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### Helping College Students Make Moral Decisions: Thesis Three: When discussing young-adult moral development, we should redirect our focus to the theme of life-story narration, conscience formation, and values

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## THIRD THESIS

*When discussing young-adult moral development, we should redirect our focus to the themes of life-story narration, conscience formation, and values.*

Psychologists note that essential tasks for healthy personality growth in the young-adult years include a more developed understanding of identity (“Who am I?”) and the deepening of interpersonal relationships characterized by intimacy (“Whom do I love and care for?”). The psychologist James Marcia notes identity and intimacy are linked. “It is the paradox of intimacy that it is a strength that can be acquired only through vulnerability; and vulnerability is possible only with the internal assurance of a firm identity.”<sup>30</sup>

Inherent in all college students’ growing quest for self-identity is the need to construct an emerging philosophy of life that provides them with ethical guidance, life direction, and tentative answers to life questions.<sup>31</sup> The undergraduate years offer a unique opportunity for these discoveries. Undergraduates confront diverse viewpoints and are exposed to ideas and individuals that previously were absent from their worlds. Students encounter other students and are able to form new and more intimate friendships. “There is no question that the college environment provides a context for the later adolescent’s work on identity formation.”<sup>32</sup>

Some researchers have viewed the young-adult college experience as laying the groundwork for later commitment. According to this view, the young adult enters college with untested (and often unchallenged) assumptions and beliefs. This insular thinking is exposed to the multiplicity and pluralism of worldviews that Jesuit education encourages. Encountering these challenges to previously untested assumptions, students respond with a confusion and relativism that accept the legitimacy of most other points of view. With time, however, in the midst of this relativism, the student comes gradually to discern the need for commitment or the “act, or ongoing activity relating a person as agent and chooser to aspects of his life in which he invests his energies, his care, and his identity.”<sup>33</sup>

Though many students most certainly adopt relativism and evolve to a state of tentative commitments regarding some life issues, I am not sure how many of today’s students comfortably fit the description offered above. Though some commentators see a renewed commitment to student activism and social consciousness,<sup>34</sup> other writers have noted an increasing purposelessness and tentativeness among today’s young adults. In a recent

cover story, *Time*, using interviews and surveys, described the eighteen-to-twenty-nine (“twentysomething”) age group as a hesitant, uncommitted generation. These young adults, raised in an era of divorce, drugs, violence, materialism and greed, “possess only a hazy sense of their own identity but a monumental preoccupation with all the problems the preceding generation will leave for them to fix.”<sup>35</sup> According to this article, one characteristic of today’s young adult is an increasing tolerance for postponing commitments that are traditionally viewed as social indicators of adulthood (for instance, marriage, work). One young-adult writer expresses the precarious identity formation and confused state that many young adults experience:

Bombarded with so much information, to be filtered through the lessons of childhood and adolescence, we have fractured into splinter groups connected only by birth dates (roughly 1961 to 1971). Some have adopted the counterculture idealism rooted in vague childhood memories; some claim the materialistic mentality of the 80’s; others are stuck in the middle of this mess. Most of us frequent both sides of the spectrum in any given week. This generation, it seems, wants to be “Wall Street’s” Gordon Gekko with the conscience of Abbie Hoffman. If you will indulge the generalizations of one member of the twentysomething generation: our style is assimilation, our attitude reaction, even if some visceral rebelliousness remains. While “thirtysomething” has become high-concept, twentysomething lacks coherence: we are clueless yet wizened, too unopinionated to voice concern, purposefully enigmatic and indecisive.<sup>36</sup>

Through my own work as a teacher and practicing clinician, as well as through conversations with both students and colleagues, I am led to agree with many of the above observations.

According to Lawrence Kohlberg, the most influential source for our ideas on moral development, the basic criterion for understanding morality is to learn how a person reasons about “justice.” In his view, a person comes to understand justice in stages. Kohlberg documented, through his cross-cultural studies, a three-level, six-stage theory (two stages for each level) of moral development with each stage representing a different understanding of justice. Kohlberg suggested that as people develop moral-

ly there is movement away from self-absorption (preconventional level) toward an awareness of the thinking and the feelings of others (conventional level). Ultimately, development might proceed toward the highest level, which incorporates universal moral principles that respect the rights of all human beings (understood as principled moral reasoning).<sup>37</sup>

Although many see Kohlberg's theory as the most conceptually integrated and empirically tested of all moral-development theories, Kohlberg relies heavily on rationality and philosophical speculation (for example, "What is justice?"). Above all, Kohlberg's theory emphasizes the vital role that moral principles play in the process of making moral judgments. Accordingly, his theory is best characterized as an "ethics of justice." However, many researchers have come to view this "ethics of justice" orientation as inadequate for a full understanding of morality.

Among these critics is the psychologist Carol Gilligan. According to Gilligan, Kohlberg's theory fails to take into account the "voice" of women.<sup>38</sup> In contrast to Kohlberg, Gilligan's view of morality is best characterized as an "ethics of care." Gilligan maintains that developmental theorists such as Kohlberg have advocated a male view of morality that prizes "justice" and "rules," whereas the female "voice" champions connectedness, care, and love. She holds that attention must be given to both "voices" since these two moral orientations transform morality in a way that neither could envision separately.<sup>39</sup>

I suspect that for most of us both the voice of justice and the voice of care have an integral role in how we fashion our moral lives. They are complementary. For example, we want our students to respond compassionately while at the same time possessing a commitment to moral principles such as justice. Briefly, a morality of justice without care would be harsh and sterile, whereas a morality of care without moral principles would lack direction and be easily manipulated by one's subjective experience (for instance, an emotionally "needy" person could rationalize many things under the guise of care, an all too frequent problem for today's young adult).<sup>40</sup>

As I look at Kohlberg's theory, I would like to offer several criticisms that bear directly on student moral development and our work with them. First, Kohlberg's theory is best described as ahistorical; that is, his theory remains far removed from people's everyday human experience. My own view is that moral development must take place within the wider context of one's daily life. To illustrate, let me share the following example.

Sue (not her real name) is a first-semester senior who has come to my office. I notice she looks troubled; and, after a brief discussion of the paper due in a few weeks, I

ask, "I know you're a graduating senior. How's this last year shaping up for you?" Sue seizes on this question and tells me she's felt distressed recently. Her mother died almost two years ago and she still feels sad. She's also concerned about her father, who has never openly discussed her mother's death. Her younger sister, still at home, has taken on the parenting role and Sue worries about her, too. Obviously, Sue is confronting many personal issues. The experience of loss weighs her down.

I bring up this example to point out that this loss experience influences Sue's moral development. Unlike Kohlberg, I would say that as Sue continues to sculpt her moral self, this emotional experience of loss will be a significant factor in her moral growth. Her loss and personal worries will weigh on future moral decisions, the ways she deals with stress,<sup>41</sup> her relationships with others and so on—all experiences that influence her moral life. Furthermore, the rational processes Kohlberg champions are vital but not the whole story in making moral decisions. The thinking of Norma Haan on emotion provides a helpful framework:

Emotions accompany and enrich understandings, and they convey far more authentic information about a person's position in a dispute than any well-articulated thoughts. In ordinary circumstances, emotions instruct and energize action. In situations of great moral costs, emotions can overwhelm and disorganize cognitive activity.<sup>42</sup>

The psychologist Jerome Kagan is even more direct:

Construction of a persuasive rational basis for behaving morally has been the problem on which most moral philosophers have stubbed their toes. I believe they will continue to do so until they recognize what Chinese philosophers have appreciated for a long time: namely, feeling, not logic, sustains the superego.<sup>43</sup>

To appreciate the role of emotion, consider the story of another young adult. The scene is typical. Jim, a twenty-year-old college sophomore, has broken up with his girlfriend. His parents had divorced during his junior year of

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high school, so this new termination reopens old wounds. Unable to accept the loss of this relationship, Jim retreats into himself, his feelings wounded and his ability to reach out to others lessened. This passive psychological state is only one of several defensive strategies he could employ. Some young adults become hostile and verbally lash out at well-intentioned friends. Others blindly invest themselves in new projects or relationships in order to ease their hurt. Still others simply deny the whole experience and attempt to act as if life were as usual. Yet interpersonal concerns are central for young-adult development, and these issues are threaded with feelings. Jim's reaction to the termination of his relationship is replete with moral concerns. How he treats others, his anger, his ability to be honest yet forgiving—all are vital factors in Jim's moral growth.

The moral life is fashioned over the long term within an evolving life history. A "moral vision" provides an individual with increasing meaning and purpose, a sense of ideals, and a future yet to be. Within the context of one's life history, then, one is always in the process of considering the questions: "Who am I becoming?" "What do I desire?" "What are my hopes and dreams?" "What is my responsibility to others?" Such questions are rich with a sense of developing moral vision, and we must do everything possible to help young adults to be attentive to their personal visions and to evaluate their present actions in light of such visions. "The actions we take, and the moral significance which they should be accorded, will depend upon our moral vision."<sup>44</sup> As adults we must pose challenging questions that help young people reflect on how their present life actions sculpt their future course, particularly at the level of value.

### ***The Young-Adult Conscience***

One cannot speak long about moral development without mentioning the word *conscience*. This construct has had a rich history, both in philosophy and theology.<sup>45</sup> In seventeenth-century England, Archbishop Laud wisely noted "no laws can be binding if there be no conscience to obey them."<sup>46</sup> On the recent Congressional vote to support the President's position on the Gulf War and the Clarence Thomas nomination, legislators were urged to "vote their conscience." In matters of import, conscience is often appealed to. It is not surprising that notions of conscience are central to the moral life, for conscience is intimately tied to moral choice and the entire spectrum of life decisions. When young adults leave our campuses, the one mechanism they may have for evaluating and acting morally is conscience. As adults involved in Jesuit

higher education, there are probably few things we would more desire for our students to carry with them when they leave our campuses than well-informed and well-functioning consciences.

One way in which conscience can be defined is the "oughtness" we bring to our decisions. The best approach to understanding conscience is holistic—evolving within one's life history. From developmental research we know that even very young children are capable of "prosocial" or caring behavior.<sup>47</sup> We must encourage this expression in young adults and nurture decision making that increasingly and significantly incorporates sensitivity toward others, proclaims other-centered values, and considers personal and life decisions within the context of the needs of the wider human community.<sup>48</sup>

Because the development of conscience is subject to the human limitations and personal shortcomings that accompany all growth and development, conscience is a frail reality, influenced (at times adversely) by the developmental needs young adults experience. Thus, identity and intimacy needs and the pain and searching so characteristic of young-adult experience are bound to cloud moral vision and decision making, thereby leading to morally questionable behaviors.

### ***Some Suggestions***

How can we as educators and concerned adults who work at Jesuit schools encourage young adults to examine their lives and to behave ethically? First of all, we must be realistic about what actually can be accomplished. No doubt every year we graduate some ideal students—those graduates who possess a healthy sense of self-identity, are reflective and utilize mature conscience functioning, and consistently evidence in their daily lives compassion and a desire to be of service to others. On the other hand, a good number of students will have fallen through the cracks; these students are often psychologically hurting and self-absorbed; some are interested simply in their own material well-being and ignorant of or, quite frankly, unconcerned, unimpressed, or hostile to the value mission of our schools. Most students, I think, are situated between these two poles. For this vast majority we can hopefully predict that some class lectures and discussions, some contact with an interested faculty member or other staff person, and/or some structured experience within the wider college or university community (for example, liturgy, dormitory environment, service projects) have contributed both to on-going and healthy identity consolidation, a maturing conscience, and to some degree a more compassionate life stance. In other words, their