

Anne Colby

It's obvious, of course, that Larry's most central professional contribution was to bring a cognitive-developmental approach to the study of morality. But we have come to take this approach so much for granted that it's hard to fully appreciate its significance. To me, the heart of Larry's theory is the belief that you can't make sense of morality or moral actions without understanding the meaning of the actions to the person carrying them out. The idea that the person's own moral perspective and beliefs have meaning and need to be taken seriously was very much at odds with mainstream psychology, even as short a time ago as the late 60s and early 70s when I was a graduate student.

Larry's unconventional approach to research methods was closely related to this attitude of great respect he had toward his research subjects. He opposed the thoughtless mystification of statistics in which tests of significance take the place of common sense and group level statistics take the place of understanding any single individual in the group. Larry in fact wanted to understand every individual in his studies. If one of his longitudinal subjects did not fit the expected pattern, Larry's approach was to fly out to Chicago to try to understand what was going on with that person and to try to learn from the encounter where his own thinking and expectations had gone wrong. He saw his subjects as real people, never as numbers, which is no doubt why he persisted in calling them by their real names, much to the dismay of us more bureaucratic types who tried to get him to abide by regulations and conventions about such things.

Larry tried hard to make people understand the emptiness of moral relativism. A mindless relativism was and still is to a great degree the easy way out of moral problems for a lot of people. When I first started working with Larry, this position was being taught systematically in just about every school I visited. Teachers would say to the kids that they should respect all people, even those who are different from them, and that each person's beliefs and values are just as valid as anyone else's—that there is no moral perspective that is any more right or true than any other. This view was, of course, very well intentioned though blatantly self-contradictory. Larry challenged us all to go out on a limb and say that yes we should respect all other people but that this

means that a value system that undermines this respect is not just as valid as a system that fosters it.

Of course, Larry received a great deal of recognition for what he did. But he also received a lot of sometimes rather bitter criticism. He was attacked by liberal relativists for being arrogant enough to think that there are right and wrong answers to some moral problems. He was attacked by conservative moralists for being outrageous enough to tell children that the conventional answers aren't always the right ones. It seems that neither really understood what he was trying to say.

Larry was a scholar and an intellectual through and through. He approached everything he did with a thoughtfulness that went far beyond disciplinary boundaries. His work drew easily and naturally from philosophy, sociology, social theory, and education. I think this was made possible partly by the fact that in some ways even at the peak of his popularity he stood outside the establishment of the field of psychology. In the end I think he allowed himself to get too far outside that mainstream and become more disconnected than was fruitful, but for most of his career this distance may have been more helpful than harmful.

I want to remind you too of the optimism of the developmental approach that Larry believed in so passionately. The view focuses on the ever present possibility of change, the positive direction of change, and the stability of this growth once it occurs. Larry believed that engagement and social influence could lead to growth throughout life and wrote convincingly about moral development in adulthood and old age. This is an optimistic and life affirming view, and one that he believed in completely. It may be hard for us now to reconcile this optimism with the fact that Larry chose to kill himself. For those of us who loved him, I think we all would like to believe that in his last moments Larry's mind was filled with a serenity that could come in spite of physical pain and emotional anguish from the perspective he derived from Spinoza and others and about which he wrote in his paper on Stage 7.

Larry was probably happiest at his house on the Cape. When he was there, he never failed to be caught up by the beauty of the land and the sea. I have always seen his paper on Stage 7 as an expression of the experiences he had most vividly on the Cape. Let us take what little comfort we can from the fact that the sea had these associations and this significance for him.

I'll end by quoting from that paper:

And if we love Life or Nature or God, we shall become capable of overcoming all the pains of life. The pains of life are caused by disappointments or losses in our loves of particular persons or aims. But if we are aware of the relationship of all persons and things to the whole of Nature or to God, then we shall continue to love the whole in spite of the disappointments or losses. And if we love life or Nature, we shall even be able to face our own death with equanimity, since we shall love life more than our own particular and finite life. The demand for our survival can be met only by identification with, or union with something more eternal, and, says Spinoza, the knowledge of and the love of Nature or God are a form of union. To know is to be part of the larger truth, and to love is union as we all know. In a sense, half-poetic, half-logical, but never supernatural, our mind is part of a whole, Spinoza claims; if we know and love the eternal, we are in some sense, eternal ourselves.