

# An Exploration into the Developmental Psychology of Ethical Theory with Implications for Business Practice and Pedagogy

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**ABSTRACT.** This article is an attempt to understand ethical theory not just as a set of well-developed philosophical perspectives but as a range of moral capacities that human beings more or less grow into over the course of their lives. To this end, we explore the connection between formal ethical theories and stage developmental psychologies, showing how individuals mature morally, regarding their duties, responsibilities, ideals, goals, values, and interests. The primary method is to extract from the writings of Kohlberg and his students the cues that help to flesh out a developmental picture of a wide range of ethical perspectives. Thus, developmental psychology benefits from gaining a broader understanding of “morality” and “ethics,” and ethical theory benefits from

a richer understanding of how moral maturity arises from youthful beginnings in juvenile and adolescent thinking. Results of this study offer insight into the difficulty of teaching ethics and a refined ability to assess moral maturity in business activity.

**KEY WORDS:** cognitive moral development, ethical theory, philosophical foundations, pedagogy

## Introduction

A peculiar divide exists between ethical theory and theories of moral development. One needs to look only at any standard text on business ethics to see evidence of this disjunction. While most textbooks contain an obligatory section on Lawrence Kohlberg’s theory of moral development, the connection to ethical theory is minimal, save occasional references to Kant or Rawls. It is as though ethical theory has no relevance for human moral capacities, except as an ideal, which few adults ever attain.

Likewise, philosophers have rarely, if ever, commented on the developmental aspects of their views – there is an implicit assumption of a maximum level of ethical capacity or development. Kant, for example, seldom discussed how one might have come to acquire a principled perspective in ethics over the course of his or her life. Hence, although most traditional ethical theories provide a rather “wide” look at ethics, the developmental “depth” is lacking. It is one thing to show, for example, that ethics has both macro and micro features to it, or that it reflects different perspectives (Blum, 1990; Emmet, 1979; Hodgkinson, 1978; Nozick, 1981). But one’s ethical capacity is not static; it can improve over time.

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So it is equally important to show how a person's capacities for utilizing such perspectives change and grow over the course of his or her life. What may look like rule-guided behavior in a child is certainly rudimentary when compared with the use made of principles by an ethically mature adult. The understanding of the ethical theory of philosophers could benefit greatly from the added developmental insights provided by psychologists and *vice-versa*.

The purpose of our article, then, is to explore the developmental possibilities of ethical theory. This is a complicated task, and so there are three major objectives to this article. First, our primary objective is to demonstrate how a developmental model of ethical theory might begin. In so doing, we unpack many of the static assumptions of ethical theory and present a more dynamic model for addressing ethics in both practical and theoretical ways. We emphasize the exploratory nature of this objective – our aim here is to show the plausibility and reasonability of such a perspective and to suggest some initial directions.

Second, we offer what we believe to be a richer theoretical grounding for stage development theory by calling attention to a wider range of theory than developmental psychologists generally acknowledge. As we discuss below, we have chosen a particular ethical framework that is not necessarily essential to a developmental perspective but does help to reveal the variety of possibilities of this approach.

Our third objective is the most important. In fact, it is the primary reason for taking on such a difficult task, viz. to call attention to the implications of a developmental approach to ethical theory in the context of business activity and pedagogy. Although the straightforward moral assessment of business behavior is important, its judgments are limited to such categories as “right and wrong,” “acceptable or unacceptable.” Much business behavior remains in a “gray” range – neither ethical nor unethical, just “business.” Therefore, to be able to assess business and managerial activity in terms of ethical maturity, levels will extend moral evaluation into areas of business activity that have long needed increased ethical scrutiny.

This approach clarifies the difficulties of teaching ethics in the classroom as well. Because of student variability along both the theoretical and developmental lines, the teaching of business ethics faces an

audience of diverse preparation and capacity in each classroom. So for both business enterprise as well as business ethics pedagogy what follows promises considerable relevance.

### **Stage development and ethical theory**

The simultaneous discussion of ethical theory and stage development theory is a complicated undertaking. To set the stage, we present a brief review of stage development theory and outline a borrowed meta-theory of ethics that lends itself to this undertaking. Taken together, these psychological and philosophical approaches will lay the foundation for the core of this article.

### **Theories of cognitive moral development**

Much of the foundation of cognitive moral development was laid by Kohlberg and his well-known Stage Development theory (1981). As we demonstrate below, however, that theory has evolved in important ways. In the following brief review we emphasize the aspects of cognitive moral development that are most relevant to the focus of this paper.

Kohlberg's observations regarding moral growth suggest a “quantum” approach: instead of a smooth transition toward full ethical maturity, Kohlberg observed moral growth occurring in stages where persons consolidate at one level before moving on toward another. Kohlberg's original theory (1981) consisted of six stages, with each successively higher stage representing an improved capacity for moral judgment. Former students of Kohlberg's have both criticized (Gilligan, 1982) and refined the model in substantial ways. Arguably, the most important refinements came from James Rest, who constructed a paper-and-pencil test designed to pinpoint a stage of moral development for a person or a population. This test was titled the Defining Issues Test (DIT) and has served subsequently as the psychometric instrument underlying hundreds of published studies of moral development.

Although the DIT exhibits relatively good psychometric properties, it has been criticized for a number of limitations, including its inability to

produce the kind of detailed discriminations predicted by Kohlberg's six stages. In response, Rest et al. (1999, 36–58) proposed a “neo-Kohlbergian” approach which frames moral development into three stages or “schemas:”

- (1) Personal interest (Kohlberg's original stages two and three)
- (2) Maintaining norms (Kohlberg's stage four)
- (3) Postconventional thinking (Kohlberg's stages five and six)

Briefly, at the *personal interest* stage (or schema), one's moral development, individual moral considerations are generally confined to self, family, and friends. Cues regarding values, expectations, duties, and sense of moral direction are all received primarily from family members or others with whom one has face-to-face interactions; considerations involving the wider society are much less influential. During the *maintaining norms* stage, one extends moral considerations beyond the small group of face-to-face actors and begins to consider his or her role in the wider social setting. This stage is reflected in the conformity of one's behavior and belief to local conventions, the absence of critical thinking, the idealization of authority, and an “us and them” mentality.

Finally, at the third stage of *postconventional thinking*, a person begins to think in truly independent ways. Social norms are no longer uncritically accepted but must now serve moral purposes. One adopts personal moral codes and appeals to broad moral ideals and principles. Examples of the kinds of ideals that Rest et al. have in mind include “creating the greatest good for all, guaranteeing minimal rights and protection for everyone, engendering caring and intimacy among people, mandating fair treatment, providing for the needy, furthering the common good, actualizing personhood, and so on” (1999, 42). Gibbs goes a step farther and adds that this stage “involves hypothetical contemplation, meta-ethical reflection, the formation of moral principles and philosophies, and spiritual awakening or ontological inspiration” (2003, 75).

As opposed to some of the difficulties associated with Kohlberg's approach, Rest's three stages seem to bear considerable empirical support. Although other recent proposals in developmental psychology

are more fine-tuned than Rest's simple approach, they are largely compatible with his view (see, for example, Gibbs, 2003 and Hoffman, 2000). So even though we use Rest's model as an organizing framework for this article, we also draw upon the insights of many other theorists to flesh out the basic structure of cognitive moral development.

### A systematic expansion of ethical theory

Stage development theory is weakest, we believe, in its comprehension of the scope of ethical theory. While it pays much attention to the “macro-moral” concepts of justice and benevolence, it fails to represent the full spectrum of possibilities for moral judgment. This is especially true for what Rest et al. refer to as “micro-morality” (1999, 13–15), which focuses on “the personal, face-to-face relationships in everyday dealings” (15). Even though Kohlberg employed ethical theory to flesh out his notion of the ethically mature person, his use of theory was largely limited to Kantian formalism and the work of Kant-inspired Rawls (1971). Kohlberg's students have done a better, more expansive job, but not in any systematic way. (See Gilligan, 1982 for an important exception.) The micro-moral aspects of ethical theory have generally received less philosophical attention in the literature, partly because particulars (the “details” in which micro-moralists are interested) are a “problem” for macro-moral ethicists, who have manifest a centuries-long preference for universals. Nevertheless, concrete particulars are important for moral understanding; indeed, some 20<sup>th</sup>-century ethicists are saying they are the only thing that matters (Caputo, 1993; Derrida, 1995).

A “theory of ethical theories,” then, which ignores the micro-moral, ignores half of what is important in human moral living. Choosing a spouse, for example, can be one of the single most defining moments in a person's life, but there is little about it that is macro-moral; everything involving this choice is colored by the unique nature of the relationship. It seems reasonable that a broader approach to ethical theory should include these types of micro-moral considerations.

One framework that allows a systematic treatment of both micro- and macro-moral elements is the

“Six Voices Model” as articulated by Brady (1999, 2003). In particular, this approach is useful because it pays far more attention to the “micro-morality” questions mentioned above by Rest et al. (1999) than other meta-ethical proposals (Cavanaugh et al., 1981; Garofalo and Gueras, 1999; Sheeran, 1993;). Business ethicists can no longer afford to ignore the profound contributions of such micro-moral theorists as Caputo (1993), Derrida (1995), Norton (1976), Badiou (2001), or Gilligan (1982), to name a few. Though Brady’s model fails to characterize in detail the potential contents of each ethical voice, it is clear that the approach explicitly allows for the micro-moral, and we take advantage of that in this article.

The “Six Voices Model” is useful for its liberality in a second dimension, as well. Besides classifying ethical theories as “universal” (macro-moral) and “particular” (micro-moral), Brady’s model also cuts across ethical theory in terms of deontologies, teleologies, and axiologies. His use of axiology as a third general type of ethical theory may seem unusual to those unfamiliar with his work. Far more popular recently is the deontology/teleology/virtue ethics approach adopted in many texts (during the 80s and 90s it was the “justice/rights/utility model” promoted by Cavanaugh et al., 1981). Surprisingly, though each meta-ethical model was widely accepted in the field of business ethics in its time, we are aware of no arguments in either case for the soundness of the model, other than general usefulness, and we are aware of no arguments at all for the soundness of the currently popular deontology/teleology/virtue ethics model. Brady, by contrast, does offer an argument for his unusual choice of “axiology” as a major component in his meta-ethical theory, which we will not reproduce here. In any case, our intent is simply to use his model as a crude grid-work of domains of interest in ethics. There

may well be other ways to cut a broad swath through the field of ethics, but for our purposes Brady is the best we have found. Because our overarching goal here is to explore a more developmental approach to ethics, there is a need to *systematically* address both macro- and micro-moral perspectives, and Brady’s approach seems to be an effective way of doing so.

**A stage developmental approach to ethical theory**

Our three-dimensional model is represented graphically in the three-dimensional model below. Superimposed within each of these six ethical theoretical alternatives are Rest’s developmental categories of the *personal interest* stage, the *maintaining norms* stage, and the *postconventional* stage 1.

This model and most of our conclusions are based largely on the existing stage development literature. We try hard not to speculate too much about what each of the stages might look like for different ethical perspectives, but some of that is inevitable. However, Kohlberg has supplied rather clear albeit general guidelines, and although much of what follows is exploratory in nature, it is reasonably well founded in the literature of stage development theory. The sum total of this effort is a better understanding of how human beings mature ethically throughout their lives and in a way that provides much more breadth than is typically provided by stage developmental theorists. The prospect of ultimately securing a fully ripened developmental approach to ethical theory is a sufficient incentive, we think, for the initial steps, which we now provide.

**Deontological theory**

Any ethical theory tries to supply meaning for the word “ought” – however one chooses to define it. A deontological ethic defines “ought” in terms of obligations or duties. And those duties can be either universal (thought of as obligatory for all persons at all times) or particular (obligatory only under certain circumstances). We refer to deontology that focuses on ethical universals as “macro-deontology.” Generally, macro-deontology approaches ethics as a

	Deontology	Teleology	Axiology
Macro	1.	1.	1.
	2.	2.	2.
	3.	3.	3.
Micro	1.	1.	1.
	2.	2.	2.
	3.	3.	3.

search for principles of action that all people should adopt, such as always telling the truth. This approach is different from a “micro-deontological” ethic in the sense that the latter is more impressed with personal responsibilities, which are carved out by the details of a situation and of a person’s life. To a micro-deontologist, principles might serve as rough guidelines, but the circumstances will always have a bearing on our deciding whether to apply the principle or not. In the absence of principles, personal responsibilities become the focus of ethical thought.

### *Macro-deontology*

A macro-deontological approach considers ethics in terms of universal moral obligations. Because of Kant’s influence in this area, one generally thinks of ethical principles as the core of a macro-deontological perspective.

Kant’s theory of moral judgment is an excellent example of postconventional moral thinking. One becomes an autonomous moral agent and judges those actions to be moral that survive the test of universalizability. Universalizability is the core of a mature ethic of principles and roughly requires that principles are impartial and apply to all (Hare, 1997). An ethic of principle is what social rules or norms try to capture or codify. It seems clear from Kant (1956) that principles are subtler things than rules and that the collection of cultural norms and expectations at any given time and place may be ethically crude, allowing for considerable fine-tuning over time. Loevinger (1976) and Bly (1996) echo these themes in describing moral maturity. Lapsley (1996) adds that simple distributive principles like equality might be augmented in the mature individual’s mind to include a variety of legitimate distributive claims, including merit, need, motive, age, and effort.

Impartiality is a characteristic of the postconventional principled thinker. The ability not to treat oneself or one’s friends in preferential ways is a hallmark of mature, principled thinking. Postconventional thinking is at its core an integrative activity: it avoids idiosyncrasy, ethnocentrism, nationalism, and opportunism (Rest et al., 1999) and tends to focus mainly on the concept of justice.

Contrast this with an earlier developmental stage, in which a person who conforms to rules and social norms has not yet acquired the ethical skills of a mature person of principle. This represents the Rest et al.’s *maintaining norms* stage (1999). At this stage, a person is guided ethically more by rules than by principled thinking. Therefore, because society is the source of the most important rules, this person feels socially obligated and fails to examine the social norms and expectations with a critical eye. This person is very much a conformist, and social approval and disapproval become important sanctions (Loevinger, 1976). Rules are seen as the terms by which one maintains acceptance within the group. A person at this stage still has a conceptually simple view of situations and would be unlikely to be critical of social norms. Schauer (1991) provides a rich description of a severe version of this pattern, where the rules are taken quite literally and eventually become entrenched in one’s mind, preventing an awareness of the “spirit” or intent of the law.

Even less morally developed is a type conforming to the Rest et al.’s *personal interest* schema. At this level of development, a person’s “reference group” is limited – in children to family and friends and in adults to a small circle of associates. One does not typically think of oneself as a member of the larger society. Both children and adults may use the rules for one’s own satisfaction and advantage (Loevinger, 1976). A business person “stuck” at this level, for example, might manipulate state and federal regulations for one’s own narrow purposes. At this “personal interest” stage, rules can be used as tools of control and manipulation of others. The child at this level realizes that the world is governed by rules but those rules are more like talismans of control. An adult at this level is very manipulative and seeks definitive social rules that define exactly what is expected in order to later invoke the rule for personal gain (Loevinger, 1976).

The key here is that at the lower developmental levels, a macro-deontological approach to ethical thinking is far from autonomous. A young person’s universe might be one’s family or friends, and the obligations one feels might be felt more as duties to the family, such as cleaning or other chores. To be sure, this rudimentary sense of obligation bears little resemblance to the mature macro-deontological

outlook of Kant and Rawls, but it seems reasonable to assume that a person grows into those capacities from less well developed, more “contained” forms of moral thought. Indeed, at the lower levels of deontological thinking, the macro- and micro-appear to be similar because the diverging mental processes of integration and differentiation have not yet begun in the cognitive processes of persons at this level of development.

### *Micro-deontology*

In pursuing moral universals, the macro-deontologist pays grudging attention to the details of life. By contrast, the micro-deontologist lives in the details and distrusts the universals (Caputo, 1993). For this perspective, life is captured in the concrete, not the abstract. It focuses on the notion of obligation without principles, of responsibility without the support of abstract philosophical foundations, of the importance of experience without generalization.

Like the early stages of a macro-deontological mind, the earliest levels of the emergence of responsibility are limited to family and friends. Other than showing responsibility for household tasks and other assignments, the young person typically knows very little of responsibility. If an irresponsible person at the *self-interest stage* were to confront one’s wrong actions, one might try to blame it on some aspect of the self for which one disclaims responsibility: “I’m fat” or “that’s just my personality,” for example (Loevinger, 1976). They know enough about the taking on of responsibility to be eager to blame others where the opportunity arises (Gibbs, 2003).

But in time, individuals begin to feel that personal identity is defined in part by the responsibilities they choose. Rather than thinking of duty as a concept requiring broader and broader thinking, one thinks of duty as increasingly specific. And unlike the macro-deontological perspective that turns outward, the micro-deontological mind begins to consult its inner resources. It becomes increasingly aware of the nonrepetitive nature of experience and the inescapable burden of personal responsibility for all action. Individuals begin to differentiate among opportunities for responsibility and select the micro-obligations that begin to define their lives.

At the middle *maintaining norms* levels of growing responsibility, a person’s sense of loyalty begins to deepen. They might see themselves as duty-bound to some role or position. Their job defines much of their responsibilities, because they have chosen to place themselves under the obligations that attach to the job. But their acknowledgment of their duties is ambivalent; their responsibilities can also serve as a security blanket. The phrase “I was only doing my duty” would be regarded by a less-developed person as a morally worthy excuse for damages brought about in the course of duty (Loevinger, 1976). The submissive nature of the authoritarian personality might be comfortable here, and such a person is happy to accept whatever responsibility is attached to a defined role, especially when the duties are specified by some leader to whom they feel personally committed (Altemeyer, 1996; see also Adorno et al., 1950, Arendt, 1963, and Kelman and Hamilton, 1989, among others). However, Piaget himself thought that promoting respect for authority was a mediocre approach to moral development (1948).

With time, the higher, *postconventional* levels of personal responsibility begin to emerge. Responsibilities become less socially defined and more personally defined and meaningful. Their lives become increasingly defined in terms of local or even momentary obligations that no simple list of duties can capture. Their sense of duty becomes increasingly differentiated and particular. Like the parent who cares for a child or the custodian who cleans a church, people can come to feel a very concrete sense of duty (Kant, 1988). A person’s sense of loyalty becomes refined such that personal responsibilities are largely self-chosen and self-defining (Royce, 1908). Experience, rather than abstract thought, dominates the moral processes. A good physician, for example, sees every case as unique. Surgery involves experience more than principle. So does farming. Knowing what to do changes from field to field (or patient to patient) and from moment to moment. Surely, general principles and other guidelines are kept in mind, but they are never felt in themselves to convey much obligation, nor does one seek them; rather, these guidelines remain subject to criticism and even neglect when the circumstances dictate. Self-direction and discretion are important. Obligation is felt as responsibility in the immediate present (Caputo, 1993).

The deconstructionists, for example, often focus on personal responsibility as the center of ethics (Critchley, 1999). Although such thinkers praise the classic efforts in the history of philosophy to construct universal statements of principle, they recognize that the decision to act on a principle is a choice for which one bears personal responsibility. Furthermore, universals in ethics are seldom without their exceptions, and one should always be open to the possibility that each moment of life may be concrete and idiosyncratic enough in its features to defy a macro-moral form of guidance.

Education – either through practical experience or through institutional means – is essential for the development of responsibility and judgment. Peery (1968) provides an excellent overview of the contributions of a liberal education for the development of mature responsibility. Marriage is a good example of self-chosen responsibilities, and raising a family illustrates the maturity inherent in committing oneself to a long-term task. Likewise, a mature employee might decide to quit a job at a workplace, which he or she considers to be irresponsible (Bly, 1996).

Applied to the world of business, the application of developmental psychology from a purely deontological point of view would lead to the following types of questions:

- Do business leaders place principles over rules and regulations or *vice-versa*?
- Is their sense of responsibility well enough developed to transcend the simple economic directive that they are responsible only to their shareholders?
- Are managers prepared to deal with the idiosyncratic nature of many personnel issues, which are often characterized by unique details?
- Does economic theory suppress an ethically mature sense of obligation among business leaders?

### Teleological theory

By contrast with deontological ethics, which focuses on duties or obligations, a teleological ethic defines the word “ought” in terms of purposes or goals. Frankena defines teleological theory as one,

which says that “the basic or ultimate criterion or standard of what is morally right, wrong, obligatory, etc. is the nonmoral value that is brought into being” (1973, 14). In other words, teleologists would argue that any action must have a sense of direction. In short, it is a moral theory that focuses on the pursuit of personal authenticity – some forms of which may be universal, and others particular. Macro-teleology, then, is the search for ideals – goals toward which all persons or societies should aim. Micro-teleology, on the other hand, doesn’t think much of homogenous societies or persons that converge toward some universal ideal; rather, this perspective is more impressed with the divergence of societal and personal goals. Human perfectibility is not a universal; it is different for every person (Mill, 1859).

#### *Macro-teleology*

A macro-teleological perspective in ethics seeks universal purposes or shared ideals. The typical idealist these days is interested in the perfectibility of society, of economics, of religion, and of culture. He or she generally seeks or promotes answers to macro-teleological questions such as those the asked by the ancient Greeks: “What is the good society?” or “What is a good person?” (Aristotle, 2004; Plato, 1980). In the 20th century, this orientation is often colored with heightened expectations for a future among the stars driven by the growing successes of technology.

The ideals of a person with this ethical orientation often appear conventional, as represented in the *maintaining norms* stage. Idealists adopt conventional social ideals, usually conservative, such as crime reduction, fiscal conservation, and defending the society against threats both internal and external. They begin to take on ideals in terms of perceived social roles, such as the hardworking and loyal employee, the dutiful child, the loyal friend, etc. And they begin to see reciprocity as an ideal rather than as a pragmatic thing: “do unto others as if others were the self” rather than “do unto others as they have done unto you” (Lapsley, 1996).

Ideological communities are important for this stage (Kohlberg, 1981). Often one’s faith or ideology defines the ideal. Political association and religion both articulate ideals, which are adopted uncritically

by the member. Examples of ideals at this stage could include the economist's notion of a free market, ideological ideals like Marxism, libertarianism, or Amish communitarianism, and religious ideals like a pure Islamic nation, a Jewish state, or a Christian community. Without sufficient maturity, even a segregated society is an ideological norm.

Idealism often begins in youth, but immature idealism is one of narrow and limited vision. A very young idealist at the *personal interest* stage holds rather narrow ideas about the direction of things. Youth often have very short-term notions about "what is best." The "good person" is the one whose virtues are supportive of family and friends – the "good boy and nice girl" stage (Bly, 1996). "Success" is defined in very simple and selfish terms, such as joining the right group, being seen with the popular kids at the prom, making the football team, and so on. Popularity might be an ideal – a source of endless striving for many adolescents. Celebrities represent the ideal of popularity to the teenage culture, defining a range of values and norms in the process. Ideals are expressed as very short-term objectives, and the person does not yet think in terms of social ideals or human ideals.

Fundamentalist perspectives of all sorts reflect this lowest stage of macro-teleological development. They often reflect the narrow goals of a small group, and have little capacity for dialogue with alternative conceptions of the ideal. In the face of challenges, fundamentalists hunker down mentally to tightly held and narrowly defined ideals (Marty and Appleby, 1991). In the business world, this is often manifested when personal or group objectives and interest trump larger and often more important organizational goals. At the group level, this rudimentary way of thinking about the world is in keeping with the ideas of suboptimization and goal displacement developed by Merton (1957).

By contrast with both the typical (conventional) idealist and the youthful idealist is the mature or *postconventional* idealist. Mature idealists don't just adopt group ideals; they evaluate and choose their own. They are quick to criticize society for failing to secure ideals such as fairness, liberty, and equality (Lapsley, 1996). Furthermore, they develop greater tolerance for those whose ideas or behavior might be less than ideal. Indeed, they may be very aware of themselves not living up to the ideal portrait

(Loevinger, 1976). This toleration arises from a growing awareness of the complexities of circumstances and of individual differences.

The mature idealist is integrative: he or she holds to broad, abstract social ideals, such as justice, world peace, and universal health (Loevinger, 1976). Character is a universal and thus injustice, cruelty, suppression, and self-aggrandizement are wrong no matter where they occur (Bly, 1996). The mature idealist worries about the largest threats to humanity, e.g., environmental degradation, war, pestilence, and famine, and he or she may be active in promoting policy changes that will ameliorate such problems.

We might also say that postconventional idealists are revolutionary thinkers. They see the large problems, see how the world could be different, and promote change toward a more ideal world, emphasizing such ideals as mutual caring, trust, respect, and democratic participation (Gibbs, 2003; Lapsley, 1996). They see that the question of human character arises from a battle over human nature between its darker tendencies and the higher dispositions of humankind.

#### *Micro-teleology*

A micro-teleological perspective emphasizes personal, rather than social, ideals. It makes a clear ontological assumption – that each individual has a purpose or direction in life and the potential to realize it.

It is rare that individuals acquire a keen sense of personal direction very early in life, but there are those that do seem to sense quite early that a personal path exists to guide them throughout their lives. This was apparently a common view among the classic Greeks, who believed that individuals were born with potentialities and that the purpose of life was to pursue them (see, for example, Plato, 1980, 1996 and Aristotle, 1984, 2004). The Quakers refer to this notion of personal destiny as "way," a kind of "personal nature," as opposed to "human nature" (Palmer, 2000). Normally, a person acquires a sense of way slowly or may only come to a realization of it in retrospect. In any case, human beings can become more or less authentically themselves, and this section on micro-teleology describes that path toward personal authenticity.



Probably the best description of this stage is Maslow's conception of self-actualization (Loevinger, 1976; see also Maslow, 1970). Volumes have been written about the authentic self (in particular, see Norton, 1976). Along these lines, the mature *postconventional* individual measures achievement by his or her own standards. Their goals are self-differentiated; they possess an autonomous sense of direction and meaning in life. Regardless of social convention, the postconventional individual seeks personal fulfillment even though the style of activities undertaken to acquire this might seem unprofitable or impractical from the "maintaining norms" perspective. Such a person is simply trying to be true to his or her self and innate inclinations. This would be exemplified in the world of business by those who feel inspired by the product or service they provide.

Sadly, not all adults achieve this growth, and they appear to waste away their lives pursuing goals that others have convinced them are personally worthwhile. In this less developed *maintaining norms* stage, one's confidence in the social system facilitates the making of personal plans and the pursuit of personal projects (Lapsley, 1996). As one comes to identify him or her self as a member of society, their source of personal goals ceases to be family and friends and becomes, instead, the larger society. This stage might be largely characterized as climbing the social or even corporate ladder. Or these individuals might be defined as simply finding one's niche in the organization or in society. The point is that one's sense of attainment and personal authenticity is provided in the context of the social environment. One's choice of personal goals is compatible with larger social purposes and norms and is unlikely to be very idiosyncratic. Personal achievement (rather than personal fulfillment) is the objective of the "maintaining norms" individual. This reflects the belongingness needs as described by Maslow (1970).

Even less developed is the child or adolescent at the *personal interest* stage. This individual is generally not sufficiently self-aware enough to acquire personal ideals that are truly personal; rather, he or she acts on very short-term concrete ideals that are cued from friends or family. To young boys and girls, "winning" means a lot; it conveys an early sense of personal accomplishment and success. Winning the personality contest or making the

cheerleading squad might illustrate this level of personal awareness. Among adults, this stage might manifest itself as seeking personal competitive advantage or making the first million (Loevinger, 1976).

The main point is that at this stage, one's personal goals are not yet self-evaluated. Natural processes of competition dominate the growth of self-awareness, and personal goals are adopted from outside the self, leading to forms of inauthenticity, which people often confront later in life.

Applied to the world of business, the above thoughts regarding the developmental aspects of teleological theory lead us to ask the following types of questions:

- Is the typical business person idealistic or goal-oriented only in the narrow sense with respect to one's firm's growth, or does one take into account the larger picture and how one's business fits into the overall outlook for an improved society?
- Does the typical business person attend to the developmental potentials of the employees or simply treat them as exploitable and bereft of aspirations of their own?
- Does the typical business culture suppress one's long-term outlook?

### Axiological theory

In the recent history of ethical theory – say, the last 200 years or so – ethics was thought of as primarily a contest of the two general perspectives outlined above. But during the last few decades, scholars have paid more attention to a third perspective. *Axiology* regards ethics as neither duties nor goals, but as values. It is generally a more intimate approach to ethics than either deontologies or teleologies, which are more objective and psychologically distant (Stoker, 1976). To an axiologist, the main question is "What should one value?"

A "macro-axiology" searches for answers to this question in universal values, things that all persons should value, such as clean air, security, or more broadly, the common good. A "micro-axiology," on the other hand, thinks that, other than a few basics, each person chooses for oneself what he or

she values. Examples might include a spouse, children, or a place to live. Both the macro- and the micro-approach to axiology are “connective:” they define ethics in terms of what a person relates to and without which one might feel impoverished (see again Brady, 1999, 2003).

### *Macro-axiology*

A macro-axiology is an ethical perspective that emphasizes universal values – clean air, security, and the common good. This is different from a macro-teleology in that the objects one values are immediately accessible, or at least potentially so, as opposed to a distant goal. Obviously, a person’s outlook on public values changes over the course of his or her life, but becomes more refined later in the development of prosocial reasoning (Eisenberg, 1986). The most mature outlook on public values is open and empathetic to all proposals regarding the public good.

Often *postconventional* individuals think in utilitarian terms, i.e., the greatest good for the greatest number (Kohlberg, 1981). They have an interest in public policy and possess a broad, integrated view of life. Thus, they typically value liberty and equality (Kohlberg, 1981), and may show an interest in broader social causes such as the environment, the homeless, victims of war and famine, the oppressed, etc. (Bly, 1996).

Because of their concern for general social welfare, the person who develops a mature sense of shared value considers factors beyond his or her community or social group. These individuals may retain an emotional attachment to country and church, but they freely acknowledge these attachments. The values they espouse are often more abstract or focused on the larger issues, such as environmental dangers. They have greater empathy and express their feelings more vividly. They may appear quite conventional outwardly while inwardly remaining motivated by values that differ strongly from those of neighbors and friends. They exhibit a wide range of prosocial behaviors, such as nonviolent protesting or caring for the abandoned and neglected; they might associate themselves with international efforts and causes such as Amnesty

International, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, or the Red Cross, to name a few.

Not all adults achieve moral maturity and embrace the human values. Their sense of the common good is quite conventional and conservative, reflecting the *maintaining norms* stage – the stage when the individual values what everybody else values (Kohlberg, 1981). This person is clearly a conformist. Consequently, he or she is prone to stereotyping, especially concerning gender roles (Loevinger, 1976), is hostile toward perceived enemies (Kohlberg, 1981), is dismissive of other peoples and countries (Bly, 1996), and often falls prey to clichés, especially moralistic ones (Loevinger, 1976). The present “culture wars” in the United States reflect this less mature stage of values development (see Appiah, 2006, for example).

This stage is important for organizations of all types where conformity to group values is important and where making up one’s own mind regarding the larger, shared values might threaten group cohesion. While group cohesion is critical in many ways, one negative outcome is well known; the literature on *groupthink* articulates the dangers that occur when group cohesion concerns supersede all else (Janis, 1982; Turner and Pratkanis, 1998).

Unfortunately, many adults never achieve even moderate growth in this area of public value because they are so blinded by *personal interest*. At the worst, it consists of simple opportunistic hedonism. An older child or adult who remains at this stage may become “opportunistic, deceptive, and preoccupied with control and advantage in his relations with other people” (Loevinger, 1976, 19). To this kind of person the value of human life is only instrumental (Kohlberg, 1981) and any sense of public good hardly exists at all. One’s values could be said to be “universal” only in the sense that the individual may see others as engaged in similar activities and from similar motivations. At this stage one does not have the capacity to imagine that seeking the public good is anything other than foolishness. Money and wealth acquisition are substitutes for more mature values.

The flavor of relationships among people at this stage may be in line with social darwinism. They are competitive, manipulative, and seek control over relations with others. They see life as a zero-sum

game in which only winners survive (Loevinger, 1976).

As the individual begins to grow, they may become less competitive; they might actually begin to value acceptance and camaraderie. They earn approval by being nice and want others to do the same (Kohlberg, 1981). They establish alliances and seek mutually beneficial associations; “public good” simply means “mutual benefit.” Nozick (1974) argues that libertarian social organizations are established on this foundation.

### *Micro-axiology*

Finally, we consider an ethical perspective centered on the development of concrete personal values. The micro-axiologist is largely interested in the values that define individuals – family, friends, a sense of history and place, and so on. This orientation in ethics is probably better known for its immature phase because it is so easy to think of personal values as being part of the earliest stages of ethical development; indeed, it is harder to imagine what a mature ethic of personal values might mean. Nevertheless, like the other perspectives, development occurs over the course of time.

Again, the earliest stages of the development of values do not differentiate strongly between macro- and micro-values. In the *personal interest* stage, the least developed individuals are likely to strive to meet certain basic needs, such as the need for security and physiological needs. The foreign policy of most governments is based in this approach to values where personal security and basic needs come first. The spoils of victory in war and politics reflect this stage’s concern with personal satisfaction of needs. This individual is highly practical; ethics reduces simply to practicality and the satisfaction of personal preferences. Because this person cares so much about what others think, he or she risks turning into a “moral marshmallow,” i.e., doing things just because everybody else is doing them (Gibbs, 2003; see also Green 1991). Friendship and association may be the ground for moral judgment, but such relationships tend to be pragmatic and poorly developed.

As the individual grows into a more conventional or *maintaining norms* perspective, his or her personal

values are cued from the social setting. It is easier to mass market to youth because their personal values are not highly differentiated yet, but with growth of perspective, one’s personal values begin to diverge and diversify. Self-expression becomes more important even though the forms of such expression may remain quite conventional. Young adults, for example, begin to differentiate themselves from the larger society by adopting stylized forms of dress and speech. Norberg-Hodge’s insights regarding the appeal of the global economy to teenage males supports these ideas (1993). Universities are full of individuals who are engaged in the process of personal differentiation through the selection of a major and an associated set of personal values. Nevertheless, the range of personal values at this stage is still circumscribed by social acceptability.

Finally, the individual with a mature, *postconventional* outlook on personal values looks beyond society for the exercise of personal interest. For the first time, one’s values become a matter of genuine personal choice, free from much of the conscience of earlier stages. This person has an aesthetic way of seeing the world as more concrete and less abstract. Personal ties are among his or her most cherished values (Loevinger, 1976).

Mature individuals are more aware of the concrete complexities of the world and are therefore more tolerant of ambiguity. They are willing to let their children make their own mistakes (Loevinger, 1976). They have the courage to deal with inner conflicts of value. They are differentiating in their preferences and therefore less affected by a homogenizing marketplace. They are far more driven by a quest for personal meaning in terms of concrete attachments to person or place. They are loyal to carefully chosen friends, and their values represent a kind of core identity (as opposed to the accidental predicates of earlier stages). Of course, one’s core identity might be defined negatively, as in cases of revenge; but by this stage, one will have developed a capacity for forgiveness that closes the door on revenge (Enright et al., 1992).

Applied to the world of business, these thoughts on the developmental possibilities within axiological theory lead us to ask the following kinds of questions:

Does the typical business leader genuinely look to create value for all or just personal aggrandizement?

- Does the prospect of money-wealth seduce business persons from the more personal and idiosyncratic values that define life for themselves and their employees?
- In what respects does increased commercial activity threaten our cultural and physical environment?
- Does the global economy threaten to homogenize human preferences?

## Discussion

Developmental psychologists have contributed in important ways to our thinking about ethics. They have observed the various stages of individual growth toward the mature approaches espoused by ethicists. Unfortunately, they have often worked on a constrictive theoretical grounding. Ethical theorists, on the other hand, generally provide a broader awareness of the diverse ways in which individuals express ethical maturity. They are far better prepared to flesh out the nature of the stages of moral development referred to here as “*postconventional*.” Yet, they often fail to adequately consider the developmental aspects of those theories. Taken together, however, these contributions empower us to make assessments of people’s behavior that have eluded us in the past. Instead of just evaluating a choice to be right or wrong, we now can also say it may be juvenile, adolescent, or mature; and if the behavior seems mature, we now can articulate the nature of its maturity with more precision. Some people are responsible, others idealistic, still others have a sense of value and proportion, and so on. So our efforts above to merge ethical theory more broadly with developmental psychology provide a model for considerable future work in this area.

## Theoretical implications

One of the three primary objectives stated in the introduction of this article was to sketch a developmental view of ethical theory, that is, a series of psychological proposals regarding how a person comes to grow into a mature reflection of ethical theory over the course of one’s life. Just as a utilitarian is not the same as a Kantian, a “young utilitarian” is not the same kind of person as a

“mature utilitarian.” Different mature ethical perspectives manifest different psychological features throughout their development. Normally, we expect to observe the gradual development of these different perspectives over the years in ourselves and in others.

A developmental view of ethical theory is important because it helps us to avoid confusion about what “ethical maturity” means. A mature understanding of Kantian ethics, for example, does not mean simply that a person keeps the rules and obeys the law. That would reflect a less mature, rule-book approach to an ethic of principle – much less than what Kant had in mind. Likewise, a mature utilitarian will not be satisfied with achieving organizational efficiency or maintaining a stock price; he or she would look at all the costs and benefits both inside and outside the organization.

A second objective of this article was to articulate a richer understanding of the *postconventional* mind. Kohlberg was mostly interested in the concept of justice as a defining characteristic of the *postconventional* mind, hence, his interest in Kant and Rawls. But we have shown above that the concept of justice is too limiting a view; moral maturity implies much more than a focus on justice, and by approaching the task systematically we have outlined several ways in which the understanding of the *postconventional* mind can be augmented.

In all fairness, this problem is well known to current stage development theorists. Rest et al. (1999), for example, call attention to the deficiencies in Kohlberg’s “foundational principlism,” that is, that moral maturity was defined solely in terms of principle-based theories. Several authors have also expressed disenchantment with Kohlberg’s theory because of its neglect of diverse moral theories available at the time (Clouser and Gert, 1990; DeGrazia, 1992; Gilligan, 1982; Pritchard, 1991; Toulmin, 1981). What we have undertaken in this article is to provide a systematic framework from which to proceed in pursuing a more complete picture of moral maturity.

It is unlikely that building such bridges to philosophy will be vigorously pursued by stage developmental psychologists. Their work is empirical and is largely based on the use of a single diagnostic instrument, the Defining Issues Test, which is designed to elicit responses to a set of moral dilemmas, which are limited in scope. According to Rest

et al. (1999), the DIT has been used in more than 400 published studies. For the sake of maintaining consistency in this important stream of research, significant modifications to the DIT to capture a broader theoretical base are unlikely. DIT researchers “have made the decision to continue with an avowedly partial set of dilemmas in order to complete a cycle of research” (Rest et al., 1999, 16). Nevertheless, this study outlines how an effort to flesh out a more robust conception of moral maturity might proceed.

### **Pedagogical implications**

Another area where this approach proves helpful is in the classroom. Teachers of ethics typically confront a different pedagogical situation from teachers of courses in finance or statistics. In the latter, students generally begin at the same starting point and learn together sequentially on more or less equal footing throughout the course. In an ethics class, however, students are already highly differentiated in both a theoretical and a developmental way. How does one teach students who begin in so many different moral places?

This article claims that moral growth occurs in at least two dimensions: one is the broadening of the mind that follows exposure to a multiplicity and interactions of ethical theories; the other is the maturity of outlook within a theory that comes with exposure to life in general. By the time teachers of ethics in universities receive students, they are highly differentiated in both dimensions. Therefore, teaching ethics is more like management – keeping people’s efforts roughly coordinated although they are individually working on different tasks.

The developmental perspective on ethics also leads to larger questions of the role of ethics instruction and the outcomes we try to achieve in the classroom. Are we just “socializing” our students in organizational norms and how managers would like them to behave? If so, this fails to get beyond “*maintaining norms*” thinking. If we are successful in the difficult task of aiding students to think in *postconventional* ways, we may end up with outcomes that may trouble managers, employers, and subsequently, business schools themselves. Some might think the “best” employees to be

thoughtlessly loyal, uncritical, and possessed of narrow ambitions. Only a fully mature manager could appreciate the potential of morally mature employees who might challenge the organization’s values from time to time.

The developmental perspective should, at a minimum, influence the way we construct and deliver our ethics courses. For them to work there must be a decided focus on the individual student. In the end, teaching ethics is not about mass production; it is about customized service. It would be well for teachers of ethics to explore the ways in which customized individual instruction can be delivered to students, through such factors as class size, learning journals, personal essays, and diagnostic tests. To teach students as though ethics is simply about acquiring content (as in many other classes) is to fail to teach moral growth.

### **Practical implications**

Finally, we believe there are important “real-world” implications for organizational management. First, this perspective adds an important dimension to moral reasoning. Advocating the benefits of viewing ethical dilemmas from different theoretical perspectives is certainly not new (Brady and Hart, 2006; Cavanagh et al., 1981), but doing so from a developmental perspective adds an important level of consideration. In many organizations, for example, a “*maintaining norms*” stage of resolution might fit better with the overall organizational climate than a more advanced “*postconventional*” approach. Like most people, some organizations are just not ready for advanced ethics.

Second, a developmental view of ethics can also be a potentially valuable management tool as well. But this would require “*postconventional*” managers. Moral development is inclusive, that is, higher developed people can reason at lower levels, but the reverse is not true. Therefore, the most capable managers are those who are most morally developed. They can best comprehend the range of moral perspectives expressed by employees and manage the situation in a more fine-tuned way than managers of lesser development.

Third, and somewhat related to the pedagogical discussion above, the developmental approach sheds

interesting practical insight onto some of the guiding assumptions of business school education. For example, we feel that the language of economics is dominant in business schools right now. Understood from a truly mature perspective, this is highly salutary and productive. But if poorly understood, rather immature and harmful mentalities can develop, which suppress the perception of larger and more mature moral positions.

For example, all too often “free market economics” to the immature mind means “take what you can get.” Indeed, a compelling argument has been made that a little training in economics is morally worse than none at all (Ferraro et al., 2005). Worse is the possibility that business school training systematically stunts the moral development of its students. The idea that such schools tend to promote the individual acquisition of power and money should, on the face of things, sound some ethical alarm. The response “There is nothing wrong with making money, just what you do with it” fails the moral maturity test if the student hopes for the former and will worry later about the latter. A school of management may profit more from an examination of the moral status of its entire curriculum than by emphasizing a solitary “stand-alone” ethics class or as distributed throughout the curriculum. We suspect the existing curriculum already teaches a brand of ethics that here and there may fail the test of developmental maturity.

Along the same lines, this expanded developmental understanding of ethical decision making greatly enhances one’s abilities to assess behavior, including business behavior. One could reasonably argue that the world of business seems to encourage (1) a focus on rules and regulations over principles and minimal discretion for most employees, (2) short-term and narrowly focused organizational goals and the general displacement of particularized goals with money, and with (3) the all-to-frequent disregard of environmental and other shared values and an exploitation of simple and homogenized personal preferences. Such language resonates more closely with the less mature developmental stages described above. If this is so, then we should ask several questions:

- Does the culture of business suppress further moral development?

- Would a more mature enterprise thrive or fail in a competitive environment?
- Do the most successful enterprises exemplify morally mature cultures or not?
- What can business schools do to promote greater moral maturity in the world of business?

We would argue that the question “Is business ethical?” that has driven the field of business ethics for more than two decades is framed incorrectly. Maybe a better question to address is, “Just how morally mature is business?” The developmental approach taken above begins to provide some tools for answering that question.

## Conclusion

Ethical theory has much to gain from stage developmental psychology and *vice-versa*. As we see it in this article, the maturation process simultaneously puts into motion two diverging processes in the human moral development. One is the integrating process, well studied in both ethical theory and developmental psychology, in which a person increasingly broadens his or her ability to consider a wider array of evidence, circumstance, and variances of all kinds. The impetus is the search for unifying principles, ideals, and values that are found in all individuals as moral beings. As Kohlberg and his students have arguably demonstrated, this integrating process facilitates the growth of a person’s moral judgment throughout one’s life, especially with respect to the concept of justice. This paper has attempted to systematically broaden the scope of that process by examining more closely the human search for universal purposes and values. This scope is fleshed out above as the macro-moral approach to ethics.

But human beings achieve moral maturity through attending to concrete details as well. We are not all clones. We acquire different responsibilities, personal destinies, and relationships in the course of growing up, which may be unique for each person. Individuating is as essential for moral health as integration. Companies who understand this make room for employee self-expression and for some divergence in the handling of difficult issues. Moral growth can be suppressed by excess in both areas: too much

integration leads to obsession with commonalities and over-socialization, while too much differentiation leads to loss of coordination and an over-emphasis on exceptions to the rule. A more balanced approach, we argue, results in true moral growth.

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