



Encyclopedia of Educational Theory and Philosophy

Moral Development: Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan

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Edited by: D. C. Phillips

Book Title: Encyclopedia of Educational Theory and Philosophy

Chapter Title: "Moral Development: Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan"

Pub. Date: 2014

Access Date: December 11, 2015

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks,

Print ISBN: 9781452230894

Online ISBN: 9781483346229

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483346229.n224>

Print pages: 536-540

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The term *moral development* most properly describes a natural, long-term process of psychological growth with regard to the individual's capacity to think about moral problems. According to moral development theory, children start out with simplistic, local ideas about what counts as an acceptable moral reason. If social conditions favorable to moral development are present during childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, moral reasoning will become more abstract, universal, and flexible. Understood in this sense, moral reasoning is indissociable from Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Elaborated, tested, and applied in a research program spanning several decades and involving thousands of researchers and educators around the world, Kohlberg's theory of moral development, also referred to as "cognitive moral developmentalism," and its school-based application, the cognitive-developmental approach to moral education, remains a model of partnership between rigorous psychological research and educational innovation.

Of all the extensive critical attention that Kohlberg's theory received, Carol Gilligan's has by far been the most enduring. Gilligan pointed out that Kohlberg had studied only boys and argued that therefore cognitive moral developmentalism does not accurately portray the moral reasoning of women. Her work prepared the way for the emergence of a substantial body of work on the ethic of care. The so-called Kohlberg–Gilligan debate continues to be a key point of reference in moral development theory. This entry describes these important contending positions.

Kohlberg's Theory of Cognitive Moral Development

When Kohlberg entered the field of social psychology in the 1950s, two schools dominated: behaviorism and psychoanalysis. Kohlberg regarded both of these approaches as philosophically suspect as theoretical frameworks for the psychological study of morality. In the United States at that time, Jean Piaget's structural developmentalism was still rather marginal, but Kohlberg latched on to it because it provided the theoretical resources to develop a theory of moral psychology that could overcome the shortcomings that Kohlberg saw in behaviorism and psychoanalysis: a general neglect of the role of responsibility in defining moral behavior and a commitment to moral relativism.

The application of the basic cognitivist orientation of structural developmentalism to the domain of moral cognition allowed Kohlberg to argue, first, that the moral domain could not be coherently conceptualized except as a domain of individual responsibility. What made structural developmentalism so different from behaviorism was that, instead of dismissing subjective mental experiences (i.e., an individual's conscious thoughts, emotions, intentions, reasons for acting, etc.) as unobservable and hence scientifically uninteresting, structural cognitivism takes as its primary data the subjective meanings that individuals ascribe to their social experiences. Kohlberg referred to this theoretical standpoint as *phenomenalism*: Psychologists should take the way moral concepts are articulated in ordinary language as the measure of the validity of moral concepts in psychology. According to phenomenism, behaviorist and psychoanalytic approaches to moral psychology appear to lack an adequate language for psychological investigation in the moral domain. The reason for this, Kohlberg thought, was that an agent's conscious intentions in performing an act are the sine qua non of assessing the act's moral status, of determining whether it makes sense to describe an act as "moral" at all. For example, a girl takes a pencil and puts it in her pocket. All things being equal,

if she knows that the pencil belongs to someone else and didn't get permission from the owner to take it, then she is stealing (immoral). If she did get permission, then she is borrowing (amoral). If she got permission with the intention of using the pencil to help a friend with homework, then the act is prosocial (moral). For Kohlberg, then, any coherent conception of *moral* psychology had to be primarily concerned with the reasons that ordinary moral agents would give to explain and justify their acts.

In addition to the idea of cognitive stage development and the primacy of subjects' explicit understanding in psychological research, a second attractive aspect of Piagetan structural developmentalism for Kohlberg was that, when brought to the field of research on moral cognition, it seemed to pose an exciting new, empirically grounded challenge to moral relativism. Piagetan structural developmentalism holds, as a central tenet, that the thought systems that human beings use to represent the world are not static. As people actively attempt to make sense of their environments, their thought systems become more sophisticated, more flexible, more effective—in a word, more “adaptive.” According to structural developmentalism, that is, the experience of trying to solve problems generates not just different ideas about the way the world is but whole different ways of seeing the world and of interpreting one's experiences. Moreover, the cognitive changes that Piaget's theory of cognitive development describes follow a predictable pattern of growth insofar as all human beings have the potential to pass through the stages of cognitive development and, as long as they are afforded a minimum experience in solving problems (e.g., through formal education), most do. Bringing Piaget's conception of development to the domain of *moral* thought, Kohlberg hypothesized that there exists a process of moral development that, exactly like the process of cognitive development Piaget described, begins with simpler, less adaptive modes of thought for thinking about moral problems and evolves toward more adaptive ones. The description of this process became Kohlberg's stage theory of cognitive moral development, summarized in [Table 1](#). The theory was based on a considerable volume of empirical research in which children of different ages were asked to reason about moral dilemmas; the famous “Heinz dilemma” is discussed below.

Table 1 The Levels and Stages of Moral Development According to Kohlberg

Level 1: Preconventional morality Individual-centered conception of morality
Stage 1: Obedience and punishment orientation Moral norms are to be obeyed out of blind obedience to the authorities that establish them. An important reason to obey moral norms is to avoid retribution from moral authority figures. Example: “If you don't share, you'll get in trouble.”
Stage 2: Instrumental purpose and exchange orientation An act is morally justified when it is warranted in an economy of instrumental exchange between equals. Morality is like a marketplace in which acts that harm others' interests deserve retribution and those that further individual interests generate a debt. Example: “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.”
Level 2: Conventional morality Socially centered conception of morality
Stage 3: Peer and personal relationships orientation Moral behavior is defined in terms of conformity to expectations or standards shared by a community of immediate peers or generated by social roles, such as being a neighbor, friend, or sibling. Not wanting to let others down and to appear morally upright in others' eyes, as well as one's own, are convincing moral justifications. Example: “Be a good boy and help your sister.”
Stage 4: Social system maintenance orientation Moral norms are understood as serving the purpose of upholding the social order. Moral justification typically appeals

to the importance of keeping the community functioning, serving society, and avoiding social tumult and instability. Example: "Homosexuality is wrong because it undermines the institution of the family."**Level 3: Postconventional morality**
Reason-centered conception of moral norms *Stage 5: Individual rights orientation*
Morality serves the purpose of promoting individuals' rights, such as the right to life, the right to free association, and the right to free religious belief and practice. Existing laws, norms, and rules can do a better or worse job of promoting and protecting rights and freedoms. Norms that are effective at promoting rights should be embraced. Norms that are ineffective in this regard should be rejected or revised. Example: "Banning abortion is unconscionable because it would deny women's right to control their bodies." *Stage 6: Universal principles orientation*
Moral requirements are understood in terms of abstract universal principles that may be expressed as general universal duties, such as the duty to be fair, to respect human dignity, and to treat people always as ends rather than means. Social norms are to be assessed in terms of these principles. Only norms that are consistent with these principles are truly "moral" norms. As rational beings, all humans have an obligation to respect moral norms. Example: "Refusing to assist terminally ill patients to end their lives is an affront to human dignity."

Source: Adapted from Kohlberg, Levine, and Hewer (1981).

In Kohlberg's stage theory, the most crucial developmental transition occurs between the Level 2 conventional perspective and the Level 3 postconventional perspective. Strictly speaking, it is only when people begin to reason at the postconventional level that they can be said to be engaging in "moral" reasoning at all. This key distinction, between "heteronomous" moral thinking and postconventional or "autonomous" morality, constitutes another theoretical debt to Piaget. Indeed, Kohlberg's theory can be seen as a refinement and overhaul of Piaget's work on the development of children's understanding of moral norms. When moral rules are understood heteronomously (i.e., as dependent on outside influences), their legitimacy is based on being established and enforced by some social authority, be it a god, society as a whole, or a person who is admired and respected. Piaget thought that all young children begin with a heteronomous understanding of moral rules. Children feel compelled to conform their behavior to a moral rule like "No hitting!" because they respect and fear adults' power to set down the rules and to impose sanctions if an adult's will is not obeyed. They have no consideration for the purpose or social function of moral rules. Hence, from the perspective of heteronomous morality, "Because mom says so!" is a coherent and convincing reason not to hit. According to Piaget, heteronomous morality characterized in this way as blind obedience to an authority constitutes the "morality of constraint." By contrast, when moral rules are understood autonomously, their legitimacy is based on a pragmatic understanding of the social roles that moral rules play in the economy of interpersonal relations. This is why Piaget also refers to autonomous morality as the "morality of cooperation." No longer arbitrary dictates commanding blind obedience, moral rules become, from the perspective of autonomy, social arrangements between equals who have both individual interests (e.g., bodily integrity and property rights) as well as collective interests (e.g., solidarity and social stability). Moral rules represent a consensual agreement about how the balance of tensions between the individual and the collective can thus be renegotiated, adjusted, and even rejected if it no longer serves the goals of mutual respect and cooperation. Now, hitting is wrong not only because of its negative intrinsic effects (pain, injury, etc.) but also because negotiated settlements to interpersonal conflicts are more stable than

solutions imposed by the use of violence.

Owing in large part to Piagetian structural cognitivism's gradual displacement in social and cognitive psychology by an array of competing heuristic, intuitionist, and personological models of social cognition, cognitive developmentalism is no longer the dominant theoretical paradigm in moral psychology. Over the three decades leading up to the turn of the 21st century, though, it stood essentially alone as the starting point for theory and research in the field. Stage theory's magnetism for a generation of moral psychologists was that it combined psychological rigor with a clear moral mission. Essentially, Kohlberg's theory boldly asserts that moral psychology can mediate the complex, divisive, and often ideologically charged moral disputes over tired moral issues such as abortion, capital punishment, and euthanasia. Assume, following Kohlberg, that the various ideological and philosophical standpoints on socio-moral problems (liberalism, republicanism, socialism, conservatism, deontology, consequentialism, care ethics, etc.) are best explained not in terms of a prioritization of certain moral values (e.g., equality or justice) over others (e.g., loyalty or solidarity) but as representing, more fundamentally, more or less adaptive modes of moral thinking. By providing a framework for analyzing the qualitative differences between various manifestations of moral thinking in terms of their *cognitive adequacy*, moral development theory could be a powerful instrument for undermining the belief that competing moral perspectives are not merely equivalent but different, and relative to a particular culturally or socially informed moral outlook. Kohlberg's theory suggested strongly that some moral standpoints are cognitively superior to others, and it was precisely in this way that moral development theory would end up "defeating relativism," or so Kohlberg thought. A half-century on, such optimism about moral psychology's potential to move social discourse forward is scarcely imaginable. Kohlberg's legacy does continue to be felt, however, in the well-established practice of using semiformal dilemma discussions in moral education. It is to Kohlberg's account of the influence of structured, peer-led moral debates on moral development that we now turn.

The Kohlbergian Approach to Moral Education

Throughout his career, Kohlberg made considerable efforts to link the theory of cognitive moral development with educational practices. These efforts can be situated at the institutional level and at the classroom level. With Piaget, Dewey, and other educational progressivists, Kohlberg was sensitive to the role that the judicious exercise of social authority can play in helping people achieve a rational understanding of morality and in developing their capacity to see the faults in ineffective, harmful, unfair, or arbitrary social norms. Through research, public advocacy, and program implementation and evaluation, Kohlberg used the theory of cognitive moral development as a basis to critique common practices around establishing, promulgating, and enforcing rules in public institutions. Whether on the part of a teacher, school principal, prison guard, judge, or parent, Kohlberg regarded disciplinary practices that depend primarily on the assertion of authority (e.g., "Do it because I say so!") or on the distribution of extraneous punishments and rewards (e.g., "Do it, or you'll stay after school!") as unfavorable to young people's cognitive moral development. The culmination of Kohlberg's work to promote cultural change at the institutional level was the Just Communities Project. Tried in schools and youth detention centers with varying degrees of success and longevity, the Just Communities Project aimed to create an atmosphere favorable to moral development and the acquisition of democratic competencies through the introduction of permanent decision-making mechanisms that

operate according to the principles of self-government and direct participatory democracy. Cognitive moral development theory's greater educational legacy, though, is the new scientific footing it gave to an old approach to moral education: dilemma analysis.

Kohlberg's theory poses a challenge to the standard way in which dilemmas have tended to be used in moral education since at least the Scholastic period in the Western tradition. Still largely in favor in postsecondary professional and applied ethics education, this approach is tutor led and principle focused. The instructor presents learners with a moral problem like the Heinz dilemma (see Box 1) and illustrates how the application of different moral principles, precepts, or obligations yields different resolutions. For instance, in the Heinz dilemma, if one prioritizes Heinz's obligations to his wife in virtue of being her husband, then one is led to the conclusion that Heinz should steal the drug. The prioritization of the property rights of the pharmacist yields the opposite conclusion. In this way, the standard approach to dilemma analysis aims to introduce learners to a multiplicity of abstract moral principles and assumes that they will learn to apply those moral principles judiciously by observing their manipulation by a wiser and more experienced adult.

From the point of view of cognitive moral developmentalism, this instructor-directed approach to moral dilemma analysis lacks developmental sensitivity. Its primary weakness is that it fails to take into account that the moral principles introduced by the instructor may be beyond students' cognitive reach. For example, according to Kohlberg's theory, a postconventional individual rights perspective (i.e., Level 3, Stage 5) on the Heinz dilemma is largely incomprehensible for a student who tends to view moral problems from a conventional peer and personal relationships orientation (i.e., Level 2, Stage 3). One of the tenets of Piagetan cognitive development theory is that the mechanism of cognitive development is experiences of "disequilibrium" or cognitive conflict that in some way challenge the individual's current cognitive orientation. In research on moral development and dilemma discussions, the operative assumption, referred to as the "plus-one convention," has been that cognitive conflict favorable to moral development is induced when children and young people are given opportunities to reflect on styles of moral reasoning about one stage above their own current stage, a stage disparity that exists in most age-based class groups. These experiences allow them to gain rational insights into the cognitive advantages of that higher stage, and perceiving these advantages, they are motivated to reject their current orientation and move on to the next higher stage. Extensive research on the induction of cognitive conflicts in moral education, which supports and refines this basic hypothesis, indicates that peer-directed dilemma discussions are more favorable to moral development than instructor-directed dilemma analyses, especially when they are characterized by a dialogic style of communication (i.e., emphasizing reciprocal respect for others' points of view and involving a genuine attempt to reach an agreement).

Box 1 The Heinz Dilemma

Heinz's wife was near death, and her only hope was a drug that had been discovered by a pharmacist, who was selling it for an exorbitant price. The drug cost \$20,000 to make, and the pharmacist was selling it for \$200,000. Heinz could only raise \$50,000, and insurance wouldn't make up the difference. He offered what he had to the pharmacist, and when his offer was rejected, Heinz said he would pay the rest later.

Still, the pharmacist refused. In desperation, Heinz considered stealing the drug. Would it be wrong for him to do that? Should Heinz have broken into the store to steal the drug for his wife? Why or why not?

Source: Adapted from Kohlberg, Levine, and Hewer (1981).

Carol Gilligan and the Kohlberg–Gilligan Debate

In her best-selling book *In a Different Voice* (1982), Carol Gilligan argued that the schema Kohlberg used to classify styles of moral reasoning in terms of their cognitive adequacy reflected a characteristically male tendency to prioritize the value of justice when faced with a moral problem. (She pointed out that it was pertinent that Kohlberg had not included women in his research sample.) Because women, according to Gilligan's research, prioritize the value of caring over justice, Kohlberg's theory is biased against women. In advancing this claim, Gilligan associates Kohlberg's theory with a long line of philosophers and psychologists in the Western intellectual tradition (e.g., Augustine, René Descartes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Sigmund Freud) who have posited qualitative gender differences in morality and consider the moral orientation typical of women to be limited, inferior, and even childish.

Careful reviews of the literature on morality and gender since the mid-1980s, for example, by Lawrence Walker, suggest that Gilligan's claims about gender differences cannot be sustained. Despite its empirical limitations, Gilligan's critique of Kohlberg's theory has had a huge influence on the evolution of the field of moral psychology and moral education. First, it was instrumental in pushing cognitive developmentalists to seek cross-gender and cross-cultural empirical validation for the theory of moral development. Second, and at the theoretical level, it led cognitive developmentalism to a fuller appreciation of well-being as a fundamental moral value. Third, as the philosopher Michael Slote has observed, Gilligan's book lent considerable impetus to a whole new approach to ethical reflection, deliberation, and choice, namely, the ethics of care. Now established as a dominant school of thought in normative ethics, care ethics has been advocated and elaborated on by a considerable number of philosophers and educationists—most notably Nel Noddings. In Gilligan's work, care ethicists see a powerful challenge not just to the Kohlbergian conception of the morally developed person but, more broadly, to an ethical and political culture in Western societies that seems to arbitrarily elevate justice, equality, rights, and the individual, while denigrating kindness and caring for others, solidarity, and face-to-face relationships, as essential elements in our descriptions of ethical thinking, ethical choice, and the ethical society.

See also [Autonomy](#); [Feminist Ethics](#); [Moral Education](#); [Noddings, Nel](#); [Piaget, Jean](#); [Virtue Ethics](#)

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483346229.n224>
10.4135/9781483346229.n224

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