

## MORAL DEVELOPMENT THEORY: KOHLBERG VS PERRY

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INTRODUCTION William G. Perry and Lawrence Kohlberg are structural cognitivists whose empirical work has been heavily influenced by Jean Piaget and John Dewey. Both studied at length the intellectual and ethical development of adolescents. I will compare their research on college students, both to inform readers and to stimulate further synthesis in the theory of learning and valuing.

## PERRY'S DUALISTS

Perry and his team examined the intellectual and ethical growth of Harvard and Radcliffe undergraduates from their entrance in college to their graduation, over the years 1954-1963. The earliest and most primitive thinking pattern which Perry found, mostly among newly enrolled students, was a way of thinking called basic duality: "The student sees the world in polar terms of we-right-good vs. other-wrong-bad. Right answers for everything exist in the Absolute, known to Authority whose role is to mediate (teach) them. Knowledge and goodness are perceived as quantitative accretions of discrete rightnesses to be collected by hard work and obedience" (Perry 1970 9).

Kohlberg's work on cognitive moral development began in 1956 in a longitudinal analysis of the thinking of 75 American boys 10 to 16 years old (Kohlberg 1958). He did similar studies in Mexico, Yucatan, Turkey, Taiwan, and elsewhere, for cross-cultural validation (Kohlberg 1971). He has studied a variety of populations up and down the social ladder, from prison to high school, and from children to aging adults. His work ranges much more widely than Perry's. His model for moral development has three hierarchical levels, each with two stages. Here we are concerned with Kohlberg's work on adolescents, as it can be related to Perry's description of dualistic thinking among college students.

"Maintaining the expectations of the individual's family, group or nation is perceived as valuable in its own right regardless of immediate and obvious consequences. The attitude is not only one of conformity to personal expectations and social order, but of loyalty to it, actively maintaining, supporting and justifying the order, and identifying with the persons or groups involved in it" (Kohlberg 1971 164).

In conventional moral thinking in Perry's dualism, authority is outside the person, and not subject to question. Values are fixed. There is only one correct way of looking at things. Both descriptions are structuralist and cognitive, and both concern how rather than what a person thinks.

Kohlberg has two stages for what Perry labels dualism. Perry does not make the distinction explicitly. In Kohlberg's prior stage for this level one's value judgments are dominated by individuals. Good behavior is what pleases others or helps them. This is conformity to natural behavior. His more advanced conventional stage shifts emphasis from interpersonal relations to the wider social order. Right behavior means to maintain and conform to society's laws.

Perry says that his dualists are much affected in their value judgments by fellow students (Perry 1970 69). The dormitories of Harvard were powerful sources of pressure against dualistic thinking, because the students varied widely in values and thinking processes. Individual professors are seen as a powerful force but the strongest pressure on dualists comes from their peers. This shows that there remains some of Kohlberg's earlier stage of conventional thinking among students.

Perry, in describing dualistic attitudes as gradually becoming more subtle, recognizes large authority groupings. The professors

are such a group, and the entire University is an authority to be reckoned with (Perry 1970 76). Students are concerned that they cannot produce contextual answers for questions which professors ask. But the students feel that somehow, Harvard knows what it is doing. Such ideas indicate Kohlberg's advanced level of conventionality. It fits Kohlberg's system that students should be frustrated if the same authority that they have grown to respect as an unquestioned source of order should likewise be a force prodding them to seek academic answers that cannot simply be memorized, since they are contextual, situational and relative. Of equal note is the puzzlement of the student who discovers professors unabashed when admitting inability to answer a question. One student said, "Here was a great professor, and he was groping too!" (Perry 1970 9)

#### COGNITIVE ADOLESCENCE

. Perry's model states that the sequence of restructuring thought has a stage beyond various kinds of dualism. It is a manner of thinking which he calls relativistic, defined as "a plurality of points of view, interpretations, frames of reference, value systems, and contingencies, in which the structural properties of contexts and forms allow of various sorts of analysis, comparison and evaluation in multiplicity" (Perry 1970 Glossary).

. How would Kohlberg treat Perry's relativism? He would call its beginning cognitive adolescence. If relativism is a pervasive stage through which Perry's Harvard and Radcliffe undergraduates pass Kohlberg notes that 50 percent of American adults never get to relativistic thinking, and that the age when it is attained is quite variable (Kohlberg 1971).

. Kohlberg sees the core of adolescence as the discovery of the subjective self, and the questioning of society's truth. Perry's Harvard subjects are described as discovering themselves and their

backgrounds as part of a wide pluralism. Their experience carries with it a questioning of the society from which they come, as they gradually attain contextual, relativistic thinking.

#### INTERACTION & CONFLICT

. Kohlberg's model for movement in moral stages fits Perry's description in that the movement is based on interaction between the subject and his environment. Progression is not passive, nor is it an innate biological development. It is in fact a movement in conflict within the framework of community (Kohlberg 1971 193).

. Perry's students' whole journey from dualistic through relativistic thinking to its last phase of commitment is described in terms of interaction between student and student, student and professor, and student and Harvard. He describes a cognitive Odyssey - a journey of trials and dilemmas.

#### DRASTIC REVOLUTION

. First, Perry sees the shift in thinking as a drastic revolution (1970 109). Kohlberg corroborates this when he places the restructuring of thought at the heart of the adolescent's discovery of his/her inner self, and the questioning of society. Both theorists center on the structural change of thought as the heart of adolescence, but Kohlberg is much more explicit in putting adolescence in the cognitive realm (Kohlberg & Gilligan 1971).

#### BREAKDOWN OF PRIOR GUIDELINES & IDENTITY

. Perry sees relativism as tied to a breakdown of earlier guidelines and personal identity. He speaks of a terrible loneliness attendant on the loss of absolute authority. Balancing this sense of loss is a sense of expansion in contrast with the narrowness of the past. There is a liberation attendant on the freedom to think things out, in contrast with the former drudgery of rote memory work in academic studies. There is a new-found sense of community with

relativistic peers and professors born of the realization that nobody has all the answers. All, including students and professors alike, are groping.

. Kohlberg also notes that moral relativism and nihilism are a transitional period in ethical progression from conventional morality and principled morality. He quotes studies to the effect that when a person goes through an active consideration of alternative goals and values, s/he experiences a crisis. "Essentially morally transitional subjects were in transition with regard to identity issues as well as moral issues. . . to have questioned conventional morality you must have questioned your identity as well" (Kohlberg & Gilligan 1971).

. He does not discuss the sense of expansion for relativistic thinkers, nor does he discuss the importance of community except by implication. For this he uses identity explicitly in Erikson's sense, and Erikson is on record on the urgency with which youth in the crisis of identity, socialize in order to discover their own identities (Erikson 1963 262).

#### CHANGED RELATION TO AUTHORITY

. Perry sees the relativist student at Harvard as discovering a new mutuality with previously revered authorities, for authority is now bereft of absolute truth. Since no one has the final answer, all are now equals. But adults in contemporary America used to be seen by youth as conventional people, whereas today in post-conventional society, there is something new. "What is new is the creation of a questioning providing half answers to which adolescents are exposed prior to their own spontaneous questioning" (Kohlberg & Gilligan 1971).

. We can see the academic relativism of Harvard as deliberately providing half-answers to students because from a relativistic point of view, those are the only answers available to human reason. Hence the egalitarian position of the professor in contrast to former

more absolutist times.

#### CAPACITY FOR DETACHMENT

. For a dualist, intellectual detachment has no meaning. Authority speaks, and that is that. One does not stop to consider the reasonableness of it all, the importance of circumstance, and other contextual factors. The relativist, on the other hand, has no authority outside. S/he is detached from former absolutes due to the conviction that there are none.

. Such detachment can provide intellectual objectivity, hitherto unknown to the student. Because it is such a drastic change in thinking patterns, it often gives rise to a period of quiet consolidation which Perry calls temporizing. Many of his students spent a full year absorbing the implications of their bewildering intellectual development. Some few chose to encapsulate themselves in this pattern, refusing to step beyond it. This static position often took the form of relativistic competence as a final resting place. This is the gamesman's position and the opportunist's way of thinking. It excludes any form of personal responsibility for one's thoughts or deeds except for a narrowly conceived notion of success. "Since all values are relative, all I must do is my own thing!"

. Kohlberg is illuminating here. He finds some of his most precocious subjects doing a reversal in moral development, going from the brink of principled behavior back to a sense of justice which is pre-conventional (Kohlberg & Gilligan 1971).

. Pre-conventional morality has little use for law or even interpersonal loyalty. Kohlberg uses the phrase "doing your own thing" to express one form of pre-conventional morality. He mentions the case of a totally unremorseful retrogressor who stole a friend's watch because he thought his friend was too trusting. Normally, neither the loyalty of friendship nor a respect for law would permit stealing valuable property from a friend. Kohlberg says that

some of his subjects went from conventional thinking in high school back to pre-conventional thinking in college, jumping forward again by the time they were 25 years old, to post-conventional thinking. There relativism in college gave them a chance to escape responsible behavior for a time, but that this escape was a transition to a more mature outlook. Detachment is viewed in a positive light by both researchers.

#### NEW IDENTITY VIA COMMITMENT

. Students who had become engrossed in relativistic thinking typically went through a period when they were unaware that such thinking might ever lead to any form of commitment. Religious commitment for a relativist thinker at this stage is impossible. A student seeing all religious belief as culturally relative, and admitting of no absolutes, will find it does not seem rational to worship God. According to Perry's findings, such a student will not foresee in the midst of relativism, that relativistic thinking is likely to be a stepping stone to future religious commitment. This is a period in which the relativists were very absolute in their thinking. Kohlberg found such absolutism in the retrogressors, and he remarked that extreme relativists often chose an ideology that glorified the self or an elite group. The self is seen as beyond or above morality. The group is special, and a law unto itself, which is pre-conventional. Kohlberg's ideologues did not regard their ideology as an approach toward maturity, but as the culmination of maturity itself.

#### PERRY'S STAGE OF COMMITMENT

. Our picture of the college youth immersed in relativity is complete. Perry states that nearly all of his subjects took a further step in their 3rd or 4th year which he calls commitment. "The assumption is established that man's knowing and valuing are relative in time and circumstance, and that in such a world the

individual is faced with the responsibility for choice and affirmation of life (1970 133). Kohlberg's term for the next stage is principled thinking, which appears to be the same as Perry's term, commitment. At the level of principled thinking, "there is a clear effort to define moral values and principles which have validity and application apart from the authority of the groups or persons holding these principles and apart from the individual's own identification with these groups" (Kohlberg 1973).

. Kohlberg flatly stated that none of his subjects of the first longitudinal study had reached principled thinking by age 23. Yet Perry claims that nearly all of his subjects, who must have averaged about 21 years of age, were committed by the end of their undergraduate training.

#### CHOICE VERSUS COGNITION

. Commitment in Perry's thinking involves decision and choice. Kohlberg does not deal with decisions directly, but measures the thinking from which decisions emerge. Principled thinking and commitment are apparently not equivalent. Both have relativistic thought as a prerequisite, and relativistic thinking persists in both studies. Perry's commitment is made in relativism, as an act of transcendence from a growing sense that one must make responsible choices. It is not so much reasonable, as going beyond reason. "The term commitment refers to an .. ongoing activity in which (one) invests his energies, care, and identity. .. the work refers to an affirmatory experience through which the man continuously defines his identity and his involvement in the world" (Perry 1970 135).

. We are talking the language of action in a relativist framework. This central action is basic to the adult emergence of the college student. Erikson refers to this part of the life cycle. "It occurs in that part of the life cycle when each youth must forge for

himself some central perspective and direction, some working unity out of the effective remnants of his childhood and the hopes of his anticipated adulthood; he must detect some meaningful resemblance between what he has come to see in himself and what his sharpened awareness tells him others judge and expect him to be" (Erikson 1956 14).

#### REACTIONS FOLLOWING COMMITMENT

. If commitment is not principled thinking, what is it? To keep the question well defined, consider how a person typically reacts after having made a commitment in Perry's sense. Most of his students reported a feeling of profound relief after their decision. They had a feeling that a heavy load suddenly had been removed from their shoulders. They felt strongly defined as persons by their commitment. A young person, having made a hard-won decision to enter medical school might now say, "I am a medical student!" In this process there is a strong sense of agency, a sense of personal power in one's choice that might be expressed: "It is my choice, and I did it!"

. Kohlberg does not offer a personality profile for any of his stages. He discusses more how his subjects think than how they feel or act. His concern with how they think is based on the premise that how one thinks is the most important single factor in how one acts (Kohlberg & Gilligan 1971 151). The sense of agency felt by Perry's subjects, however is worthy of comment from Kohlberg's point of view.

. Principled thinkers are beginning to think on matters of justice. In a wide sense, all of Kohlberg's subjects are committed to justice, but the principled ones are operating on their own principles, as well as those of society. He defines the first principled stage. "Right action tends to be defined in terms of general individual rights and in terms of standards which have been critically agreed upon by the whole society. There is a clear

awareness of the relativism of personal values and opinions and a corresponding emphasis on procedural rules to reach consensus. Aside from what is constitutionally and democratically agreed on, the right is a matter of personal values and opinions. The result is an emphasis on the legal view of rational considerations of social utility. This is the "official" morality of the American Government and Constitution." (Kohlberg & Gilligan 1971 165).

. Perry's subjects show a sense of agency, but we do not know whether their commitment respects the rights of others, or in what degree. It is by no means clear that their sense of ethics is on the democratic level of the United States Government and the Constitution. The leap to commitment is described by Perry in terms of intuition - a Kierkegaardian leap beyond reason or a Kantian moral imperative (Perry 1970 135). Reason helps, but it is not enough. However the leap may be made, it is not so closely focused on justice as the principled thinking of Kohlberg. It opts for a decision within the framework of reasoning but remains less defined.

. Perry's committed juniors and seniors emerged from the limbo of unattached relativistic thinking to a realization that they wanted to stand for something - a set of values, a career decision, a marriage. The content of the commitment remains incidental, and Perry is more interested in discovering that his subjects showed a pattern of of commitment in relativistic thinking than to what they were committed.

. Kohlberg, like Perry, is interested in structures of thought, but it is peculiar to Kohlberg's approach that the structures of moral thinking reveal content on the principled level, and specific content universal among his subjects. Kohlberg's novice principled thinkers reveal a sensitivity to the rights of other human beings. Those rights are seen as universal (Kohlberg & Gilligan 1971 155). On this level (Concluded on page 222)

general moral position (Erskine 1972-1973). The moderating of the earlier anti-war attitudes indicated in the later sample illustrates the marked shifts in public opinion as their perception of the situation shifts.

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GROSS (Continued from page 208)

moral thinking, a person thinks with the subtlety of a relativist, but is capable of putting him/herself in the shoes of the rest of the World's people. This quality of enlightened empathy is the bedrock of principled thinking.

. Kohlberg's focus is narrower, and consistently aims at the cognitive antecedents of moral behavior. His levels are levels of understanding. Perry's commitment involves decision. Kohlberg is more directly involved than Perry in the content of moral behavior. Kohlberg's research reveals broad moral universal principles. For the reader interested in moral development, there is opportunity for a penetrating look into the thought and value patterns of a group of elitist students in Perry's work. Kohlberg offers a more comprehensive perspective with a much wider range of articles and empirical studies.

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ALLEN & CAVANESS (Cont'd from 216)  
**process may include a reverse flow, and the rating process inherently permits reevaluation in both directions. The distributions seen here, however, are much more consistent with the hypothesis of a net downward flow which operates at a very restrained pace over the early part of the life cycle.**

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