-empirical priority paid to either duty or virtue in moral development. It brings to light several challenges concerning the use of developmental psychology in ethics: (1) a weakness in schools of cognitive structuralism, such as that of Lawrence Kohlberg, inasmuch as they do not move beyond the theory of stages and structures that focus only on the cognitive judgment of justice and on duty; (2) a weakness in developmental virtue approaches, such as that of Martin Seligman, inasmuch as they do not employ moral content in the operative notions of virtues and values. This article concludes that a heartier notion of developmental psychology and normative ethics will need to recognize the interrelated nature of ethical acts (moral agency), ethical agents (moral character), and ethical norms (duties and law). Such an integrated approach must also attend to the input that diverse philosophical and religious presuppositions make toward understanding the place of developmental psychology in the practice of ethics.*

### INTRODUCTION

In the field of ethics, developmental questions are often left unexplored. In the field of psychology, ethical issues are often left undeveloped. In both fields, the popularity of strictly duty or rule-based

presuppositions has limited a more profound use of developmental psychology in ethics (Handelsman, et al., 2009). This article will not pit a modern construal of duty-based and virtue-based approaches to ethics against each other. Nor will it contest the need for duties and rules. Rather it will demonstrate the promise found in a wider notion of reason and a more normative notion of

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the virtues that subsume moral duties and rules as a constitutive part of ethics instead of its end.

The end of Lawrence Kohlberg's developmental psychology has been construed as the formal judgment of justice (structures-of-justice reasoning) founded on duty-based presuppositions of moral development. Much is owed to his research and to those who have advanced it. Nonetheless, the limits of this perspective—concerning moral flourishing and the content of ethics—have been recognized, and its need to be renewed has been largely accepted. In an era that many researchers call post-Kohlbergian, a burgeoning revival of interest in moral character and virtues has opened the door for further integration of psychological and ethical considerations that aim at not only ethical duty in developmental psychology, but also other elements needed to constitute a more robust ethical theory and moral psychology, namely: character, virtue, happiness, cognition, volition, emotion, values, and interpersonal relationships.

Although exerting a major influence from antiquity to present, the place of virtue in ethics has been eclipsed in modern rationalist (Descartes), deontological (Kant), sentimentalist (Hume), utilitarian (Mills, Bentham), and evolutionary (Darwin) accounts of moral agency. Nonetheless, the philosophical revival of virtue, especially largely Aristotelian virtue theory, has offered a source of further personal and social input and a platform for a deeper synthesis. The most renowned philosophical contributors to the virtue revival include: Josef Pieper (Pieper, 1966), Elizabeth Anscombe (1981), Vladimir Jankélévitch (1968), Alasdair MacIntyre (1985), Nicholas Dent (1984), Martha Nussbaum (1986), and André Comte-Sponville (1995). The most significant theological contributions to virtue theory are found in the works of Servais Pinckaers (1978, 1995), Paul Ricœur (1992) and Stanley Hauerwas (1981). In the field of psychology, major Kohlbergian theorists, Thomas Lickona (1976 & 1992), Carol Gilligan (1981), William Damon (1999), David Carr (1999), John Gibbs (2003), and Daniel Lapsley and F. Clark

Power (2005) have built upon the structures-of-justice reasoning, while trying to go beyond it, especially by showing greater interest in character and virtues. Further efforts at developmental psychology include the work of Martin Hoffman (2000) and Nancy Eisenberg (1998). Finally, of special interest for its larger vision of the human person and moral agency is a distinct character and virtue approach called "positive psychology," which is represented by Martin Seligman.

In this paper, first, I will present Kohlberg's perspective to developmental psychology, followed by several critiques and a sampling of the efforts that continue in this legacy. Second, I will demonstrate that studies in developmental psychology and moral development find complementary input from the positive psychology approach, particularly in terms of character, virtue, and moral integrity. Third, I will address several other issues concerning the use of developmental psychology in ethics. Overall and in light of these two schools of developmental psychology and their philosophical presuppositions, I will advance a dialogue between deontological and virtue ethics in the use of developmental psychology.

## **COGNITIVE-STRUCTURALIST APPROACH TO MORAL DEVELOPMENT**

What was and continues to be the interest that Kohlberg's cognitive-structuralist theory offers for the use of developmental psychology in ethics?

### **Influences on the Cognitive Approach to Moral Development**

The response to this question first requires turning to Kohlberg's major source, Jean Piaget. In academic circles, a conception of "moral development" that aims at empirical validation gained a reputation in the 1930s, when Piaget applied his genitive epistemology and developmental psy-

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