
Moral Development and Reality: Beyond The Theories of Kohlberg and Hoffman offers a much needed synthesis of Lawrence Kohlberg’s and Martin Hoffman’s pioneering studies of the development of moral reasoning and empathy. Yet this is much more than a book about moral development. The linking of moral development with the term reality in the title suggests that this book not only goes beyond the theories of Kohlberg and Hoffman, as stated in the subtitle, but also goes beyond psychology itself. At the conclusion of his penetrating analysis and careful criticism of Kohlberg’s and Hoffman’s theories, author John Gibbs dares to ask about a deeper moral reality undergirding ordinary moral experience. Through an analysis of key features of documented near-death experiences, Gibbs points to a reality that underlies all moral experience, a reality which is itself moral and is the condition for the possibility of all moral experience. Here Gibbs crosses the borders between psychology and metaphysics. Is such border crossing warranted? Gibbs answers as a psychologist with an open mind. The psychological experiences of individuals reporting near-death experiences provide a window into the domain of what many call religion – into ultimate moral reality.

This book is likely to attract two different audiences: those who want to learn more about the relationship between Kohlberg’s and
Hoffman's theories of moral development, and those who want to learn more about the relationship of near-death experiences to contemporary moral psychology. Neither audience will be disappointed. Gibbs is one of the most highly regarded moral psychologists in the world today. No other psychologist has studied Kohlberg's and Hoffman's theories so assiduously over such a long period of time. Those who know Gibbs's work know that he has never been content only to comment on or to clarify the prodigious output of these two great psychologists. Gibbs provides a profound insight into Kohlberg's and Hoffman's achievements by reconstructing their major ideas within a highly original framework. *Moral Development and Reality* offers an intriguing rendition of Kohlberg's and Hoffman's theories and contributions and a penetrating exploration of the implications of their contributions.

Gibbs notes at the outset of *Moral Development and Reality* that Kohlberg's and Hoffman's theories are based on a common conception of morality as objective and universal and of moral development as based in role-taking, that is, the ability to see an action from the perspective of others affected by it. When one steps back and considers that most social science theories are relativistic and do not emphasize the role-taking dimension of development, Kohlberg's and Hoffman's theories seem remarkably alike. Gibbs rightly notes, however, that the theories, while broadly related, are significantly different. Although Gibbs does not believe that it is possible to integrate them fully, he does argue that they largely complement one another.

Kohlberg's moral development theory, as Gibbs points out, is fundamentally cognitive; and Kohlberg's stages of moral judgment describe distinctive ways of moral reasoning. Although Kohlberg is typically regarded as having extended Jean Piaget's theory of moral development, Gibbs rightly credits Kohlberg's life span stage theory as going well beyond Piaget's contribution. On the other hand, Gibbs criticizes Kohlberg for adopting John Dewey's developmental scheme, which depicts development as progressing from pre-conventional, to conventional, and finally to post-conventional stages. In Gibbs's view, Kohlberg's appropriation of Dewey's scheme suggests that development in the conventional stages involves the internalization of moral content. Yet Kohlberg was very clearly committed to Piagetian constructivism, in which children do not simply appropriate their environmental input but interact with it and thereby adapt. Unfortunately, Kohlberg never addressed the
confusion his choice of terminology engendered, and Gibbs’s clarification is most welcome.

Gibbs also takes issue with the nature of Kohlberg’s post-conventional stages. Noting that the post-conventional stages involve philosophical reflection on moral thought and action, Gibbs argues that post-conventional modes of thought are not really stages in the Piagetian sense, but existential phases of meta-ethical thinking. In his reconceptualization of Kohlberg’s post-conventional stages, Gibbs includes not only Stages 5 and 6 but also Kohlberg’s Stage 7. Kohlberg would have objected to such a move, not only because he thought of Stage 7 as a “metaphorical” stage but because he did not think of Stage 7 as a stage of moral judgment per se. On the other hand, Kohlberg, like Gibbs, also claimed that the Stage 7 insight into ultimate reality could ground a morality of agape or self-sacrificial love, which goes beyond the demands of justice.

After discussing Kohlberg’s stages, Gibbs takes up Hoffman’s “empathy-based” approach to moral development. Gibbs describes the transition from Kohlberg’s theory to Hoffman’s as a transition from the right to the good, insofar as Hoffman’s theory emphasizes the affective, desiring dimension of morality, a dimension many find neglected in Piaget’s and Kohlberg’s cognitive developmental theory. Gibbs describes Hoffman’s theory as drawing on three interrelated processes involving biology, cognitive development, and socialization. Although Gibbs faults Hoffman for not recognizing the logical dimension of morality (moral reciprocity) as having a distinctive motive-power, Gibbs credits Hoffman with presenting a more “balanced” and “comprehensive” theory than Kohlberg (p. 108). Hoffman’s theory understands moral functioning as fraught with conflict. Empathic concern for others vies with the egoistic motives; others make competing demands on the self. Gibbs concludes that while both Kohlberg’s and Hoffman’s theories have much to offer, they are incomplete. Each needs what the other lacks. This leads Gibbs to attempt to integrate the two theories by examining the psychological underpinnings of prosocial and antisocial behavior.

Gibbs’s treatment of prosocial behavior not only brings Kohlberg’s and Hoffman’s theories together, but invokes other psychological constructs operative in moral functioning and prosocial behavior, for example the moral identity. Gibbs is not content to show how these various factors interrelate to produce positive behavior; he also discusses how moral functioning can go awry, by analyzing the cases of Timothy McVeigh and Osama bin Laden. Gibbs notes that both men
possess many of the characteristics associated with heroic moral and prosocial action. Both men wholeheartedly committed themselves to their ideals; both displayed great ego strength, self-efficacy, and empathy. Yet, as Gibbs argues, both lacked a mature moral perspective leading to ideal reciprocity and forgiveness and both men had seriously distorted perceptions of morality.

Gibbs's chapters on understanding and treating antisocial behavior summarize his own seminal research on the roots of antisocial behavior and his very successful EQUIP program for rehabilitating juvenile offenders. While heavily relying on Kohlberg's and Hoffman's theories for the EQUIP approach, Gibbs liberally draws on a variety of resources to produce a very powerful treatment program.

Readers may find the transition from Gibbs's presentation of the EQUIP Program to his discussion of near-death experiences and the "deeper reality" that they reveal somewhat abrupt. Gibbs, the engaged therapist, suddenly becomes Gibbs the contemplative philosopher. Yet the continuity of the volume becomes evident as the reader attends to the way in which throughout the volume Gibbs's analysis becomes increasing more personal, engaged, and inward. Gibbs's opening chapters on Kohlberg and Hoffman provide judicious commentary from the detached perspective of a critical psychologist. Gibbs's middle chapters, which aim at integrating Kohlberg and Hoffman, reveal much of Gibbs's own perspective. When Gibbs presents the EQUIP program, he is no longer describing the moral experience of others; he is reflecting on his own experience as a devoted moral educator/therapist interacting with a needy and vulnerable population of young people. The empathic reader will, I believe, come to Gibbs's concluding chapters asking with Gibbs for the ontological ground of moral commitment. Gibbs's turn to a consideration of ultimate reality is certainly a fitting response to the age-old question of "Why be moral?"

Gibbs's treatment of that "deeper reality" is similar in many ways to what Kohlberg referred to as Stage 7. Kohlberg coined the term "Stage 7" as a metaphor to signify that, although one could reach a final equilibrium in determining one's moral principles at Stage 6, the question, "Why be moral?" still remains. This question should not be confused with the question, "What is moral?" The question "Why be moral?" asks about the ground of morality or, as Gibbs might put it, the deeper reality in which we seek to pursue our moral ideals. Does that deeper reality correspond in any way to our most cherished moral ideals? or is that deeper reality without meaning or value?
Gibbs, like Kohlberg, marvels that the logical-mathematical constructions of mature cognitive development are found at the deepest core of the physical world. If the mind's logical mathematical constructions are so related to the depths of physical reality, why are not the mind's moral constructions similarly related to the depths of moral reality? Mind and reality are, Gibbs and Kohlberg speculate, uncannily one.

The encompassing oneness of reality becomes existentially relevant when individuals confront life crises that raise questions of meaning. Kohlberg emphasized the reassurance that a pantheistic or religious cosmic perspective on reality might bring to the anxious moral agent. Gibbs finds interesting parallels between Kohlberg's depiction of Stage 7 and the content of near-death experiences.

Near-death experiences appear to represent another window on ultimate reality. These experiences share, in my view, certain features of the existential crises that Kohlberg and I thought of as leading to explicit reflection on metaphysical and religious questions (Kohlberg and Power, 1981). Moreover, near-death experiences appear to affirm the nature of ultimate reality as deeply moral. This realization appears to bring forth both a sense of comfort and moral challenge to those reporting near-death experiences. Those individuals Kohlberg and I considered as exemplifying Stage 7 thinking also derived a certain comfort and challenge from their Stage 7 contemplation.

Gibbs carefully appraises claims that near-death experiences can provide extrasensory perceptions. Even the most skeptical reader will find his discussion of these experiences probing and balanced. While he clearly concludes that near-death experiences provide an access to ultimate reality, Gibbs seems to value these experiences more for the moral motivation that they provide than for their extrasensory attributes. The near-death narratives that Gibbs reports echo scenes from Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Alighieri, 1955/14th century) and other religious classics. Humans have never simply accepted their finitude as a brute fact but have seen themselves in a cosmic drama reaching into infinity.

Gibbs's *Moral Development and Reality* is a book that will inspire as well as inform. It will certainly have a significant influence on moral psychology and its applications to juvenile delinquency and criminal justice. Most importantly, in my view, it will challenge all of us as readers to take stock of our lives in the light of a reality beckoning us beyond our mundane sense of justice and goodness.
References
