

## SOME THOUGHTS ON KOHLBERG'S 'STAGE 7'

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In the previous chapter it was found that, whilst intervention programmes to promote upward movement through the stages of moral development could be justified on the basis of psychological maturity, it was also noted that this justification does not answer the question, Why be Moral? Why should a person be moral if they can get away with being immoral? There is a huge gap between knowing the right or 'moral' thing to do and the actual doing the right or 'moral' deed, especially when there appears to be no tangible reward for doing the right thing. It appears even saints have this problem. Kohlberg quotes St. Augustine's

*O Lord, give me strength to give up my concupiscence, but not just yet.*<sup>1</sup>

So why do we sometimes act morally? Bradley (1962) states

*To do good for its own sake is virtue, to do it for some ulterior end or object not itself good, is never virtue; and never to act but for the sake of an end, other than doing well and right, is the mark of vice.*<sup>2</sup>

Kohlberg contends that the answer to the question, Why be Moral? is not answerable in terms of moral discourse. Although the question may be raised philosophically it is more commonly raised existentially when one is in conflict between one's duty and one's pleasure or happiness.

In an attempt to address this problem Kohlberg posits a seventh stage, which is a religious or ontological stage, not a purely moral one.

Petrovich (1983) says that

*In spite of all the difficulties associated with Kohlberg's idea of the role that religion plays in morality, the fact is that he makes a remarkable step by approaching this question directly in an utterly secular moral psychology.<sup>1</sup>*

As Kohlberg (1974) has found that a “considerable portion of a child’s orientation to divinity... is a moral orientation”<sup>2</sup>, and Petrovich (1983)<sup>3</sup> found convincing evidence that pre-school children refer to God as an important agency in particular, well defined, contexts, it may be concluded that empirical observation does suggest a relationship between morality and religion. The Seventh stage is the attempt by Kohlberg to elucidate the nature of this relationship.

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1 Quoted in Kohlberg, L., “From Is to Ought”, 1981, p. 183

2 Quoted in Kohlberg, L., “The Question of a Seventh Stage”, in *Philosophy of Moral Development*, Harper and Row, 1981, p. 322

1 Petrovich, O., “Moral Autonomy and the Theory of Kohlberg”, in *Cosensus and Controversy*, Modgil and Modgil, (eds), Palmer Press, 1986, p. 102

2. Kohlberg, L., “Education, Moral Development and Faith”, in “*Journal of Moral Education*”, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 5-16

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In this chapter it is proposed to examine how Kohlberg describes his ‘metaphoric’ seventh stage, and to come to a conclusion as to whether the seventh stage is a ‘delusion’ as Locke<sup>1</sup> believes, or ‘a remarkable step’ as noted by Petrovich.<sup>2</sup>

### **Section 7.1: Relationship between Morality and Religion**

As stated earlier in this thesis, Kohlberg began his study of morality with the assumption of the autonomy of morality and moral principles, rather than deriving moral development from, or reducing it to, for example, religious attitudes or principles. He writes,

The starting point of rational discourse about the relation of morality and religion, then, is the recognition in some degree of autonomy of morality and moral discourse from any other form of discourse, whether religious, scientific, or political.<sup>3</sup>

However, he also notes that, although the functions of morality and religion may be differentiated, that is, the function of morality being to resolve competing claims among individuals on the basis of a norm or principle and the function of religion being to affirm life and morality as related to a transcendent or infinite ground or sense of the whole, they have been seen in the world religious as intimately related.

As Kohlberg relied heavily on Piaget when developing his theory of the relationship of moral reasoning to logical reasoning, so also, when hypothesising a seventh stage which link the moral and religious domains, he refers to Fowler’s<sup>1</sup> stage theory of ‘faith’ development when engaged in empirical studies to establish the existence of a metaphoric stage 7. Kohlberg calls ‘stage 7’ a metaphor because it presupposes the conflicts and questions that arise at moral stage 6. At stage 6, universal ethical principles cannot be as immediately justified by the

realities of the human social order. Such a morality uniquely ‘requires’ an ultimate stage of religious orientation and moves people toward it. He contends that religious thinking involves a reflection on moral reasoning such that one’s moral understanding is given religious significance. In this process ordinary moral language is qualified and transformed to refer to the extraordinary.<sup>2</sup>

Empirical research by Kohlberg and Power<sup>1</sup> appears to lend support to the relationship

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1 Locke, D., “A Psychologist among the Philosophers”, in *Consensus and Controversy*, Modgil and Modgil, (eds), Falmer Press, 1986, p. 30

2 Petrovich, O., “Moral Autohomy and the Theory of Kohlberg”, in *Consensus and Controversy*, Modgil and Modgil, (eds), Falmer Press, 1986, p. 102

3 Kohlberg, L., “The Question of a Seventh Stage”, in *Philosophy of Moral Development*, Harper and Row, 1981, p. 315

1 Fowler,

2 Kohlberg, L., “The Question of a Seventh Stage”, in *Philosophy of Moral Development*”, Harper and Row, 1980

1 Kohlberg, L., and Power

between moral reasoning and religious reasoning. Before discussing this research it is important first to look briefly at Fowler's stages of faith, which provided the theoretical basis for the Kohlberg and power study, although, before Fowler had started his research on faith stages, Kohlberg (1973a, 1973b) had speculated about a Stage 7 which would answer the unsolved questions left unanswered by Stage 6 moral principles. He speculated that its essence involved the adoption of a cosmic as distinct from a (moral Stage 6) universal human perspective.

From a structural-developmental perspective the empirical investigation of the relationship of religion and morality was first undertaken by Fowler in a study of 400 people aged four to eighty, who were interviewed with the expectation of defining stages of faith that would broadly parallel the moral stages.<sup>2</sup> Fowler established six stages of faith which include, as components of their definitions, Piagetian logical levels and the moral stages. There is a direct correspondence between these six stages of faith and Kohlberg's six stages of moral reasoning. As, for example,

**Stage One: Intuitive Projective Faith**, (locus of authority, parents and family), average ages 4-7 years, corresponds to moral judgements based on punishment/reward, that is, a stage 1 moral judgement.

**Stage Two: Mythic-Literal Faith**, (locus of authority, teachers, customs traditions, books), average ages 7-11, corresponds to moral judgements based on instrumental hedonism (reciprocal fairness), or stage 2 moral judgement.

**Stage Three: Synthetic-Conventional Faith**, (locus of authority, conventionally or consensually sanctioned authorities), average ages 12 to adulthood, corresponding to moral judgements based on inter-personal expectations and concordance, or a stage 3 moral judgement.

**Stage Four: Indicative-Reflective Faith**, (locus of authority, personal experience of oneself or peers and/or, ideological consensus), average ages 18 to adulthood, corresponding to moral judgements based on societal perspectives, reflective relativism, or class biased universalism, that is, stage 4 moral judgement.

**Stage Five: Paradoxical-Consolidative Faith**, (locus of authority, fully internalized), average age - minimum about 30 years, corresponding to moral judgements based on a principled higher law (prior to society), which is universal and critical.

**Stage Six: Universalizing Faith**, (the matter of authority is now contained within a relationship of un-mediated participation in the ultimate conditions of existence, a loyalty to being), age minimum about 40, in which moral judgements are based on a stage six moral judgement level.<sup>1</sup>

Work by Shulik (1979) and Power and Kohlberg (1980) shows high empirical correlation

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2 Fowler,

1 Kohlberg, L., "The Question of a Seventh Stage", in *Philosophy of Moral Development*, Harper and Row, 1981, pp. 323-335

between Fowler's stages of faith and the moral stages. Kohlberg states that,

Skulik reports a correlation of .75 between independently made ratings of moral stage and of faith stage.<sup>2</sup>

Kohlberg and Fowler differ on their interpretation of the relationship of moral stage to faith stage. Fowler sees the faith stages as being holistic in themselves, that is, faith reasoning includes logical and moral reasoning, whereas, Kohlberg contends that both moral reasoning and religious reasoning are distinguishable areas in the overall development of the person. Moral development occurs whether individuals have particular religious beliefs or not and individuals at the highest moral stages differ widely in their religious views. That is, where Fowler conceives of his faith stages as being necessary for the grounding of a particular pattern of moral reasoning, Kohlberg's hypothesis is that

... moral stage development is necessary but not sufficient for development of a parallel stage of religious judgement... In our view, religious structures are in large part metaethical or metaphysical structures that presuppose the normative or moral structures that they interpret and justify.<sup>1</sup>

To empirically test the above hypothesis Power and Kohlberg undertook a study of 21 people in which they developed a definition of religious stages that is independent in content of moral judgement but includes structural features of the moral stages. They found an 81% overall agreement between stages of religious reasoning and moral stage. The only cases in which there were differences were in the higher stages (4 and 5), and in all these cases the moral stage was higher.<sup>2</sup> In the above study, the stages of religious thinking were constructed to parallel the moral stages, so that they would reflect the logic of the moral stages but "represent something more".<sup>1</sup> The description of the parallel relationship of religious and moral conceptions stresses theistic versions of each stage of religious thinking. For example, in stage

1, God is depicted as having superior physical characteristics, greatly exaggerated; in stage 2, God is depicted as acting purposefully for his own good and the good of individuals; in stage 3, God is depicted as a personal deity, a friend or a caring shepherd; in stage 4, God is depicted as a 'supreme being' or a 'cosmic force'; in stage 5, God is seen as an 'energizer', supporting and encouraging autonomous moral action; and in stage 6, God is depicted in terms of justice and love, a 'natural law' view of the relation between moral principles of justice and the ultimate. This could be either a theistic or a pantheistic orientation.<sup>2</sup>

The data support the hypothesis that it takes additional time after the attainment of a moral stage to construct an organized pattern of religious belief and feeling at a parallel religious stage. Kohlberg concludes that religious thinking involves a reflection on moral reasoning

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2 *ibid*, p. 333

1 *ibid*, p. 336

2 *ibid*, p. 339

1 *ibid*

2 *ibid*, p. 340-343



and bestowing on it religious significance.

Petrovich (1986), whilst being supportive of Kohlberg's attempts to tackle empirically the relation of morality and religion, nevertheless, feels that the evidence cited by Kohlberg to support the conclusion above is

... neither substantial (Power and Kohlberg) nor certain since it is based on a disputable theory of faith development propounded by Fowler.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, Kohlberg's conclusions are influenced by the data derived from the Power and Kohlberg (1980) study and in addition by the work of Oser (1980)<sup>2</sup>, who has formulated stages of religious reasoning based on administering religious dilemmas to a cross-sectional sample of children, adolescents and adults in Switzerland. What aspect of Kohlberg's theory has received very little attention from researchers to date and perhaps further research may produce more substantial support for the relation between moral and religious reasoning.

If you are going to talk more about Stage 7 in the remainder of the chapter you will have to end with a bridging passage here. Otherwise the reader is unclear as to why this material is being included.

### **Section 7.2: The Characteristics of Stage 7**

Kohlberg attributes one part of the notion of a stage 7 to Erikson's discussion of an ultimate stage in the life cycle in which integrity is found and despair ultimately confronted. Kohlberg contends that stage 7 begins with despair, when we begin to see our lives as finite from some

more infinite perspective. The meaninglessness of our lives in the face of death is the meaninglessness of the finite from the perspective of the infinite. He states,

It represents, in a sense, a shift from figure to ground.<sup>1</sup>

To investigate the characteristics of this stage Kohlberg looks at life-histories of outstanding people recognised to have been people of integrity, for example, Marcus Aurelius (as depicted particularly in his personal journal, usually called the *Meditations*), Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln and Socrates.

The faith of Marcus Aurelius is based on the belief that the universe is lawful, knowable, and evolving. The ultimate, evolving principle of the universe is sometimes called nature and sometimes God. Kohlberg or M. Aurelius does not attempt to separate God from nature. Kohlberg or M. Aurelius writes,

Mortal life cannot offer you anything better than justice and truth; that is,

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1 Petrovich, O., "Moral Autonomy and the Theory of Kohlberg", in *Consensus and Controversy*, Modgil and Modgil, (eds), Falmer Press, 1986, p. 100

2 Kohlberg, L., "The Question of a Seventh Stage", in *Philosophy of Moral Development*, Harper and Row, 1980, p. 340

1 *ibid*, p. 345

peace of mind in the conformity of your actions to the laws of reason...  
remember always what the world-nature is and what your own nature is  
and that your nature is such a small fraction of so vast a whole. Then you  
will recognize that no man can hinder your you from conforming each  
word and deed to that nature of which you are a part.<sup>1</sup>

Kohlberg sees the perspective on life as portrayed in the above quote, as a characteristic perspective of the Seventh Stage, that is, a natural law perspective. He finds support for the natural law perspective in the writings of Spinoza and Teilhard de Chardin. As, for example, Spinoza claims that the order of the universe is known to humans because the human mind is part of the universe and partly shares universal mental properties. Kohlberg quotes from Spinoza,

Our mind is also a part of Nature; that is, Nature has an infinite power of thinking which contains subjectively the whole of nature. The human mind is this power, not as infinite and perceiving the whole of nature, but as finite and perceiving only the human body.<sup>2</sup>

When Spinoza writes about the wholeness of Nature he contends that this is not to say that the universe is the mere sum of its parts but is something over and above the aggregate of things. The universe is a system or organism, and in a system the whole is something different from the mere sum of its parts. In other words, the human person is part of the wholeness of the

universe not as a cog is part of a machine, but as partaking of whatever it is that constitutes the whole. As explained by a contemporary physicist David Bohm (1985),

.... in an organism, the very nature of any part may be profoundly affected by changes of activity in other parts, and by the general state of the whole, and so the parts are basically internally related to each other as well as to the whole.<sup>1</sup>

He goes on to say that relativity introduced into our thinking a number of fundamentally new concepts regarding space, time and matter, which are quite subtle. The notion of separate and independent particles as basic constituents of the universe had to be given up. The basic notion instead was the idea of a field that spreads continuously through space. Further developments, namely Quantum Mechanics, resulted in the knowledge that everything is woven together in indivisible links, the universe is one whole, as it were, and is in some sense unbroken.<sup>2</sup>

Bohm, in an attempt to clarify this uses the holograph as an example. Each part of a holograph is an image of the whole object, that is, every part contains information about the

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1 *ibid*, p. 346

2 *ibid*, p. 361

1 Bohm David, *Unfolding Meaning; a weekend of dialogue with David Bohm*, D. Factor (ed), Pergamon (Oxford) Ltd., 1985, p. 3

2 *ibid*, p. 6-7

whole object. Information about the whole is 'enfolded' in each part of the image. The holograph 'unfolds' the 'enfolded' information. The point being made here is that modern science accepts the notion of wholeness of the universe which Spinoza and Marcus Aurelius refer to. In fact, oriental philosophers have propounded this doctrine for thousands of years so its not a new idea. And Schrodinger<sup>1</sup> writes that 'quantum theory dates 24 centuries ... back, to Leucippus and Democritus'. What is new is the evidence of science which supports the notion of wholeness. However, Schodinger, whilst accepting that the task of science is 'to answer the one great philosophical question which embraces all others, the one that Plotinus expressed by his brief... who are we?'<sup>2</sup>, does not believe that the answer is to be found in the quantitative results of physical and chemical measurements. He seems to be saying here that we should not look to the natural sciences to answer the Who are We? (the Why be Moral?) question. He says, 'I feel a certain incongruity between the applied means and the problem to be solved'.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, in these days when such a strong emphasis is placed upon science and objectivity, it is reassuring to find that there appears to be scientific data to support the notion of the interrelationship of man, and all things, with the cosmos. Bohr (1961)<sup>2</sup>, while stating that it is not his intention to introduce a mysticism which is incompatible with the spirit of natural science, at the same time concludes with

... the fact that consciousness, as we know it, is inseparably connected with life ought to prepare us for finding that the very problem of the distinction between the living and the dead escapes comprehension in the ordinary sense of the world. That a physicist touches upon such

questions may perhaps be excused on the ground that the new situation in physics has so forcibly reminded us of the old truth that we are both onlookers and actors in the great drama of existence.<sup>3</sup>

The Natural Law perspective is not the only orientation of stage 7. Kohlberg points to ‘agape’ as a second form of stage 7. ‘Agape’ is an ethic that presupposes justice principles but goes beyond them. He describes it as ‘an ethic of responsible universal love, service, or sacrifice - an ethic of supererogation’. It is not, as some writers have claimed,<sup>1</sup> an alternative conception of a sixth and highest moral stage, instead it suggests the possibility that there is a seventh moral stage, based on an ethic that is higher than and goes beyond an ethic of justice. To explain what he means by that, Kohlberg argues that ‘agape’ requires the individual to give up claims he/she may in justice demand. He writes,

The attitude of agape presupposes an understanding and acceptance of the

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1 Schrodinger, Erwin, *Science and Humanism, Physics in Our Time*, Cambridge University Press, 1951, p. 54

2 *ibid*, p. 51

1 *ibid*, p. 52

2 Bohr, Niels, *Atomic Theory and the Description of Nature*, Cambridge University Press, 1961, pp. 116-119

3 *ibid*, p. 119

1 Gilligan, C., “? “ 1977

logic of duty and justice for its own definition.<sup>2</sup>

Kohlberg contends that a stage 6 justice principle does not directly answer questions about the nature of the good person or the good life and does not assume that such questions have, or require, universalizable answers that they must provide. Agape is not a principle competing with the principle of fairness, it is an attitude inspiring acts that go beyond duty, acts that cannot be demanded or expected by their recipients but are, rather, 'acts of grace from the standpoint of the recipient.'<sup>3</sup>

### **Summary**

In this chapter the question Why be Moral? was considered in the light of Kohlberg's metaphoric seventh stage. This stage is not a pure moral stage but is rather a stage where moral principles are given religious significance; a stage which takes the individual from the known to the unknown, and in so doing provides an answer to the Why be Moral? question through an appeal to the Natural Law or to an attitude of responsible love or 'agape'. Neither of these, that is, Natural Law or agape, depend directly on revelation. In examples, quoted by Kohlberg, of people who display these characteristics, their religious orientation rests on a sense of connectedness between the individual human mind and the larger cosmic whole or order. The fact that contemporary science finds 'proof' of such connectedness is an added bonus.

As a result of empirical studies, Kohlberg claims that stage 7 presupposes stage 6 moral reasoning. That is, for the individual to be capable of understanding a Natural Law orientation, or to be capable of acts of agape he/she must first have a stage 6 universal justice

orientation. If Kohlberg is correct then this would provide a strong motivation to help students to move upward through the moral stages, as it is at stage 7 that the ultimate questions relating to suffering and death and answered in a manner which enables the individual to go beyond despair to a sense of oneness with Nature of God.

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2 Kohlberg, L., "The Question of a Seventh Stage", in *Philosophy of Moral Development*, Harper and Row, 1981, p. 351

3 *ibid*, p. 352