Teaching moral philosophy in schools: Dynamic systems theory, teacher education & the issue of universality versus cultural diversity

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Abstract

Given renewed interest in teaching moral philosophy in schools, especially in Australia, perhaps it is time to reconsider its place in teacher education and revisit the longstanding universality/cultural diversity dichotomy in moral development theory. Put simply, does a child's morality develop in a universal way through invariant stages as Kohlberg argued and, if so, how can we explain different moral behaviour and reasoning from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds? This paper argues, in keeping with dynamic systems theory, that moral development is always the product of the historical and social contexts in which an individual organism's development takes places. From this perspective, it is not the forms or stages of moral reasoning that are universally the same, but the dynamic process of emergent self-organisation, which is historically and socially situated, and the organism's in-built predilection to value. So, there are similarities across time and place in the processes of development, but the product of those processes is regionally and culturally diverse. Moreover, as emergent self-organisation operates both individually and at a group level, diversity is manifested within and across regions and cultures. Dynamic systems theory provides a better platform for teaching moral philosophy in schools than either the doctrines of universalism or cultural diversity.

Introduction

Moral education got itself a bad name when it was viewed by many educators as little more than indoctrination; the imposition of middle class values, especially the values of the teacher. However, it was seldom noticed that problems of teaching moral education were also problems of teacher education, compounded by the expectation that moral education could be taught by any fair-minded teacher. The renewed interest in teaching this subject in schools, as witnessed by a pilot scheme recently conducted in New South Wales to provide *Ethics* classes for children in public primary schools, suggests a need to ask whether the subject *can* be taught by any fair-minded teacher. Does ethics, or as I would prefer *Moral Philosophy for Children*, not require specialist knowledge, special teaching skills and thoroughly examined assumptions?

This paper is based on the assumption that if we are going to reintroduce morality or ethics into the classroom it has to be taught philosophically, perhaps as part of *Philosophy for Children*. As a prerequisite for teaching moral philosophy, however, teachers should have a basic understanding of how children acquire and develop moral awareness and reasoning, which has implications for teacher education. It therefore cannot be taught by any fair minded teacher. In saying this, I acknowledge that I am making a distinction between teaching moral philosophy and 'teaching children to be good' (Straughan, 1992), which might well be a responsibility of all teachers. Moral philosophy as I understand it here is concerned with critically examining moral claims and dilemmas. Later in this paper I will briefly describe how a basic engagement with moral philosophy is being incorporated into teacher education at the University of Sydney as part of the Human Development and Education Unit for all BEd student teachers.

But there is a problem. To come straight to the point, if *Moral Philosophy for Children* is to be widely introduced into schools it will soon encounter many dichotomies in moral development theory. These include the dualisms of universality versus cultural diversity, mind (reasoning) versus body (action), and rationality (cognition) versus passion (emotion). These dualisms have dominated moral development theory over the past half-century. Moreover, the problem is not restricted to moral development theory. Universality and diversity, along with nature/nurture and the qualitative/quantitative dichotomy, is one of the three big issues that 'child development theorists have grappled with, but not yet resolved' (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2010, p. 5).

Resolving these 'big issues' is not simply a matter of empirical study; these dualisms are deeply embedded in the philosophical assumptions of development theory and thus a matter for philosophical scrutiny. Indeed, a major assumption of this paper is that human or child development does not *belong* to psychology; it is inherently cross disciplinary. It requires engagement 'philosophically, psychologically and neurobiologically and… in such a way that insights generated in each of the three disciplines operate in mutual modification and none is considered, a priori, to be in the lead' (Kim & Sankey, 2009, p. 285). This view of the interrelatedness of philosophy and empirical study also underpins the Human Development Unit in the BEd course at the University of Sydney, which we consider later in the paper.

Dan Lapsley (1996) has noted a close interrelationship between the empirical study of moral development and philosophy, which is particularly apparent in the work of Laurence Kohlberg. In the 1960's Kohlberg provided a major spur to moral development and moral education theory, by proposing that moral development progresses through six invariant stages. Moreover, he claimed, these stages are irrespective of cultural difference – the same stages of development can be found universally across all cultures. He had personal and professional reasons for asserting universality. He had been appalled by the inability of Behaviourism and Freudian Psychoanalysis to provide any kind of response to the Holocaust, (ibid, p. 41). What was needed, he believed, was a notion of morality that asserts universality in order to escape the clutches of moral relativism. To this end, 'Kohlberg trades on many key elements of Kant's theory', which includes the focus on moral reasons, the distinction between form and content, and the concern with universality and the autonomy of morality (ibid, p. 205).

However, it is now generally appreciated that Kohlberg's adoption of Kant's ethical theory brings severe problems. Richard Bernstein has argued that: 'In the back-ground of Kant's inquiry into morals is a dramatic Either/Or. Either there is a universal objective moral law, or the concept of morality is groundless and vacuous' (Bernstein, 1983, p.13). Furthermore, Lapsley (1996) has noted that 'Kant's ethical theory simply assumes a "moral law folk theory", that we are essentially dualistic in our nature' (p. 204). Another dichotomy in Kant's ethical theory is between a superior human 'rationality' and unworthy, animalistic 'passion'; a view that was challenged by Darwin's account of human origins.

Robert Fullinwider (2007) has noted that Kohlberg makes a logical error in conflating universality and generality when he attempted to theorise his stages. Kohlberg adopted the idea that adequate moral judgments are universalisable and reversible prescriptions, and believed that only the so-called "principled" judgments made in stages 5 and 6 fully meet this condition. Kohlberg's aim was to provide a meta-ethical justification for Stages 5 and 6, by advocating the universal logical superiority of principled reasoning over conventional reasoning; the reasoning associated with mutual expectations (Stage 3) and obedience to law and order (Stage

4). However, it is not at all clear why universality should have this exalted position. Indeed, Fullinwider (2007) argues that: 'it is increased generality, not increased universality that really differentiates higher from lower level principles in the Kohlbergian stages.'

From the perspective of this paper, the many dichotomies one finds in moral development theory suffer from exactly the same problem that all dichotomies and dualisms suffer from; the inability to perceive a 'third way'. The issue of cultural diversity is particularly important in the context of teaching and teacher education, not least because of the pervasive influence of post-modernism and multiculturalism, both of which tend towards relativism. As noted above, cultural relativism was Kohlberg's major concern, and it remains a concern when it either explicitly or implicitly prohibits criticising assumptions and beliefs for fear of offending cultural or religious sensitivities. Sensitivities should most definitely be respected, but not at the cost of enforcing silence in place of carefully considered judgement. Moreover, there is often as much variability within cultures as there is across them, perhaps increasingly so in our globalised world, which moral relativism frequently underplays.

The reason it is possible and indeed essential to make judgements in morality is because morality is *not* entirely a matter of culture. Some moral claims such as those that underpin the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, transcend any and perhaps all particular cultures (Moshman, 2005). Moral issues are seldom black and white. Dynamic systems science emphasises that many boundaries which we assume to be fixed and impermeable (geological, biological and conceptual) are actually fuzzy and ill-defined. Each individual and cultural group is an open system, where new forms of pattern (e.g. national boundary, rules and laws, judgements) can emerge, given sufficient energy. There are fuzzy boundaries on what may and may not be considered morally acceptable across cultural differences. Indeed, the discourses regarding ethical and moral issues across cultures are an essential process in moving on to new states of human morality. Children therefore need to be encouraged to recognise and celebrate our human similarities as well as our differences and to be thoughtful and sensitive when discussing morality.

What is needed in teacher education is a moral development and moral education metatheory that can incorporate universalism *and* cultural diversity as well as rationality *and* emotion and ground these in a satisfactory theory of human development that acknowledges our 'animalistic' heritage. In a 2009 paper, published in the *Journal of Moral Development*, Derek Sankey and I advocated dynamic systems theory as an alternative to Kohlbergian and Neo-Kohlbergian theory; a new paradigm for moral development and moral education. This theory identifies non-linear emergent self-organisation as the predominant driving force of change, operating across descriptive levels from the neuronal maps in the brain to social and cultural groupings.

The process of emergent self-organisation, being frequently non-linear, acknowledges considerable variability. Esther Thelen and Linda Smith (1994), who pioneered dynamic systems theory in cognitive and motor development, argued that 'the origins and function of variability are absolutely central' (p. 145) for understanding development. However, they also noted that in the conduct of developmental psychology research, variability has often been viewed as an obstacle or as 'noise in the system' (ibid. p. 145). Acknowledging variability opens up room for many and varied moral points of view, across and within

different cultures. At the same time, dynamics theory also provides for universality; the biological and neurobiological processes underlying moral development and moral action being the same across the human species. We thus have a model that is capable of breaking through the universal/cultural-diversity dichotomy, holding both together in dynamic tension. Similarly, it includes the neurobiology of the brain and thus it breaks through the rationality and emotion dichotomy. Over the past two decades or so it has become increasingly acknowledged, partly as a result of studies of people with pre-frontal lobe damage to the brain, that rationality, when truly rational, is infused with emotion (Thelen & Smith, 1994; Damasio, 1994, 2000).

We will now explore some of these issues a little further in the belief that this will provide a useful background for teachers when teaching moral philosophy in schools. We begin with looking in more detail at the pervasive influence of Kohlberg, and the now widely acknowledged shortcomings of his position. That will be followed by a consideration of how a dynamics approach is able to rectify those problems. Having discussed the theoretical background, the paper will end with a description of how the dynamics approach is being introduced into teacher education at Sydney University, in the study of human development, and which generates discussion about moral development and teaching morality in schools.

From Kohlberg's Universalism to dynamic systems theory

Kohlberg's staunch defence of universality led to his theories being widely criticised for their lack of 'cultural, situational context and history, and… insufficient justification for the universalisability of moral maturity.' (Henry, 2001, p.268) The problem partly springs from his insistence on *stages* of development that are said to be invariant and progressive. For example, let us assume a society such as South Korea that moved from a military government that suppressed individual rights to a democratic society whose legal system respects universal principles of human rights. In this transitional situation what meaning can be given to the Stage 4 individual in Kohlberg's scheme, whose morality is founded on obedience to law and order? Is it possible to categorise both 'obedience to the law of humanity' and 'obedience to the law of inhumanity' in the military government as the same form of reasoning? Moreover, in this situation it is not clear where one would place the dissident on Kohlberg's ascending moral ladder, who opposes the regime of law and order imposed by the military government to the point of imprisonment and torture, but who is content to base his morality in the law and order of the democratic society that he fought for. It could be argued that he has regressed from Stage 5 back to Stage 4, but that violates Kohlberg's requirement that stages are progressive and invariant. One way out of that dilemma is to argue that one has to judge the situation historically and culturally, but to a Kohlbergian that will seem like the slippery slope of cultural relativism.

From the perspective of dynamic systems theory it is essential that the cultural, situational context and individual history is clearly recognised in accounting for moral development. In place of stage theory, moral development is conceived as a journey, from day to day, across a shifting landscape of attractor basins (like valleys in a real landscape), some deep and some shallow; hills and valleys that represent different influences, contexts and situations. 'The hills and valleys both deepen and become more shallow as preferred states emerge and disappear' (Thelen & Smith, 1994, p. 122). Also, the configuration of each hill and valley at any given time is 'a result of the history of the system (a person) up to that point, plus the factors acting to parameterize the system at the time – such as the social and physical context' (Thelen & Smith, 2006, p. 276).

In this shifting developmental landscape, there is no place for the idea of a stage or resting point, free from social and historical context. At a low level of magnification, we may find seemingly similar forms of moral reasoning across cultures (as Kohlbergian research has consistently found), but they are only snapshots at a moment in time, or cross-sections through a geological landscape that momentarily provide a similar configuration. What forms of reasoning (hills and valleys on the shifting landscape of opportunities) will emerge in the future for each culturally situated individual is, however, unpredictable. Moral reasoning and behaviour are always assembled by the nature of the situation one is confronting, given the social and cultural constraints operating at that time and against a history of previous reasoning and behaviour. Helen Haste (2008) has similarly argued that 'people and historical events are similarly "constructed" – and their construction changes' (p. 382). Within the dynamic systems view, however, the language of 'construction' is replaced by the process of 'emergent self-organisation', where individual morality emerges in response to culture and society, constrained by the individual's biology and past history of development. 'Knowledge is not constructed separately in the mind of the knower, but, rather, it emerges; it is co-created during the exchange in an authentic recursive transactive process' (Mennin, 2010, p.20).

Another major problem with Kohlberg's theories is the lack of awareness that human beings are biological organisms, therefore genetic and neurobiological levels are not encompassed in his theories. From a dynamics approach, these levels must be added to the account of moral development, alongside historical and situational contexts of development, because they are crucial in giving detailed stories of the origins of human universalities and diversities. This is depicted in Figure 1, below.

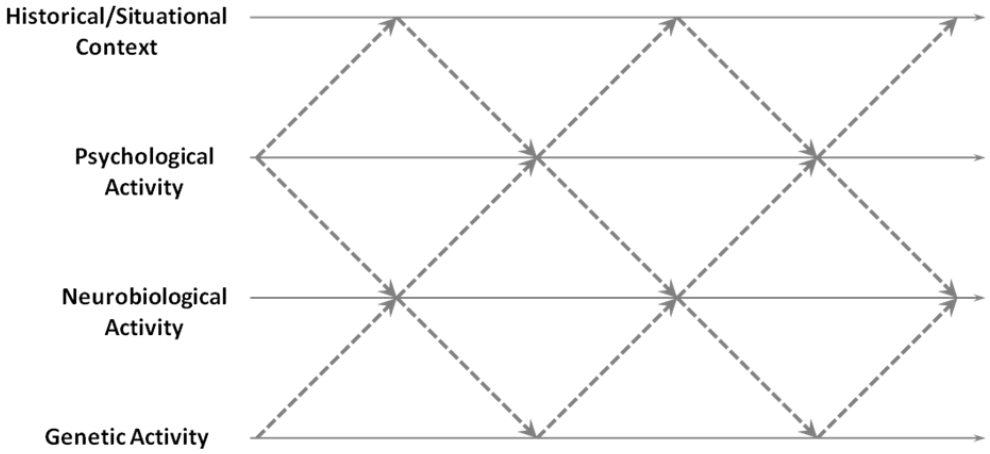

Fig. 1. *Moral functioning as a dynamic interplay at four descriptive levels*

From a dynamics approach, Sankey and I argued that 'our native ability as organisms to categorise our perceptions, coupled with an inborn *predilection to value*, in response to salient and meaningful experiences laid down in memory, provides the neurobiological rudiments for morality and moral development.' (Kim & Sankey, 2009, p. 294). This process, we propose, is universal. Indeed, the way our brains are formed and function is universal and there are considerable similarities even across all animal species as found in the neurobiology of memory (Squire & Kandel, 1999) and emotion (Flack & de Waal, 2000). However, while the neurobiology of perceptual categorisation, memory, value and salience, etc., which is common across the human species, provides universal *constraints* on the moral developmental process, diversity and individual

differences of moral functioning emerge through complex, multilevel interactions between an individual's genes, neurobiology, and psychology.

Similarly, results from mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) studies reveal that all human beings share a common human ancestry. The results of these studies are consistent with the fossil record from archaeology, indicating that 'all mtDNAs stem from one woman who is postulated to have lived about 200,000 years ago, probably in Africa' (Cann et al, 1987, p. 31). Though there are dissenting voices, the 'Out of Africa' theory is widely accepted, though the specifics of the theory, such as the time sequencing of the migration out of Africa, are not yet agreed. Some geneticist such as Spencer Wells (Wells, 2003) argue for a time span of only some 50,000 years. Anyway, given our common ancestry, there is much that we share and this inevitably sets some constraints on the degrees of freedom operating in the dynamics of human morality. However, if our common ancestry provides grounds for asserting universality it also supports cultural diversity. In his bestseller *Brain and Culture: Neurobiology, Ideology, and Social change*, Bruce Wexler finds 'the origins of differences in culture and language' from the mass migration of our common ancestors (Wexler, 2006, p. 184). Small groups of individuals separated from the original group, and often became quite isolated. And, in these isolated communities, 'distinct languages and cultures evolved, leading to what Jane Goodall has called cultural speciation (p. 185).' Even though these ancestors shared the same universal foundation of development, genetically and neurobiologically, different language, rituals, religious belief, art, moral rules and literature have emerged in different regions.

Beyond the dichotomy of universality and cultural diversity

Within dynamic systems theory, one's moral or immoral behaviour is a product of interplay of multiple, contributing influences not one single cause, as proposed in much developmental theory. We have previously noted, the process is one of 'emergent self-organisation' in which moral functioning is always conducted on a shifting landscape of historical, social, and situational contexts. From this perspective, it is not morality that is universally the same, as Kohlberg and his many followers maintained, but the processes underlying human and moral development, based on our common humanity. So, there are similarities across time and places in the way human organisms and their morality develop, the result of *emergent self-organisation*, but, the product of that developmental process is regionally and culturally diverse. Once we incorporate the four different descriptive levels or elements of the dynamic approach into the account of moral development, outlined above in Figure 1, we no longer have a dichotomy. Rather, universality and cultural diversity are embedded in a holistic process, interacting in dynamic tension across time and situation.

I am reminded of an interview with a young Taiwanese dentist, a third generation immigrant to America, when conducting a cross-cultural study on professional ethics. When asked about the case of a family where an injured child shows possible signs of negligence or abuse, he responded that he would promptly report the case to the local authority in California. On the surface, he seems to be protecting the patient from possible harm and thus faithful to his professional responsibilities. The signs of possible injury to the child seem to alert his mind in recalling what he has been taught about child protection, which brings a quick response to the situation. But surprisingly, he said he would not behave in the same way if he had lived in a Taiwanese

community where family affairs are considered as belonging to the private domain. The same signs do not give rise to the same warning signs and he seems to perceive the same case in a different way.

The picture that emerges is one of rich diversity, but it isn't simply an East-West dichotomy, as Richard Nisbett (2003) and his cultural psychologists would have us believe. Respect for family privacy is not restricted to the East. Nisbett builds a dualistic dichotomy in from the start. Instead, one needs to appreciate that the issue in both contexts is multifaceted while remaining one that evokes concern for the patient – the dentist is no less concerned about the patient in the Taiwanese context, but his cultural sensitivities and the historical situational contexts bear on his decision whether to report or not. In part this results from different litigation contexts in the different setting, in part from the way he views the family in relation to notions of civic responsibility, and there are many other factors that may be coming into play, both explicitly and implicitly. Moreover, culture is not a discrete variable which strictly demarcates a given group of people. Even within a given society, new forms of culture emerge, always stabilising and destabilising in response to immediate factors and factors operating over time both in and out of the society. Culture is thus not a fixed entity or 'thing' which controls members' behaviours, but a process. Similarly, 'knowledge or abilities are not stored "things" that are timeless (Thelen & Smith, 2006, p. 278).' Rather, we see both similarity and difference between individuals both within and across groups, as they variously respond to the social, cultural and temporal contexts in which they find themselves.

In summary, I have tried to show that a dynamic systems approach to moral development is able to provide teachers of moral philosophy in schools with a distinctive empirical base that is able to avoid the dualisms and dichotomies that have beset moral development theory and influenced moral education over the past half-century. Though focussing primarily on the universality/cultural diversity dichotomy in this paper, a dynamics approach is inherently non-dichotomous in its overall approach to development and learning. In teaching moral philosophy in schools against a background of a dynamic, holistic, interactive theory where opinions and beliefs stabilise and de-stabilise in the trajectory across a shifting landscape of attractor basins, children will better appreciate why their ideas and thoughts change sometimes this way and sometimes that way over time. And teachers will encourage debate that prompts children to constantly examine their opinions and the opinions of others in the class. This is aided if student teachers engage with these ideas when studying for their degree in education, which is starting to happen at Sydney University.

Incorporating dynamics systems theory into human development in Sydney

At the start of this paper it was suggested that if *Moral Philosophy for Children* is to be taught in schools, and there are those who are advocating it should be, we cannot simply assume that the subject *can* be taught by any fair-minded teacher. It requires specialist knowledge, special teaching skills and thoroughly examined assumptions. Gaining a basic understanding of how children acquire and develop moral awareness and reasoning is an important part of this specialist knowledge and skills. Moral development has often been a component of human development courses in teacher education. But, what are teachers being taught about moral development nowadays, if at all? Where does it exist, and is there some overarching metatheory that draws the many moral development theories one finds in the textbooks into some coherent whole? If one turns to developmental psychology, a quick browse through most course syllabuses and textbooks one could be

forgiven for assuming the discipline simply comprises a collection of perspectives and approaches and universal trends. As Paul Van Geert has recently noted:

> Developmental psychology is apparently not a first-principles-based science. There seems to be no fundamental developmental mechanism, the understanding of which forms the key to a thorough understanding of the emergence of developmental phenomena (Van Geert, 2008, 242-243)

Textbooks on child or human development in education, still present the cognitive developmental approach to moral development as the main theoretical framework, i.e. Piaget's two phases (heterogeneous vs. cooperative) and Kohlberg's six stages at three levels. Though universality and cultural diversity, moral reasoning, behaviour and the influence of emotion in moral development may be mentioned, it is not easy to find attempts to present an overarching account which draws together the different levels of human development, as in Figure 1, above. The result can be considerable confusion in student teachers' understanding of the main developmental issues. In attempting to change this situation at the University of Sydney, as part of the Human Development and Education Unit for all BEd student teachers, it has been particularly interesting to note the willingness and enthusiasm of many students when discussing moral development. All students (around 450) on the BEd course are required to attend the Unit, which for the 2010academic year comprised 20 lectures and 10 seminars over a period of 10 weeks.

At the same time as taking up the appointment as lecturer in human development, a joint paper was published that argued for 'dynamic systems theory and its core concept of emergent self-organisation as the fundamental developmental mechanism that should guide human and child development studies in teacher education' (Kim & Sankey, 2010, p. 81). Putting my own recommendation into practice, I completely redesigned the Unit of Study, adopting dynamic systems theory as an overarching meta-theory of human development. In line with the argument presented in that joint paper, the classical theories in human and moral development are examined in the light of contemporary theory and research, drawing in particular on dynamic systems theory, and our genetic inheritance as exemplified in the 'Out of Africa' theory. The following have been major components of this 2010 Unit of study.

(a) Learning the basic assumptions and key concepts of dynamics theory

In the first two lectures students were introduced to the classical theories of Piaget and Vygotsky in Lectures 2 and 3 respectively. This was followed by a lecture introducing key ideas and concepts of dynamic systems theory. The notion of 'emergent self-organisation' was introduced and students were introduced to the idea that, like all other biological organisms, human beings are 'non-linear', 'dissipative' systems. In this lecture, the language of 'attractor basins', 'a shifting developmental landscape' and the metaphor of a 'mountain stream' were presented and contrasted with the linear, sequential stage models of traditional development theory. The principles of developmental research as adopted in the DSA, focussing on analysing the individual's developmental trajectory, was contrasted with traditional 'group-average' approaches. Furthermore, an emphasis was given to 'considering the origins and function of variability because these are 'absolutely central for understanding change' (Thelen & Smith, 1994, p. 67).

(b) Including the neurobiological level in human development

The neurobiological level of human development was presented following the introduction of the main concepts of dynamics theory. The aim of this lecture was to encourage student teachers to see multi-levels of moral development encompassing genetic, neurobiological, psychological and cultural levels. The session started by questioning the relationship between mind and brain, when many of students noticed that a 'form of mind/body dualism' is implicit in their understanding of human development. Also, traditional mechanical metaphors used to describe brain functioning (e.g. clock, telephone exchange and computer) were questioned. Some students appeared perplexed when told that brain does not work like a computer, presumable because it clashes with Information Processing Theory. The metaphor of the brain as a computer still prevails in many textbooks, but is viewed as both limited and potentially misleading in the dynamics account.

In a subsequent lecture on emotional development, students learnt about the emergence of different types of emotions and their origins in brain development. In this session, students encountered universal brain processes in the amygdala which produce considerable similarities in emotional experiences not only across all human beings but also across many animal species (Flack & de Waal, 2000). In the session on 'nature/nurture' students were taught that from the dynamics perspective genes 'are not all powerful; they operate relationally within the context of the whole organism'. Students were also introduced to recent findings from epigenetic studies (ibid. p. 84). Throughout these lectures, it was hoped that students would grasp a 'holistic concept of development', 'which stresses the continual interplay between the child as organism and the multifaceted natural and social environments she encounters as part and parcel of the one same process.' (ibid. p. 85)

(c) Comparing the Kohlbergian/Piagetian view of moral development with the DSA

Turning specifically to moral development in this Unit, one lecture introduced the history of the study of moral development and important contributions of Piaget and Kohlberg. In the following lecture, however, this was contrasted with moral development when viewed from the perspective of dynamic systems approach. The lecture was based on the joint Kim & Sankey paper published in 2009. The lecture began by showing how main assumptions in Piaget's and Kohlberg's accounts of moral development are challenged in the DSA, particularly the notion of their being a teleological end point of development, an invariant sequence, and moral construction in the form of schemas. Students were introduced to the notion that moral development may be conceived as 'an individual's trajectory of stabilities and instabilities through a shifting landscape of attractor basins' (Kim & Sankey, 2009, p.291).

The four different levels of moral functioning, introduced earlier in this paper, were carefully incorporated into the lecture to allow students to see the holistic picture of human morality. The neurobiological rudiments of morality were introduced and students considered that morality 'piggybacks on the human organism's ability to categorise perceptions and is guided by its inherent predilection to value' (Ibid., p.294). In the following week, there was a lecture dedicated to the topic on 'Human development: Culture and ethnicity, relativism and plurality.' In this lecture, two disciplinary approaches to the human beings were contrasted: the cultural psychologists' efforts to find the cultural differences in moral and value orientation between East and West versus geneticists' efforts to uncover the common ancestry of different ethnic groups. From this

contrast, students might see that both universality and diversity exist in dynamic tension in human development.

(d) Reflection of theories and practices in education in seminar discussions

In the tutorial session following the lecture on moral development, students discussed current moral education practices in NSW. Students compare how two subjects (religious education and moral education) might contribute, in their own way, to a child's development, though it seems one is likely to replace the other. Though the issue has been presented in the media as a battle between religious and nonreligious approaches to moral education, students are guided to consider the possibility of cultural and religious factors playing their part in a cascade of influences contributing to moral reasoning and moral action.

Teaching moral philosophy in schools

The experience of designing and coordinating the Unit this year has left a powerful impression of how willing students on this course have been to engage with the moral dimension of development and how enthusiastically they have engaged with some of the ensuing philosophical ideas – including universality and cultural diversity. The result is that in the next academic year moral development/moral philosophy component will be considerably expanded and given a practical bent. This is made possible because the tutorial sessions are being almost doubled, but the decision to expand this aspect of the course, rather than any other, is directly related to the students' response. One important aspect of the new design will be to offer practical advice on conducting moral philosophy in schools, based on the developmental content of the Unit. All indications from student evaluations suggest that students will be warm to this initiative. There are good reasons for believing that teaching moral philosophy in schools is not only viable, but also likely to be warmly welcomed by teachers, if given support and encouragement.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to sketch a possible way forward for moral philosophy in schools. It has focused on the common dichotomy of universality versus cultural diversity in moral development theory, and argued for dynamic systems theory as an alternative to that dichotomy. I have described how this alternative view has been incorporated into a Human Development and Education Unit for student teachers. I believe that gaining a more holistic perspective through the adoption of dynamic systems principles provides us with a new platform to talk about moral philosophy in schools. I am working to that end in Sydney and I would like to think that teachers in schools and lecturers concerned with teacher education will also profit from adopting a similar approach, when considering the theoretical basis for moral development as a foundation for teaching moral philosophy in schools.

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