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## Positive Disintegration and Moral Education

### Abstract:

This article sketches out the implications for moral development theory, axiology and moral education of Dabrowski's theory of Positive Disintegration. Dabrowski's idea of the necessity of lower level disintegration before integration can take place on higher levels is explored, as is his central and unique contribution of the concept of multilevelness of behavioural organization and functions, particularly the importance given to emotional development as the source of objective valuing. A basic assumption is that there is an empirically observable development of the capacity to make value judgements and the ability to establish one's own hierarchy of values independent from cultural conditioning. Dabrowski's insights rescue moral theory from much of its confusion and root it in the vital, existential, whole person.

A new psychological theory of human development with a broad philosophical basis has recently emerged, offering exciting and challenging answers to problems of moral choice. It is the theory of 'Positive Disintegration' proposed by Kazimierz Dabrowski of the Department of Psychology, University of Alberta, Canada.

Dabrowski bases his theory on both his practice as a medical doctor in Poland before the Second World War and on continuing clinical practice since then in Canada. The theory is the product of a lifetime of experience and study; he is now testing it empirically in collaboration particularly with Michael M. Piechowski of the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

There does not appear to be any one source in which Dabrowski has extensively expressed himself on the topic of *moral* development, yet in a certain sense the whole of his work has a moral and certainly a value orientation. It is the purpose of this article to define more sharply these moral dimensions of Positive Disintegration theory in a way that is interesting to theorists and practical to moral educators.

### A. Positive Disintegration Theory

Positive Disintegration is a theory of general human development that avoids merely describing development of individuals and constructs instead a distinct conceptual system that defines truly measurable developmental parameters. It is an evolutionary rather than ontogenetic approach.

The name 'Positive Disintegration' comes from the idea that development is a process of disintegration of structures at lower levels so that reintegration may take place at higher levels. Piechowski expresses the core ideas of the theory when he says:

The central concept of the theory is that of multilevelness of developmental phenomena. Development is seen to be a function of the level of behavioural organization. The theory defines five levels. Each level constitutes a distinct structure (1975, p 1).

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It is this theme of multilevelness that carries through Dabrowski's work and is the key to new understanding of moral development and axiology. Dabrowski was greatly influenced by John Hughlings Jackson who in 1884 delivered three lectures on the Evolution and Dissolution of the Nervous System in which he demonstrated a biological hierarchy in the nervous system and proposed that evolution is a passage from the most simple to the more complex and from the most automatic to the more voluntary. Jackson's approach was both multilevel and evolutionary. Building on this, Dabrowski proposes that emotional-cognitive development is an evolutionary development of the structures of behaviour passing through five levels.

### *1. Levels of Integration and Disintegration*

The five developmental levels form a hierarchy ranging from the lowest, (1) primary integration through (2) unilevel disintegration, (3) spontaneous disintegration, (4) organized multilevel disintegration, to (5) secondary integration, the highest of the levels. Disintegration that is associated with movement through levels is called 'positive' if it involves dissolution of mental functions at lower levels and reintegration at higher levels. A detailed examination of each of these levels will reveal that they do in reality form a hierarchy from lower functioning to higher.

Since Dabrowski's levels of development begin and end with two radically different 'integrations', and the process between is composed of three different, hierarchically arranged 'disintegrations', the importance of these concepts cannot be overemphasized. Understanding them gives the clue to precisely distinguishing the five levels.

#### (a) Integration

Integration is an incorporation of various functions into a coordinated structure showing dynamic equilibrium. At the lowest level — primary integration — mental functions are subordinated to primitive drives. Instincts (used in the unique Dabrowskian sense of fundamental dynamisms that undergo transformation at different levels of development) are not hierarchically arranged, their prevalence depends upon their momentary greater intensity. Intelligence is the tool of primitive urges. Little real thought is given to any problem. Infantile urges rule instead.<sup>1</sup>

Really there are no inner conflicts for the primitively integrated. At this level, no problem of importance can get to him. Higher order conflicts are screened out by a lack of sensitivity and empathy and blunted perceptions. The only conflicts that might get through to upset the individual are those that strike at his own lower order needs. One can be upset, but, without disturbing any higher level functions of intelligence, feeling and empathy; it is a simple matter to settle back into the old primitive ways. A sensationalized newspaper account of a murder or a graphically violent television show may be more disturbing than a neighbour's real tragedy; one feels no need to get involved.

On the other hand, at the highest level is another radically different form of integration — secondary integration — the result of the full process of positive disintegration. It is the integration of high level mental functions with the dominant role of higher emotions emphasizing the major dynamisms of autonomy, authenticity and responsibility. As is his practice, with all important terms, Dabrowski is careful

to define, or rather indicate the dynamics of these fluid and multilevel concepts (1973, 1974). Autonomy refers to consciously chosen independence from lower level drives and some influences of the external environment. Authenticity is the unfalsified exteriorization of one's own emotional, intellectual and volitional attitudes, indicated by a consciously accepted hierarchy of values and a high degree of self insight. Responsibility, arising mainly from self control and empathy, depends on one's ability to understand other people's developmental difficulties and one's own role in assisting these people. At the higher levels of development, particularly at the level of secondary integration, the dynamization of the personality ideal has an increased role in directing development. Activation of the ideal consists in an increase of commitment and the mental tension that follows. The personality ideal declares that some things are not only good in themselves but 'good for me'. The personality ideal is the highest level of Scheler's experience of

. . . a finger pointing toward me from the depths of this value, as if it were whispering 'for you'. The specific content of this individual value assigns me a unique place in the ethical cosmos and it commands also the performance of actions, deeds and works, all of them crying out 'I am for you' and 'You are for me' (*Der Formalismus*, p 510).

Individuals who attain this high level of development are few. Dabrowski calls them 'eminent men'. Eminent men are 'driven men', driven by their own hierarchy of values in their personality ideal.

#### (b) Disintegration

The three levels of disintegration between primary and secondary integration involve loosening, disorganization or dissolution of mental structures and functions. Dabrowski says:

This terms covers a wide range of states from temporary loosening of contact with reality observable in severe fatigue, boredom, depression, stress . . . neurosis . . . to a split of personality in schizophrenia (1970, pp 164-65).

Disintegration is unilevel if conflicts are between drives and emotional states of a similar developmental level and of the same intensity. This is a stage of ambivalences, marked with strong feelings of inferiority toward others. One is highly susceptible to social opinion and the influence of others. Recognition and approval are prime needs. Values are internalized from external sources, parents, church, government, authority of the printed word. Ideas and values are stereotyped and relative. Morality is conventional morality. Conflicts at this level show a minimal degree of consciousness and ability to transform stimuli. It is the vacillating 'Hamlet' stage of development. Disintegration is 'horizontal'.

Disintegration is 'vertical' or multilevel if there are conflicts between higher and lower levels of instinctive, emotional or intellectual functions (Dabrowski, 1974). If higher level values begin to make an appeal to the individual, functions are differentiated and one tends to form a new hierarchy within the same function, lower level functioning yielding to higher. Spontaneous multilevel disintegration is an example of this; in contrast to unilevel disintegration, it stems from conflicts between higher and lower levels of the same function. For example, primitive biological dynamisms of the instinct of self-preservation may come into conflict

with moral values, concerns for one's neighbour, empathy. 'It is the beginning of sorting things out prior to the emergence of an autonomous hierarchy of values' (Dabrowski, 1974, p 51). Spontaneous multilevel disintegration brings out a sense of self-criticism, feelings of shame and guilt, feelings of inferiority toward oneself — experiencing the disparity between the level one is at and the higher values toward which one is beginning to strive. This level sees the emergence of positive maladjustment consisting of a rejection of standards, attitudes and demands of one's environment which are incompatible with one's growing awareness and loyalty to a higher scale of values. A form of positive maladjustment may be behind some college students' rejection of unjust authority, police brutality, and involvement in war, as long as it goes beyond mere rebellion and involves conscious moral choices and an attempt to actually live the values one proclaims.

The hallmark of level three is inner conflict. 'The nature of multilevel conflict is in essence the opposition between 'what is' against 'what ought to be' (Dabrowski, 1974, p 55).

Level four, Organized (or Directed) Multilevel Disintegration, in contrast to level three is one of synthesis and increasing order of the organization of the inner psychic milieu. 'Inner conflicts abate while the unifying power of personality ideal increases intensity. . . . The process of developmental synthesis leads to an increasing stabilization of the hierarchy of values . . .' (Dabrowski, 1974, p 56). One becomes more objective, particularly in regard to oneself. The dynamism of subject-object in oneself develops and reflects an interest in and critical evaluation of one's mental life. There is a parallel here with Piaget's decentration; the process of shifting from a totally egocentric point of view is not only the task of the infant. It is a lifetime task. The paradox that Piaget (1955) expressed of discovering oneself in so far as one discovers others and discovering others in so far as one discovers oneself is not just for infants. It is the work of a lifetime as the person moves from primitive infantile egocentrism where one is really out of touch with oneself, to mature integrated awareness and concern for others where one is really in touch with himself.

A realistic self concept has been the hallmark of mental health for other psychologists like Karen Horney, but Dabrowski adds the further insight that with greater self awareness and self objectification, comes the possibility of self education and autopsychotherapy.

## *2. Dimensions of mental functioning*

Dabrowski's multilevelness concept flows through his five dimensions of mental functioning — again arranged hierarchically from lowest to highest: (1) Psychomotor, (2) Sensual, (3) Imaginational, (4) Intellectual, (5) Emotional. The supreme position given the emotional is another core characteristic of Positive Disintegration with its emphasis on psychology's need to rediscover emotional development after many years of stress on physiological and cognitive development. Piechowski reflects this view when he says: 'Even more than the acquisition of symbolic language, emotional factors are significant in man's becoming human' (1975, p 5). But it is important to point out from the beginning the special and broad concept Dabrowski has of the emotions. He does not see them as something cut off from

or in opposition to intellect, but believes that the two are in reality inseparable; they share the same nervous system. Dabrowski's stress on emotional development is not a one-sided look, blinded to cognition, but an attempt to reinstate emotionality in its proper place in the psychology of human development. The stress on emotional functioning is part of Dabrowski's quest for greater objectivity in psychology and education, including moral education. In *The Dynamics of Concepts* (p 123) he says:

It seems to the author that the objectivization of emotional functions is one of the most important humanistic postulates in human development, that it is the fundamental principle in developmental and educational psychology, in education, in the theory of morals, in sociology, politics and philosophy.

To Dabrowski it does not seem possible to have sound education, family life and a sound society without elaboration and objectivization of emotional functions. Otherwise education, family life, society will be only apparently moral and not really so.

Dabrowski's distinction of five levels of mental functioning is based on his clinical observation of 'types of increased overexcitability'.<sup>2</sup> He observed that some children, adolescents and adults consistently overreact to both external and intrapsychic stimuli. Their overreacting appeared limited to certain dimensions. He distinguished five dimensions: psychomotor, sensual, imaginal, intellectual and emotional. Some individuals seemed to be more sensitive to one kind of stimulus, some to a broad spectrum of stimuli. Some showed sensitivity at lower psychomotor levels of the hierarchy, others at higher levels more closely connected with cortical functioning. These overexcitabilities are like channels bringing stimuli into the individual. Messages from higher level channels bring about the dissolution of lower level responses and open up the possibility of reorganization on a higher level. Less automatic but more voluntary responses that come later in development conflict with earlier, more automatic modes of functioning. Higher level processes disorganize and inhibit more automatic ones. The resulting disequilibrium brings on the emergence and organization of new and higher levels of control. Autonomy, sympathy, empathy emerge from the process of cognitive-emotional conflict as the individual strives for his personality ideal. Thus a refinement, especially an emotional refinement, takes place within the whole person. In the movement from unilevelness to multilevelness, the primitive is replaced by the reflective, the fractional by the integrative, the impulsive by the meditative. Conformity yields to authenticity, selfishness to alterocentrism. The intellect, subordinated to primitive drives is replaced by the intellect in equipotential collaboration with higher emotions. Adjustment to 'what is' gives way to qualified adjustment and adjustment to 'what ought to be'.

#### B. Moral Development

The foregoing has been an attempt to summarize some of the principal themes of Positive Disintegration theory as presented in Dabrowski's numerous publications—particularly the more recent publications and papers. Our next step will be to apply these ideas to moral development before going on to look at Dabrowski's axiological theory. In the process, some points merely touched upon will be

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elaborated more fully in the context of moral education.

Even though Dabrowski emphasizes emotional factors in moral decision making his theory cannot be labelled 'just another emotive ethics theory'. Certainly he is insisting that the emotions be recognized as highly directive in moral development, but this is because developmental psychology, including the psychology of moral development, has left the emotions a much neglected area probably through lack of definition or difficulty in measuring or, perhaps, through some holdover idea from the past that emotions stand outside of intelligence or even in opposition to it. Dabrowski's unique stress on emotions and particularly their multilevelness rescues emotional acts from being subject to mere word games and roots them instead in the vital, living, healthy, existential person.

The door that Dabrowski's key of multilevelness opens is that moral development is development of whole persons — not just learning or cognitive development or emotional development or identification processes. Moral development covers the whole spectrum of physiological, instinctive, rational and emotional functioning. This has important implications for moral education as we shall see later.

Moral development is a process of adjustment — negative or really non-developmental if it means acceptance and conformity to values prevailing in one's society without personal, critical evaluation from all dimensions of the person. Positive adjustment on the other hand is developmental. It consists of a new hierarchy of values consciously adopted and subordinated to one's personality ideal. Negative adjustment is adjustment to 'what is'. Positive adjustment is adjustment to 'what ought to be'. Moral judgements move from levels determined by instincts of self preservation and 'keeping out of trouble', to a balanced concern for oneself in the context of other human beings and things.

Perhaps Dabrowski's most remarkable 'moral treatise' (still only in mimeo form) is his 1974 publication *Multilevelness of Emotional and Instinctive Functions*, Vol I, in which he considers more than fifty functions ranging from laughter to suicide and differentiates five levels for each of these functions. For example, justice ranges from primitive self-protective forms to its highest levels — justice through self giving with an 'all encompassing universal love above justice' (p 151).

The important role Dabrowski assigns to multilevelness of functions and values makes his theory revolve around a moral development core. With valuing so central it is important to look at his value theory.

### C. Axiology

In a personal foreword to Piechowski's paper 'A theoretical and empirical approach to the study of development' (1975, pp vi-vii), Dabrowski says:

The definition of five levels of development of emotional and instinctive functions, their detailed description and elaboration of methods of their diagnosis brought the concept of multilevelness to the realm of objective operations, similar to those employed in the study of human intelligence. This in turn allowed me to gradually elaborate philosophical ideas in regard to the problem of values. The distinction of levels of values is more meaningful and more crucial than the distinction of the kinds of values. This introduces into axiology in place of relativism of values their hierarchization.

In *Mental Growth Through Positive Disintegration* (p 104) he says:

It is important to realize that the levels of mental functions besides their objective character (clinically recognizable and testable) have a normative character. The higher levels . . . become consciously defined and consciously chosen aims. They acquire the character of ideals toward which we are inwardly compelled to strive. In this manner 'what ought to be' emerges from 'what is'. We can consider this the formative process of the dynamisms of authenticity and of hierarchization of values.

Dabrowski distinguishes a hierarchy of values from a hierarchy of aims. The former may be speculative; the latter is normative for the individual. The hierarchy of values and aims of eminent men (highly developed men) is objective. This objectivity stems from their more developed mental dynamisms. Dabrowski sees a remarkable concurrence in the basic values of eminent men such as Christ, Socrates, Gandhi, Schweitzer. 'All that rises must converge'. Those who rise to high levels of development seem to converge on a similar set of values. Their sensitivity to what is truly worthwhile and the way they organize their lives around it is creative of an objective hierarchy of values for which others may strive.

#### D. Education Implications

Dabrowski and others have pinpointed the implications of the theory for many types of education from pastoral practice (Dabrowski, 1966) to the group encounter movement (Hague, 1973) and the organization of mental hospitals (Cienin, 1972).

As a minimal goal for education in general, the pervading theme of multilevelness sets up the objective of at least partial transcendence of the biological cycles of life and at least partial change of the psychological type. In other words education should at least lead persons from primitive to somewhat higher levels of functioning. This is done through the collaboration of heredity, environment and what Dabrowski calls the 'third factor'—autonomous developmental forces, largely those of self-choice. Only after diagnosing and utilizing these three factors in the individual can authentic education and ultimately self-education be developed. In other words, anyone who would be a 'teacher' in whatever form that may take—from parent to politician—cannot succeed without understanding the developmental potential of his students.

The basic assumption of the theory is that there is an empirically observable development of value judgement-making capacity and the ability to establish one's own hierarchy of values independent from cultural conditioning. 'It provides education' (Dabrowski, 1970, p 120) 'with a cornerstone which otherwise must be arbitrarily posited or abandoned altogether in favour of nihilistic libertinism'. This has a two-fold effect for education: (1) independence—liberation of education from subservience to external authority; and (2) exclusion of the practice of moral education as a kind of indoctrination into the values of the educator, without respect for the individuality of the pupil, or self-awareness of the educator's own limitations determined by his level of development. Education is a quest for authenticity by both pupil and teacher.

#### *1. Central place of moral education and specific implications*

Dabrowski (1970, p 120) emphasizes that 'in any system founded on the theory of positive disintegration problems of morals would have to occupy a prominent place

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since a general shift would have to be made from the emphasis on the purely intellectual sphere to the development of higher emotions'.

What are some of the more specific implications of this for moral education?

First, Dabrowski is obviously not a Dewey; he believes that there does exist an objective hierarchy of values to be discovered by the individual and converted into his own hierarchy of aims. This is an important philosophical premise any moral educator must accept or reject but know that he accepts or rejects before he begins to teach. Opting for objectivity of values, does not imply that one has all the answers—only some and a deep desire to search for others together with his students. But it does imply that teachers must take a stand, and wishy-washy discussion techniques that run through aimless gambits of opinion can be ruinous. If nothing else, the teacher's opinion can be a springboard from which students can leap into the dark of their own authentic search.

Secondly, the importance Dabrowski places on models says something about the techniques of moral education.

The creation of a scale of developmental values and of a hierarchy of moral and social goals cannot be successfully examined otherwise than in the light of concrete lives of eminent individuals (Dabrowski, 1970, p 107).

If the concept of modelling begins to sound like the 'bag of virtues' approach, we should recall that Dabrowski sees modelling against a backdrop of intelligent understanding, authentic, free choice and ultimately the establishment of one's own autonomous personality ideal.

Thirdly, Positive Disintegration theory is obviously opposed to the old 'mental hygiene' concepts of education and the creation of a 'well-adjusted child'. Mere conformity is negative adjustment—adjustment to what is. Moral education is meant to be 'adjustment to what ought to be' (Dabrowski, 1970, p 162). Dabrowski's concept of positive maladjustment has important implications for moral education. This 'conflict with and denial and rejection of those standards, patterns, attitudes, demands and expectations of one's environment which are incompatible with one's growing awareness of a loyalty to a higher scale of values' (Dabrowski, 1970, p 163) is the ground of authenticity. It is, if you wish, the route to post-conventional levels of moral development. It is something the teacher looks for and encourages even in the child. That positive maladjustment is growthful is well exemplified in the lives of eminent men. For example, Christ's conflicts with the Pharisees was a kind of positive maladjustment. They stood for conventional thinking. He constantly pointed to higher values that overrode human laws.

Fourthly, these concepts of adjustment put teachers' and parents' attitudes toward special children in new perspectives. They entail a special treatment for children who are psychoneurotic, children (and adults) who 'don't fit in'. If pedagogy follows the assumption that higher levels are not attained until lower levels are first disintegrated, special educational techniques are needed to encourage not only the integration of higher level functioning but the disintegration of lower level. Positive Disintegration theory brings with it a whole new attitude toward the neurotic child and the child in crisis. It sees neurosis as a potential; it sees crisis as an opportunity. It takes an insightful teacher to see this, it takes a

courageous teacher to encourage this disintegration so that it may be positive.

On the other hand, Dabrowski's theory allows the proper assessment and upbringing of children who are rigidly integrated—fixed at low levels of integration. Parent-child relationships, teacher-student relationships offer many opportunities for encouraging disintegration of low-level structures; above all, the individual's interactions with his peers are opportunities for insight into what he believes and feels; these are opportunities to question, to reject and move on and up to higher levels demonstrated by peers and adult models, ultimately moving on to self-education and autopsychotherapy.

The success of the task of the moral educator is based on being aware of the developmental potential of his students, matching this with an objective awareness of his own level of development.

Finally, and perhaps most centrally, if the theory of Positive Disintegration is founded upon the breakdown of old structures and the rebuilding of higher structures, the role of crises in moral development becomes important. Crises can be part of the life cycle, timed by biological and social development (like the age of opposition of the two-year-old, adolescence, or menopause), as Erikson has so thoroughly explained; or crisis may be 'accidental'—those unique happenings in every person's life, the death of a loved one, serious illness, accidents. They need not be dramatic; it is the degree to which they affect the sensitivity of the individual that is important. Again, there are many levels of crises, ranging from mild disappointments to major shock leading one to question the meaning of life. One could even consider the posing of a moral dilemma as a form of crisis—but looked at within a broader and especially more emotional context than as only a cognitive choice-making exercise. Moral judgements are judgements of the whole person, and they truly indicate the real level of moral development of the person when they incorporate his functioning at all levels not just cognitive or not just emotional.

This brings us back to a central theme of Positive Disintegration: Moral development is not just learning, not just an easy intuitive leap, not just a rational dispute over a moral dilemma but a painful personal *agonia* in the original Greek sense—an agony, a straining of all that one is, struggling from lower to higher levels of humanness.

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Although primary integration is characterized by infantile behaviour and secondary integration by 'mature' behaviour, the five levels of development are not directly keyed to the growth process: an adult may well be at a primitive level during most of his life; on the other hand, Dabrowski (like Maslow with his self-actualization theory) sees that secondary integration is possible only to one of mature age and experience.

<sup>2</sup> I find the term 'overexcitability' can be a little misleading, particularly when applied to higher levels of functioning. The connotation is pejorative, implying too much of something; it may give the correct impression when applied to types of psychomotor activity—hyperkinesis—but at higher levels of functioning the connotation intended seems to be more of sensitivity to and capacity for emotional and intellectual functions.

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