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ABSTRACT

The author argues that unless Kohlberg's theory of moral development can be demonstrated empirically, based on scientific evidence, his ensuing plan for a program of moral education amounts to no more than a systematic program of indoctrination. Kohlberg identifies the moral stage of a person by eliciting from a subject the reasons referred to in determining to act one way rather than another. While Kohlberg claims to study the structure of responses rather than their substance, it is questionable whether these are separable and whether relying on immediate utterances of responses is sufficient evidence for characterizing individuals into particular stages. Determining the scientific usefulness of a proposed theory depends upon the semantic clarity of the terms used in constructing the theory, and Kohlberg's description of "stages" as "organized systems of thought" is one example of the semantic insufficiency and ambiguity characteristic of Kohlberg's paradigm. It is fundamentally important to a theory that is grounded upon the linguistic behavior of its subjects to develop clearly constructed procedures for associating observation expressions such as "justice" with terms of less ambiguous nature. In conclusion, by constructing a particular nomenclature, Kohlberg has made his ideas appear to be actual, and appear, therefore, to be a legitimate object of scientific study. (LH)

Kohlberg, Science and Indoctrination

by

Paul A. Wagner

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Studies Association (Nashville, TN, November 3-5, 1982).

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Kohlberg, denies that his program of moral education is indoctrinative. His claim depends upon an implicit argument that he can demonstrate scientifically, how it is that human beings develop morally. Before discussing whether or not Kohlberg makes good on his claim, a few preliminary remarks are in order.

Since Kohlberg is a professional psychologist and not a philosopher, one is justified in expecting him to be involved in the making of specific empirical claims that must then be defended by reference to relevant empirical evidence. This is not to deny that a psychologist may legitimately become involved in the doing of philosophy. Rather it is only to observe that when a psychologist qua psychologist asserts the truth of certain propositions pertaining, say, to the nature of moral development and proceeds to cite data to support that claim, readers have a right to treat such utterances as the empirically-supported theory of a scientist and not the pronouncements of a philosopher.

I.

Kohlberg, is a Kantian of sorts.[1] In specifying the character and emotional traits of a moral person, Kohlberg claims to be studying the structure of moral thoughts, but inevitably ends by focusing on the substance rather than the structure of thought. If it turns out that Kohlberg has not succeeded in scientifically establishing the nature of a moral person then one must conclude that Kohlberg is espousing a program in which students are simply caused to accept a particular moral commitment, a commitment which neither the author of the program nor the student is able to justify. Causing a person to accept a moral commitment for which he is ultimately unable to provide justification is, I take it, a paradigm case of indoctrination. More generally, anytime one person X causes another person Y to adopt a belief which Y is unable to justify

then Y has been indoctrinated by X. In the case of Kohlberg's program, if simple numerical correlation is insufficient grounds for identifying a Kantian as a paradigm of moral development, and since there is no further justification in Kohlberg's work for causing people to adopt a Kantian morality, then to initiate practices that cause people to adopt a set of unjustified beliefs is tantamount to indoctrinating them. Consequently, as I will argue, practices of indoctrination are in fact essential to the success of Kohlberg's program.

The fact of the matter is that some of Kohlberg's own research reports suggest that students do not develop naturally into what Kohlberg conceives of as a moral person. In addition, Kohlberg is unwilling to allow students to subscribe to whatever moral attitudes and principles they find immediately gratifying or may naturally develop. In a recent paper prepared by Lawrence Kohlberg and Moshe Blatt the authors studied the effect of techniques for moving students closer to Kohlberg's Kantian ideals. Kohlberg and Blatt conclude that themselves, then proceeds to construct theories about much more narrow and specific classes of events.

However, merely because one gives a common name to a set of observable instances is not in itself indicative that some unique essence exists. For example, to say as Kohlberg does that because stages "can be validated by longitudinal study implies that stages have definite empirical characteristics"[3] is to make either a trivial point or no point at all--if the empirical characteristic referred to is no more then a coincidential statistical correlation. Certainly if a scientist has accurately identified some feature of the natural world (by "feature" I mean some readily recognizable and reoccurring natural phenomenon), then given the relevant circumstances--whether they occur in the past, present or future--the same phenomenon (stage) ought to again be easily

identified by the trained researcher. If, however, as in the case of Kohlberg the term "stage" is not used to identify any distinct feature of the natural world, but refers instead to a rather loosely described collection of things and events, then any declaration that a state is again evident because one suspects that the same statistically correlated things and events are again present, does not by itself justify a claim that a distinct feature or useful taxonomic description of the world has been identified. What Kohlberg must do is present an argument that his stages represent something more than a coincidental statistical correlation.

In elaborating upon his claim that "stages can be validated by longitudinal study", Kohlberg makes the following claim: "Stages are 'structured wholes' or organized systems of thought. Individuals are consistent in level of moral judgment."[4] While it is clear what Kohlberg means by the term "organized systems of thought his use of the disjunction "or" is perplexing. If stages can be either an "organized system of thought" or a "structured whole," then it remains to be made clear what soet of thing constitutes a "structured whole" and why such a construct should be treated as an alternative but fully sufficient referent for his term "stage." To subsequently point out that "Individuals are consistent in level of moral development," explains nothing about the notion of "structured whole" or the reason why "stages" can be regarded as either "structured wholes" or "organized systems of thought." The only point made by Kohlberg's claim is that a "stage" is somehow a thing.

What is not made clear by either Kohlberg's claim or his statements of observation is that what he claims to observe possesses the relevant relational property or consistency such that it might be recognized as a thing by a trained and impartial observer. Nevertheless, without the benefit of further explanation,

Kohlberg seems to have concluded that simply by constructing a particular nomenclature, he can make that which is talked about (falsely) appear to be actual, and hence a legitimate object of scientific study.

In questioning whether Kohlberg's "stages" and, more generally, his theory is about a scientifically interesting phenomenon, it is informative to consider some additional remarks Kohlberg offers as further explication of the nature of his stages. Kohlberg writes, "The moral stages are 'structures of moral judgment' or 'moral reasoning'. 'Structures' of moral judgment must be distinguished from the content of moral judgment."[5] At this point, since Kohlberg is interested in discussing the "structure" of moral judgment, one might expect him to discuss a particular form of deontic logic and then to justify the treatment of that logic as an actual standard rather than as an ideal of moral thinking processes. Quite the opposite occurs, however. In explaining what he has in mind by "structures" of moral reasoning Kohlberg writes, "As an example (of the structures of moral reasoning), we cite <u>responses</u> to a dilemma used in our various studies to identify stage."[6] Rather than focus on the way moral thought is structured, that is, whatever identifiable logical operations seem to exist within such thought processes, Kohlberg proceeds to make stage identification in accordance with the decisions made by the respondents. Certainly if one is to investigate the <u>structure</u> of moral judgment one must begin by examing actual moral responses. However, the content of such responses should only be of secondary importance to one who is interested in identifying the structure of such judgments. Even though Kohlberg admits that, "The choice by a subject (steal, don't steal) is called the 'content' of his moral judgment in the situation," he goes on to claim that,

His (the respondent's) reasoning about the choice defines the structure of his moral judgment. This reasoning centers on the following 10 universal moral values...(underling my own)

1. Punishment
2. Property
3. Roles and concerns of affection
4. Roles and concerns of authority
5. Law
6. Life
7. Liberty
8. Distributive justice
9. Truth
10. Sex [7]

So while Kohlberg claims to disregard the operational part of moral judgment (steal, don't steal, etc.) his investigative interests still lie with the content of that which leads to the decision rather than the structure of the reasoning process itself--as indicated by his initial claims. Since Kohlberg is interested in how people relate to "10 universal moral values are and, secondly, how one might identify such universals prior to entering into any speculations about how humans use such values. Certainly Ruth Macklin is right in observing in this connection that, ". . .one can only judge that a set of changes constitutes progress (or development) if one knows something about the aims, goals or fundamental characteristics of the particular human activity in which claims about progress are being made."[8] Futthermore, it is quite possible that even if such distinguishable values exist, they exist as features of such intangible phenomenon as the relations between minds, wills, or as the products of a universal will, etc., and not the sort of stuff that can be empirically investigated. Kohlberg has said nothing to make it clear that his investigations are, in fact, with features of the natural world or, in other words, that the phenomena he describes are legitimate objects of scientific interest.[9]

The above statements taken from Kohlberg's article, "The Cognitive Developmental Approach to Moral Education," illustrate equally well Kohlberg's willingness to accept an almost insurmountable measure of theoretical uncertainty and yet proceed as if he were in a comfortably secure position from which to generate clear and perspicuous scientific arguments.[10] For example, Kohlberg identifies the moral stage a person is in by eliciting from the subject the reasons referred to in determining to act one way rather than another. One can easily imagine an individual who, after much reflection concludes that not only ought his behavior be governed by notions of logical comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency, but, having recognized the fundamental moral role of such notions, the individual concludes further that such principles represent an actual authority in regard to his personal behavior. Furthermore, the individual may conclude that once he has determined the content of a specific maxim, then that maxim ought to be regarded as a universal demanding considerable respect. Finally, there is no reason to believe that this same individual might not claim that the given social order, as it really is, and not as it may appear on the surface, is characterized by every individual recognizing every other individual as an element of ultimate value.

In identifying whether such an individual is in Stage Six or Stage Four of Kohlberg's scheme of moral development, Kohlberg is willing to assume that Stage Six individuals will talk of justice, universality, reciprocity, and consistency, etc.. However, considering the imaginary moral agent discussed above, and in this context it might help to think of Kant himself as the hypothetical respondent) one can envision a situation in which the agent in giving Kohlberg his reasons for stealing or not stealing might make explicit reference not to justice, etc., but rather to notions of respect for authority, doing one's duty and maintaining the given social order. Kohlberg, unfortunately, is willing to rely

upon an immediate utterance as sufficient evidence for characterizing the individual as a Stage Four individual even though an extended philosophical discussion with the individual may indicate that he or she does recognize notions of justice, as logically prior to notions of authority, respect, etc.[11]

Even an individual intellectually unable to fully participate in an extended philosophical discussion may well regard a notion of justice as essential to his moral behavior. Yet when asked to produce reasons for a specific moral decision, that individual may simply refer to several superficial though related notions of justice that he suspects are readily understood by those around him. Thus, it is not clear that the sorts of observation statements Kohlberg accepts are evidence of a person's being in a particular moral stage of development nor are they sufficient to distinguish the individual's moral character as similar or dissimilar to that of other members of his linguistic community. The problems of semantic, insufficiency[12] which make Kohlberg's evidence questionable even in a single linguistic community with which Kohlberg is familiar become greatly proliferated as Kohlberg attempts to carry on his cross-cultural studies in which he again claims to have found verification of his stages.[13] In short, theoretical uncertainty seems to be something which Kohlberg manages-not by a careful analysis of the issues at stake--but simply by a disregard of those issues. Kohlberg's demonstrated lack of concern to make less frequent the occurrences of uncertainty by minimizing the effects of semantic insufficiency has proliferated the problems normally associated with making intelligible references. In addition, his lack of concern in accounting for uncertainty in the sentences he uses in establishing his theory results in the sentences being deficient in a scientific sense, as well as remaining relatively uninformative even in the most speculative realm of ordinary moral discourse.[14] Vagueness in the language of

scientific discourse leads not only to incomplete understanding of the phenomenon under consideration, but can, at times, lead to a completely erroneous or useless explanation. The scinetist must take care in his use of language to avoid falling victim to the all too human tendency to develop loosely constructed theories that do little more than "explain away" problems and thereby do little more than simply offer some immediate gratification to the scientist who is presently overcome by his inability to account for a particular phenomenon.

And, to the extent that Kohlberg's program is based upon a commission of the naturalistic fallacy, then Kohlberg's program is indoctrinative in the sense that it is designed to bring about a person with specific moral commitments even though neither Kohlberg nor the individual can provide an adequate justification, scientific or otherwise, for why such a commitment should be valued.

If Kohlberg is to show that his theory is one of moral development rather than mere moral change, he must show that each subsequent moral stage is an improvement over the stage which preceeded it, Kohlberg's persistence in claiming that temporally sequential moral stages are better than earlier stages commits the naturalistic fallacy by identifying "better" with "later". Consequently, to the extent that Kohlberg is unable to address the charges listed above, he is similarly unable to argue that his prescriptions avoid the charge of indoctrination.

> ...the developmental teaching principles employed in this study lead to more change than is found in either free or unstructured discussion of moral dilemmas or in didactic forms of legal or moral education. 2

In short, unless Kohlberg can show that his scientific studies clearly demonstrate the nature of a moral person, then Kohlberg's plan for a program of moral education amounts to no more than a systematic program of indoctrination. Hence, it is to the scientific legitimacy of Kohlberg's work that I will now direct my attention.

II.

While I do not believe one can formulate a single paradigm of scientific activity, it does seem that there do exist certain family resemblances among the various activities we ordinarily describe as scientific. For example, all general areas of scientific activity attempt to develop theories by which certain phenomena might be described or explained. For theories to be meaningful scientists must make clear and remain cognizant of the assumptions they make about the course of natural phenomena and likewise, make clear and remain cognizant of the semantic aspects upon which meaningful explanation is predicated.

Although it is important and perhaps even necessary to make explicit reference to various assumptions concerning, for instance, the regularity of nature, a more important consideration in determining the scientific usefulness of a proposed theory depends upon the semantic clarity of the terms used in constructing the theory. If the scientists is to generalize in a <u>scientific</u> way about a class of events, he must take care to mention all the relevant features of those events that allow him to treat and describe such events as being part of a discrete class and, consequently, a legitimate and appealing object of scientific study. The scientist accepts as a given, certain assumptions about the behavior of natural events. Even though his studies are dependent upon linguistic matters, Kohlberg makes little effort to sort out the difficulties involved in attempting such an investigation.[15] A first step in minimizing the effects of semantic insufficiency could be taken by attending to Wesley Salmon's criterion of "linguistic invariance" which states that "no indictive rule is acceptable if the results it yields are functions of the arbitrary choice of language.[16] Thus, in formulating statements of observation

or hypothesis, Kohlberg should use only those terms which are as Goodman says, strongly "entrenched"[17] in the linguistic habits of the community to which such statements are addressed. Furthermore, the scientist must exercise caution in not only selecting expressions which are strongly entrenched within the linguistic habits of the appropriate community but he must also select--as much as possible--only those items which are most primitive in the sense of being purely ostensive in themselves or readily characterized by purely ostensive terms. If such a vocabulary is not available then the scientist ought to reconsider whether or not his concerns are truly within the range of scientific study.

In short, genuine science is concerned with a specific type of phenomenon, that is, a type of phenomenon which is characterized by discrete events or classes of events within the natural world and that are in a sense publically observable. Kohlberg has not shown that what he counts as a morally developed person is an appropriate phenomenon for scientific study.

Kohlberg's disregard for the importance of developing correspondence rules between his technical use of the term "justice" and the use of that term by his subjects should not really be so surprising to anyone who has studied his work. Not only is Kohlberg irresponsible in not developing clearly constructed procedures for associating observation expression with terms of a more theoretical nature, but Kohlberg seems unaware that recognition of the differences between the two types of terms is fundamentally important to a theory that is grounded upon the linguistic behavior of its subjects.

Certainly it would be unfair to criticize Kohlberg simply for believing that there is fulfillment of a moral developmental process or that the morally developed individual seems so Kantian in character. But that is not the point

at issue here. Rather, it is because Kohlberg does not attempt to justify his position in the careful and rigorous manner of either a philosopher or a scientist, that it seems unfair on Kohlberg's part to present his work as though it is simply the product of scientific study.[18] In short, as R. S. Peters rightfully notes, "It is either sheer legislation to say that Kohlberg's morality is the true one, or it is the worst form of naturalistic fallacy which argues from how 'morality' is ordinarily used (or seems to be used) to what morality is."[19] There is certainly more to the development of a scientific theory than collecting a number of questionable statistics and then linking them together by a linguistic maneuver that on close investigation only appears to make the numbers coincide with one's own wishes and desires.[20] To the extent that Kohlberg's work reflects just such a procedure, then to that extent his work is suspect on scientific grounds.

1. L. Kohlberg, "The Cognitive-Developmental Approach to Moral Education," Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. LVI, No. 10 (June, 1975), p. 672. It should be mentioned, however, that at other times, for reasons that are trivial at best, Kohlberg claims to be presenting a position he calls Deweyan at some points and Platonic at onthers. See, for example, Lawrence Kohlberg, "The Concepts of Developmental Psychology as the Central Guide to Education: Examples from Cognitive, Moral and Psychological Education," Moral and PsychologicalEducation: Theory and Research (Irvine, California: R. F. Publishers, Inc., 1976), pp. 5-10. See also L. Kohlberg, "Education for Justice: A Modern Statement of the Platonic View," Moral Education, Nancy F. and Theodore R. Sizer (eds)., (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 80-83.

2. Moshe Blatt and L. Kohlberg, "The Effects of Classroom Moral Reasoning Upon Children's Moral Judgment," Moral and Psychological Education: Theory and Practice (Irvine, California: R. F. Publishers, Inc. 1976), p. 152.

3. Kohlberg, "The Cognitive Developmental Approach to Moral Education," P. 670.

4. Kohlberg, "The Cognitive Developmental Approach to Moral Education," p. 670 Similar claims are frequently made by followers of Kohlberg. See for example, Thomas Lickona, "How to Encourage Moral Development," Learning: The Magazine of Creative Teaching, Vol. 5, NO. 7 (March, 1977), p. 39.

5. Ibid., p. 671

6. Ibid

7. Ibid

8. Ruth Macklin, "Moral Progress," Ethics, Vol. 87, No. 4 (July, 1977), p. 374.

9. By the expression "legitimate objects of scientific interests" I mean to refer to discrete events or classes of events that are in some sense publically observable in our natural world. Thus the forming of cumulous clouds represents an obvious example of such a class of events, while, on the other hand, the traces of an electron passing through a cloud chamber is a less obvious though perfectly legitimate example of a phenomenon of scientific interest.

In other words, for a thing or a relationship y to be scientifically interesting, it is sufficient that y be directly observalbe itself or, given all that we know or have good reason to believe about the behavior of things or relationships in general, we conclude that y must exist because of the preponderence of evidence that suggests that y exists and because if y did not exist, a large number of previously accepted conclusions about the world would henceforth become unacceptable. By the term "natural world" I do not mean to refer simply to those things and relations that make up our physical universe, but also to those conceptual constructs that we find necessary to postulate if we are to adequately describe and explain the world for purposes of shared cognition among the members of our conceptual community (conceptual community is used here rathe than linguistic community to refer to the more inclusive set of all rational persons). The sorts of things I have in mind here are such assumptions about the world that the scientist typically makes prior to his actual theory constructing activities. Examples of these sorts of assumptions are the principles of cause and effecg and of the regularity of nature, etc. Things excluded from consideration under the term "natural world" are such things as the intentions of God.

10. Simpson discusses this same point at some length in "Moral Development Research: A Case of Scientific Cultural Bias," pp. 79-80.

11. This same point has been demonstrated by W. P. Alston in his essay, "Comments on Kohlberg's 'From Is to Ought'," Cognitive Development and Epistemology, T. Michel (ed.), (New York: Academic Press, 1971), p. 272.

12. An extensive discussion of the notion of semantic insufficiency can be found in Peter Achinstein's Concepts of Science (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1968). I am using the term semantic insufficienty to designate the use of an expression in which the meaning to be foundin that use is not clearly and singularly apprehended by participants in the relevant linguistic community.

13. See, for example, L. Kohlberg, "Stage and Sequence," Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research, D. Goslin (ed.), (New York: RAnd McNally, Publishers, 1969), pp. 411-412.

14. This same point is argued at length by Simpson, "Moral Development Research: A Case of Scientific Cultural Bias," pp. 62-63.

15. For futther discussion of the difficulties involved in this process, see M. Cole, J. Gay, J. Glick, and D. Sharp, The Cultural Content of Learning and Thinking (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1971), p. 22.

16. Wesley Salmon, "Vindication of Induction," Current Issues in the Philosophy of Science, H. Feigel and E. Maxwell (eds.), (New York: Holt Rhinehart, and Winston, 1961) p. 246.

17. Nelson Goodman, "The New Riddle of Induction," Readings in Philosophy of Science Baruch Brody (ed.), (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1970), pp. 512-516).

18. For a discussion of Kohlberg's failure to adequately justify his developmental theory in contrast to the more carefully argued work of another developmental theorist such as John Rawls, see Betty A. Sichel, "John Rawls' Theory of Moral Development," Proceedings of the Philosophy of Education Society, 1971, I. S. Steinberg (ed.), (Urbana, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 1977,) pp. 247-256.

19. R. S. Peters, "A Reply to Kohlberg," Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. LVI, No. 10 (June, 1975), p. 678. For a more recent discussion of Peter's criticism of Kohlberg see, R. S. Peters, "Democratic Values and Education" Teacher's College Record, Vol. 80. No. 3, (February, 1979), pp. 474-479.

20. For an example of Kohlberg's tendency to do this very sort of thing, see his discussion of the scoring of responses by Jewish children on the role of Eichmann in Hitler's Germany. Lawrence Kohlberg, "Cognitive-Developmental Theory and the Practice of Collective Moral Education," Moral and Psychological Education: Theory and Research, (ed) Peter Scarf (Irvine, California: R. F. Publishers, Inc., 1976), pp. 194-199. That this is Kohlberg's implicit objective is evident in nearly every article Kohlberg prepares. See also, L. Kohlberg and E. Turriel, "Moral Development and Moral Education," Psychology and Educational Practice, (ed.), G. S. Lesser (G lenview, Illinois: Scott Foresman, 1974), pp. 410-465.

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