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Egocentrism in moral development: Gibbs, Piaget, Kohlberg

Jan Boom

Department of Developmental Psychology, Utrecht University, PO Box 80.140, 3508 TC, Utrecht, The Netherlands

A B S T R A C T

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In Gibb's theory of moral development Piagetian ideas concerning egocentrism play an important role. Based on these ideas Gibbs offers a detailed analysis of transitions in moral development. However, Gibbs still fails to utilize the full potential offered by Piaget's equilibration theory, because he does not generalize the idea of overcoming egocentrism, as an important mechanism, to all stage transitions. Gibbs seeks a non-relativistic theoretical/ethical justification for his claims about moral development in a difficult to substantiate notion of an underlying reality. Moreover, such objectivist claims are difficult to reconcile with his endorsement of Piaget's constructivism.

Following Piaget's equilibration theory development can be seen as the march to an ever widening perspective, possible through reflecting abstraction, and implying overcoming egocentric biases that recur at all levels of development. Assuming the widest level in the case of moral development is the moral point of view, an impartial procedure that should guarantee that everybody involved can freely agree as the result of considering arguments reflecting all viewpoints, fits in with a tradition in ethics from Kant, to Rawls, to Habermas which takes the moral point of view as the ultimate moral principle. These so called 'Procedural Ethics' theories are not relativistic, but not objectivist either, because they ultimately depend on the characteristics of the procedure.

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E-mail address: j.boom@uu.nl.

1. Egocentrism in moral development

In Kohlberg's theory of moral development (Kohlberg & Colby, 1987) and more pronounced in Gibb's recent theory of moral development (Gibbs, 2009), Piagetian ideas concerning egocentrism, centration, and decentration play an important role. In his model of moral developmental, Gibbs heavily draws on Piagetian ideas, although the terminology he uses differs somewhat from Piaget's. For example, the notion of early childhood superficiality is Gibbs' (2009) rendering of Piaget's notion of egocentrism. Closely related terms used by Gibbs are egocentric bias and self-centration. Of course, Kohlberg, in his cognitive developmental approach, took up Piagetian notions earlier. Gibbs, despite his credits to and admiration for Kohlberg, however, claims to go deeper, and correct some unfruitful deviations from Piaget introduced by Kohlberg. He suggests being more true to Piaget compared to Kohlberg, while not eschewing criticism of Piaget's ideas.

Gibbs in his 2009 book (a revised edition of his 2003 book) offers a theoretical justification and foundation for his account of moral development. In contrast to relativists, who deny even the possibility,¹ he believes that a theory of moral development requires a foundation and that moral development is development in the direction of a more mature and more adequate morality. Basically he uses Piaget to delve deeper into descriptions and mechanisms relevant to moral development; deeper than Kohlberg that is. His thoughts on the non-relativistic foundation of morality and the ultimate aim of moral development depart considerably from those of Kohlberg. My final assessment is that Gibb's return to Piaget is immensely valuable for recent moral developmental theory (as evidenced by the successful intervention program EQUIP), but unfortunately, in the deeper justifications of his approach he departs from Kohlberg and Piaget at points where he better had not.

I am interested in the connections between cognitive structural developmental theories (e.g. Piaget and Kohlberg) and the conceptualizations of the moral point of view because I have been always intrigued by the possibility that these psychological theories and ethical reflections can mutually support each other, or that, for them to be viable, they depend on each other. Kohlberg's original intuition on this was that the fact that a new stage is morally better is precisely an important part of why people would prefer it and move towards it (Kohlberg, 1971). The title of this (in?)famous paper was "From is to ought: How to commit the naturalistic fallacy and get away with it in the study of moral development". This paper was not well received, to put it mildly, but the idea is very intriguing. Anyhow, I am sympathetic towards non-relativistic approaches to moral development such as Gibbs's and of course Kohlberg's. This does not imply that I agree completely with either of them. In fact my own position differs from theirs and is more influenced by Habermas (1990) and his discourse ethics. But then again, of course, Habermas was inspired by Piaget and Kohlberg.

In this paper, I reconstruct Gibb's use of Piagetian ideas, in particular his rendering of the notion of egocentrism (Piaget, 1932, 1995; Piaget & Inhelder, 1967), working all the way from its Piagetian origin to the present day use in Gibbs' (2009) book, but first I present some background for Gibbs' approach. Then I point out some problems for Gibbs and propose two points of elaboration or refinement and a conclusion.

2. The main trend in development of moral judgment

According to Gibbs (2009) life-span moral judgment can be subdivided into two broader Phases²: It begins with standard moral development possibly (but not necessarily) followed by existential development. Standard moral development involves an invariant sequence consisting of two overlapping levels each of which nests two stages. Standard development encompasses roughly Kohlberg's first 4 stages of moral development. The next phase concerns existential development and it replaces stages 5 and 6 of Kohlberg's system but (hard-) stage characteristics do not apply here. The most important developmental change is the emergence of ideal moral reciprocity in stage 3. The

¹ Gibbs specifically mentions the following relativist positions: post-modernism, virtue ethics, narrative psychology, pragmatic accounts, neo-Nativism, social intuitionists theory, and cultural psychology (Gibbs, 2009, p. 3).

² Gibbs distinguishes phases, levels, and stages.

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