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# is there moral giftedness?

## Abstract

Are the higher levels of morality a gift given to some? The first part of this paper describes higher levels of morality by contrasting two approaches: Kohlberg's Cognitive Developmentalism and Dabrowski's Positive Disintegration. The roots of the more holistic theory, Positive Disintegration, are traced back to traditional appreciations of life-death cycles to develop the broad context of dynamic forces within human development and, more specifically, the value issues indigenous to speaking of "higher" and "lower" levels of moral development.

Rather than a strictly cognitive activity for solving moral dilemmas, high level morality is seen as a function of the total person, especially factors that constitute developmental potential. Higher morality is then not totally a gift but something chosen, striven for, and indeed the result of some kind of disintegration.

Perhaps we count among the gifts given to the gifted a certain moral sense. That assumption may be somewhat warranted, given their intelligence. But is the ability to reason even if supported with a host of other talents, clearly such a sure track toward moral judgment making? If we include moral praxis — actually carrying through right judgment to right action, the case becomes more suspect. If we go another step beyond to picture full morality as a fairly consistent way of life, perhaps the thread becomes even more stretched. To explore these questions will involve digging a bit into what is sometimes implied by "gifted" and what we mean by "moral." Let's look at the moral part first, then the gifted.

## Moral Development — a contrast of two theories

Morality is an elusive topic. We all support it, but it is difficult to know what "it" is. When we look into questions of ought or should that impose obligation regarding things we care about we are into morals. Morality has two aspects, judgment and action, but the vitality of morality is in the thrust of action not just moral speculation. It is fascinating to entertain moral dilemmas; it is challenging to advance to moral action. It is even more challenging to follow through with a consistent theme of a moral life.

Then there is the fact that we are not all at the same level of moral development. The study of morality in psychology is usually from a developmental aspect, complete with its inevitable levels or stages of moral development. Its development at higher levels is

complex. Since we are looking at people with exceptionally high talents, "high end" morality is what I would like to discuss here. I am going to start by contrasting two quite different approaches to understanding high level morality that have implications for people we call "gifted" One is Kohlberg's well known Cognitive Developmental approach; the other (not so well known) is Dabrowski's theory of Positive Disintegration.

## Cognitive Developmentalism

I was never too happy with Kohlberg's theory of moral development in the 60's and 70's. It was all so narrowed down to the cognitive that it failed to touch the full scope of human qualities. At first Kohlberg's stage six person was a man of principle gained through rationality, and avoiding things of the heart. Even the famous Kohlberg moral dilemmas, appealing as they were to teachers and researchers desperate to measure morality, were peopled with pale, cardboard-thin characters acting in antiseptic worlds. The Kohlbergian solutions to these moral dilemmas called for rationality, and that in itself cannot be disparaged, but where was the feeling and passion that we know courses through the moral decisions we must make? Where was the real moral world as we experience it? Cognitive developmentalism as it has come down to us from Piaget, is not a holistic view of persons. For various reasons it parceled out the cognitive, and in the Greco-Roman tradition set intellect on a throne to guide and rule that which is "lower." Kohlberg early in his career championed cognitivism to save

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morality from rank subjectivism. Later, in response to his critics, he admitted the possibility of reasons of the heart, and in his more mature years when personal illness had taken its toll, saw clearly that ultimate moral questions could not be answered by reason alone. There are he said moral questions beyond stage six justice reasoning which require the aesthetic, religious, even mystical to give some kind of answer to the larger moral questions. He called it, metaphorically, Stage 7. More mature personal reflection gave him a broader moral picture. I think Kohlberg personally was a man of this more holistic view who, in his quest for objectivity, singled out what a cognitive tradition said is its prime source — pure reason.

Another issue that gnawed away at the shell of Kohlberg's cognitivism without really getting to the kernel was the question of moral action. All very nice to come out with a tightly reasoned high level solution to a complex moral dilemma, but in real life does such reasoning lead to actual moral behavior? Morality is all about action; but despite his active concern for a just society, Kohlberg's theory fell short in convincing that such stress on the cognitive would actually lead to moral action especially to consistent moral action and ultimately moral behavior as an enduring theme of one's life. Kohlberg never did adequately link reason to action.

The influence of cognitive developmentalism through Kohlberg had a powerful effect on moral education. Much research and educational effort went into testing children for the presence of higher level moral reasoning. The danger in it was to conclude that they who are gifted with high intelligence should also be gifted with high morality. After all, they could reason to the highest principles, and that in Kohlberg's philosophy is of supreme import.

But in one's strength is also one's weakness. An example of this appears in James Webb's (1994) article on giftedness in which he contrasts strengths and related weaknesses of gifted people. Among many dichotomies facing the gifted which he outlines, one pairing that particularly touches on morality is the following:

<b>Strength:</b>	<b>Weakness:</b>
Emphasizes truth, equity, and fair play	Worries about humanitarian concerns

This is an interesting contrast. Does it mean:

It is good to seek the truth and justice	It is not so good to and "worry" about one's neighbour
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If Webb means worry is pathological, perhaps even obsessive behavior, many would agree with him without a second thought that worry is bad indeed. It is easy (particularly in North America) to conclude that life should be free of worry and that any anxiety is a bad thing to be avoided at all costs in the pursuit of

happiness. Perhaps, on the other hand, the implication of Webb's dichotomy is that it is not good to be disturbed by the plight of others; one should take care of oneself. Again our individualistic society would applaud. I suggest that to be concerned about truth and justice, far from being negative, is a desirable, albeit sometimes uncomfortable state. We really applaud but hesitate to emulate the Mother Theresa's of this world. But in an age becoming more and more aware of its interconnectedness, we need reminding that to be *actively* concerned (to carry thought into action) is the only true moral state. regrettably it usually carries with it at very least a measure of inconvenience and almost certainly pain.

### Positive Disintegration

This brings me to me a theory of human development I want to hold up in contrast to Kohlberg's. The study of chaos tells us that order, beauty, goodness issue out of turmoil. Progress is not a gift but a product of some kind of disintegration. This theme is something that humankind has observed in the natural world. The cycles of the seasons; the cycles of life and death. Old, dead vegetation falls to the ground to be recycled back into living matter. New life issues out of death — this palpable mystery, rich with paradox, is woven through the wisdom of centuries in the form of myths, art and religious ritual. The Phoenix still arises from he ashes.

Psychology has been slow to express (even to comprehend) this mystery; it flies in the face of "feel good psychology" and quick fix psychotherapy in the pursuit of happiness. But if we dare to apply this insight to human development we see that not all disintegration with its accompanying anxiety and pain is totally bad. Painful perhaps, but in the long term growthful. Some anxieties, some concerns have potential for growth. Concern for others or oneself can be an opportunity not just to do good, but to grow as a human being. At the heart of such concern is the disintegration that ensues. Some sort of disintegration is necessary for development to higher, better levels; there must be disintegration of that which is lower before one can reintegrate on higher levels. These are realities mythology and religion have taught men and women when they take time to reflect on the critical experiences of their own lives.

It is only relatively recently that this fact has permeated any part of the science of psychology. Naturally it makes its entrance in developmental psychology, and appropriately its name is Positive Disintegration. The words Positive Disintegration make one do a double take: How can disintegration be positive? It is uncomfortable, often painful; how can this be good? Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD) recognizes a basic law of cosmic evolution and human development: Movement toward a higher level involves some sort of breakdown or dissolution of lower level functioning, to be replaced by a higher level

function. The richer, livelier, less automatic but more voluntary responses that appear later in development conflict with earlier, automatic responses. The less automatic processes disorganize and inhibit the more automatic. Disequilibrium results. This crisis precipitates the organization and emergence of new, higher levels of control. This dissolution involves conflict, crisis, discomfort, sometimes intense pain. This is commonly called illness, especially "mental illness." The medical and popular zeitgeist says to get rid of it as soon as possible because conflict is pathological. TPD does not see conflict as necessarily evil; consequently it does not, like so many psychotherapies, try to eliminate conflict, particularly intrapsychic conflict and conflict between self and the external environment. Instead, it utilizes conflict's potential for growthfulness. Disintegration which can be positive comes about in the presence of intense conflict, disorganizing experience and an abundance of painful affects such as anxiety and depression and, yes, moral concern.

Remarkable as this idea may be in the contemporary world of medicine and psychology, it is nevertheless something those who have gone through it know already. Some reflect back on their passages in life fraught with threat and anxiety; for some it was a difficult time of misfortune, loss, grief, even mental illness. For many, as Dabrowski found, new life seems to spring from the agonies of psychoneurosis. Dabrowski proclaimed in fact that psychoneurosis is not an illness, but potentially an opportunity to be grasped for the developmental possibilities within it.

### **Potential for Moral Development**

TPD is a theory of general development but has a strong moral theme expressed in its concern for values. I will try to pick out those motifs which are most relevant to our theme today. Kazimierz Dabrowski constructed his theory from his observations of life on the battlefields of Poland during two world wars. Dabrowski was well aware that his notion of the positive potential of disintegration was not original; but his psychological theory and his application of it to real life were original. Like most developmental theories his writings described levels of development, but, rather than being nomothetic, this theory concentrates on advanced levels of development. It furthers the idea of levels beyond the usual description of life stages to what Dabrowski calls multilevelness or levels not only of development over time but levels within concepts which are distinguished as higher and lower by their values.

At this point I would like to draw attention to a metaphor developmental psychology consistently uses, and most of us accept uncritically. It is the metaphor of "levels of development." Almost all developmental theories break down the process into levels or stages. These are convenient for our understanding. Whether they represent reality or not is another question; the

profusion of theories with competing schemas of levels should give us pause. Psychologists describe levels to help picture the upward progress of development. (Robert Siegler prefers a wave metaphor to represent the ebb and flow of strategies) (Azar, 1995)) Whatever the metaphor, the built in assumption is that upward movement is progress; "higher" is "better" Better is a value statement; when we say "better" we have placed a value on something being more desirable than something else. The actual values are rarely brought to the front. Few theories are explicit about their values They move on in a fog of confusion.

Dabrowski's is a value-based theory. But he has clearly stated the values on which his multilevels stand. "Better" arises from conscious reflection and control of impulses, escape from illusion toward authenticity, from rigid thinking to creativity, from egocentrism to compassion. Development to higher levels from this aspect becomes a pursuit of what ought-to-be rather than mere acceptance of what-is. It is the imagining of and searching for a personality ideal. Values are paramount; authentic morality becomes the goal.

If life comes from death; if integration comes from brokenness; reintegration on a higher more desirable level comes from disintegration of that which is lower and less valuable. This theory draws our attention to a truth at the core of the developmental process, a truth which we in North America especially would like to ignore. The fact is that real development toward anything worthwhile is not inevitable progress but a sometimes painful process of tearing down that which is undesirable in ourselves, lower and inferior, to move on to and reintegrate at a higher, better level. Life presents disturbing situations where one is invited to reflect on one's self and the values one holds. Dabrowski urges us to take a reflective stance. The contradictions, the discrepancies between what one purports and what one actually does, come out in such reflection. It is a matter of facing up to the real self. The ensuing pain is necessary for growth from that which is lower toward that which is higher and better. In fact, Dabrowski insists, real growth does not come without disintegration.

### **Developmental Potential**

The big question is: "Can just anybody do this? This kind of disintegration and reintegration is possible to those who have what Dabrowski called developmental potential. It involves two components, *overexcitabilities* and *dynamisms*.

*Overexcitabilities*. Dabrowski concluded that people with potential for growth through positive disintegration showed greater responsivity than others. He called them *overexcitabilities* and named five types: *intellectual*, *emotional*, *imaginational*, *sensual* and *psychomotor* domains. Some people, he found, were more excitable in responding not only to stimuli from their environment but

also to stimuli coming from their own inner psychic milieu. Not only were they more responsive to the world around them, but they also affected the world more sensitively and more actively. The best of these people were responsive not just in one or two but in all five of these domains. The role of Dabrowski's overexcitabilities is being researched intensively at the present time.

**Dynamisms.** Dynamisms are the driving forces of human Development. To cover all of the dynamisms is too much for this paper. They are listed completely in the figure at the conclusion. They contribute insight into what these forces for positive disintegration might be. They take one through the levels of disintegration, in a positive way. They give fresh and innovative insights into the dynamics of higher level development leading to the achievement in some degree of one's personality ideal.

At this juncture developmental potential may sound very much like giftedness. The temptation is to leap to such conclusions. Giftedness is not identical with intellect, preeminent as it seems to be in the minds of some who reduce giftedness down to IQ. scores. Pearce in *Evolution's End* (1992) distinguishes between intellect and intelligence, using the latter to describe a full range of neural activity that incorporates with the cerebral the emotional and even instinctual levels of the human brain. Creativity, sensitivity, superexcitability, intelligence and so on are not necessarily signs of positive disintegration at high levels, but they point to its possibility. Giftedness moral or otherwise is not just the luck of the draw in acquiring certain attributes even if these attributes help one to "solve" moral dilemmas.

DP is the facilitator of advanced development to levels beyond the norm. But it can be equated with giftedness only if we miss the prime point of TPD: *Some disintegration is necessary. Disintegration is the doorway to growth to higher levels.* It is the norm of moral development; it is the norm of all human development; it is the norm of all that is human, and all that we know. It is not always the doorway to higher levels of moral development because some with potential will not put their hand to the door. But it is the only way. Some sort of breakdown painful as it might be opens up the possibility of growth to higher levels. The development of the whole personality to higher levels is not a clear gift; it comes with a price — the price of effort and anxiety and even pain. Nothing of real value is gratuitous. If there is any gift it is the gift of the breakdown, the gift is the opportunity.

Opportunities may be taken or lost. We are not total victims of heredity and environment nor are we gifted in the sense of being totally lucky. We can make decisions; we can set the course of our lives and the quality of our moral contribution.

This is no Pollyanish philosophy of "Every dark cloud has a silver lining. Something good will come of this; just

you wait and see." It is a philosophy and science of change broader than mere optimistic thinking, broader than traditional psychology. The highest ideals are potentially the most destructive. It is consistent with the dynamic interplay of disintegration and reintegration that we find in the physical world. It calls for decision — not just decisions around moral dilemmas hypothetical or personal. But decisions on the course by which we want to steer our lives, guided by the stars of what we value.

## Conclusion

Is there moral giftedness? Does morality come as a free gift? Only if one distorts the whole idea of morality and reduces it down to intellectualizing morals. It then becomes at best a rational balancing of the scales of justice, and at worst a kind of cleverness. This is far from the essence of morality which is a holistic response to life — the confluence of intelligence and sensitivities, and the forbearance to have undergone some disintegration in one's life. High moral ground is won, like all high ground through struggle, pain, dissolution and disillusion. The scope of moral praxis is more engaging of the whole person and involves a range of human qualities we have explored which, far from being just gifts, involve the price of compassion and the pain of that disintegration which is positive.

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