



# **Encyclopedia of Human Development**

## **Moral Development**

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Scholars have trouble reaching a consensus as to the best definition of morality. At the very least, they usually agree that it has to do with acts that affect rights, duties, and the welfare of others. Beyond this, there are disagreements.

Some people think that morality is subjective, meaning that it is based on feelings and nothing more. However, cognitive-developmental psychologists do not think they are subjective because moral judgments are backed by reason, not feeling.

Others think that morality is culturally bound. It is true that different cultures have different beliefs, but does that mean that all are right? For example, some cultures have held the belief that the earth is round, whereas others have believed that the earth is flat. Clearly, both cannot be right. Also, just because different cultures have different beliefs, it does not mean that they have different underlying values. Say, for example, a culture prohibits the consumption of cows because they believe that the spirits of the deceased sometimes inhabit cattle. Although other cultures may allow the consumption of cows, it is not because they do not share the same underlying value of respecting their deceased relatives. All cultures agree on some fundamental values, such as caring for infants and prohibiting murder, because they are necessary for society to function.

There is also the belief that morality is based on religion. Morality is a matter of reason and conscience; it is not a matter of religious faith. In one study, researchers wanted to know if Amish-Mennonite and Orthodox Jewish children could distinguish between moral and religious rules. Most of the children studied thought it would be okay for people who belong to other religions not to wear the traditional head coverings of their own religions, but they believed that stealing would not be okay, even if God commanded it. Although religion often promotes moral behavior, morality is not dependent on religious faith, and many religious rules have nothing to do with morality.

Social convention is also often mistaken for morality. Psychologists distinguish between moral rules, personal issues (such as with whom one should be friends), and social conventions (such as addressing certain people as “Dr.” or “Ms.”). Researchers have found that mothers treat violations of social conventions differently than violations of moral rules when they discipline their children. There is also evidence that children as young as 3 years of age know the difference between moral rules and social conventions.

So how do psychologists decide when an act is immoral? One way to tell is to ask if other people can legitimately interfere with the person doing the act. If others have no right to interfere, the act is probably a personal issue and not a moral one. For example, it would probably be considered repulsive if a family were to decide to eat their pet that had been killed in a traffic accident, but it would be unlikely that anyone would do anything to try to stop them. On the other hand, if one were to know that a neighbor was being beaten by a spouse, they would likely feel justified to intervene.

Another way to decide if an act is immoral is to ask if it would be unacceptable in all human societies. Immoral acts should be universally prohibited. Torture, slavery, and child abuse are immoral. Irrespective of time or place, morality is a set of universal principles agreed upon by all humans.

### **How Does Morality Develop?**

Psychologists who study moral development typically take one of three different approaches. Some psychologists are most interested in the reasoning behind moral action. Others think that the emotions that drive moral behavior are more important. And still others focus on moral behavior itself. Although most psychologists take an integrated approach to moral development, most pay more attention to either moral thinking or moral emotion.

### **Piaget and Intention**

Jean Piaget was one of the first influential theorists to study moral development. Working from a cognitive-developmental perspective, he focused on judgment and reasoning. He found that as children mature, they develop increasingly complex and flexible understandings of morality.

Piaget used hypothetical examples to learn more about how children reason about moral issues. One of his most well-known examples is as follows.

A little boy who is called John is in his room. He is called to dinner. He goes into the dining room. But behind the door there was a chair, and on the chair there was a tray with 15 cups on it. John could not have known that there was all this behind the door. He goes in, the door knocks against the tray, bang go the 15 cups and they all get broken!

Once there was a little boy whose name was Henry. One day when his mother was out he tried to get some jam out of the cupboard. He climbed up on a chair and stretched out his arm. But the jam was too high up and he could not reach it and have any. But while he was trying to get it, he knocked over a cup. The cup fell down and broke.

After telling children these two stories, Piaget asked, "Which boy was the naughtiest?" What he found was that younger children evaluated these stories differently than older children did. The younger children in his study considered the consequences of the actors' behavior and tended to claim that John was naughtier because he broke 15 cups whereas Henry only broke one. The older children, on the other hand, considered the actors' intentions, and they tended to say that Henry was naughtier because John did not mean to break all those cups. (Technically speaking, neither boy broke cups on purpose. Henry was merely careless, whereas John was not because "... he could not have known that there was all this behind the door").

Piaget concluded that young children decide what is right or wrong based on what adults tell them. They think of rules as rigid and to be obeyed without question. He argued that as children grow older, sometime around the age of 8 or 9, they come to understand that rules are created primarily to help people to get along and that rules can be changed if everyone agrees to the change.

So why did the younger children think that breaking more cups was naughtier? Some have speculated that adults may punish children based on the amount of damage caused by their misdeed. Others have argued against Piaget's contention that young children do not consider intention. They have proposed that younger children have limited cognitive ability and may therefore make their judgments based on the amount of physical damage because it is easier for them to evaluate. Subsequent researchers have found that even 5-year-olds are hardest on someone who breaks a toy intentionally, least hard on someone who breaks something accidentally, and rate someone who breaks something out of negligence somewhere in between.

## **Kohlberg's Stage Theory**

Most of the recent moral development research is based on the work of Lawrence Kohlberg. He also took a cognitive-developmental approach to the study of morality and therefore was most interested in moral reasoning. And like Piaget, he also used hypothetical dilemmas to learn more about how people think about moral issues. His most well known dilemma is as follows.

In Europe, a woman was near death from a rare form of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her, a form of radium that a druggist in that same town had recently discovered. The druggist was charging \$2,000, ten times what the drug costs to make. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could only get together about half of what the drug cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said no. So Heinz got desperate and broke into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife.

Should Heinz have stolen the drug? Kohlberg presented a number of moral dilemmas like this one to people of various ages and asked them to propose solutions to each one. In truth, he was more interested in the reasoning behind the decisions people gave than in the actual decisions themselves.

Based on the responses to his moral dilemmas, Kohlberg proposed that the development of moral reasoning is characterized by a series of stages. He suggested that individuals progress through these stages in an invariant sequence, each stage reflecting a more integrated and logically consistent set of moral belief than those before it.

Kohlberg grouped his six stages into three levels: the preconventional level, the conventional level, and the postconventional level. At the preconventional level, right and wrong are determined by what leads to reward or punishment. Most elementary school children, some middle school children, and a few high school students fall into this category. Preconventional individuals will obey people with the power to reward or punish.

Within the preconventional level, Kohlberg identified two stages. Individuals in stage 1 make moral decisions based on what they think will most benefit themselves without considering the needs of others. Actions are only considered wrong if they lead to punishment. Those who have advanced to stage 2 have begun to realize that others have needs as well. They have adopted a "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" mentality (although they usually try to make sure they are getting the better end of the bargain). To them, being "fair" means that everybody gets the same opportunities, but like individuals in stage 1, those in stage 2 only focus on the physical consequences of their behavior.

Many high school students, some middle school students, and a few older elementary school students exhibit what Kohlberg referred to as conventional morality. This level is characterized by an acceptance of society's conventions of right and wrong. Rules are obeyed even when there is no reward for obedience or punishment for disobedience. The appropriateness or fairness of a rule is seldom questioned.

Kohlberg also identified two stages within the conventional level. Individuals in stage 3 look to people close to them and to authority figures for guidance about right and wrong. They try to treat others as they would like to be treated and to please others to gain approval. Stage 3 individuals are also able to consider the perspectives of others when making decisions. They acknowledge that intentions must be considered in determining guilt or innocence.

Individuals in stage 4 look to society as a whole for guidance about right and wrong and realize that rules are necessary to keep society running smoothly. On the other hand, they do not realize that it may occasionally be morally justifiable to break laws, nor do they acknowledge that as society's needs change, rules may need to change as well.

Postconventional morality was Kohlberg's highest level of moral reasoning. It is rarely observed in students before they reach college. In fact, most people never reach this level of reasoning at all. At the postconventional level, people have developed their own set of abstract principles of morally right and wrong. These typically include the basic human rights of life, liberty, and justice. People at this level obey rules consistent with their principles of morality and disobey rules inconsistent with such principles.

The first stage at the postconventional level is characterized by the understanding that rules and the democratic process make up a social contract. Those at stage 5 see rules as a way to maintain social order and protect individual human rights. They also recognize the flexibility of rules and think that rules that no longer serve society's interests may be changed.

At stage 6, individuals answer to a strong inner conscience and willingly disobey laws that violate their own ethical principles. Such principles typically include respect for human dignity and basic human rights, the belief that all people are equal, and a commitment to justice. Stage 6 is Kohlberg's ideal stage that few people ever reach.

### **Examples for Each of Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development**

#### ***Preconventional Level***

- Stage 1. Okay to cheat if you do not get caught
- Stage 2. Okay to cheat as long as you show your friends how to cheat as well

#### ***Conventional Level***

- Stage 3. Not okay to steal cars because it will disgrace your family
- Stage 4. Not okay to steal cars because it is against the law

#### ***Postconventional Level***

- Stage 5. Not okay to steal because it violates the social contract that protects individual human rights and social order
- Stage 6. Okay to steal food if you are starving because human life is more valuable than law

Why do we see such variation in moral development at any given age? Kohlberg proposed that moral development is somewhat dependent on cognitive development. In order to grasp the more abstract concepts of postconventional reasoning, one must have attained a level of cognitive sophistication that young children do not yet have. But advanced cognitive abilities do not guarantee advanced moral reasoning. In other words, cognitive development is necessary but insufficient for moral development.

Disequilibrium may also help explain why some people move to higher stages sooner than others. Piaget proposed that when children experience disequilibrium, meaning that they witness an event that cannot be explained by their current understanding of how things work, they adopt new representations of how things work in order to explain their experiences. Similarly, Kohlberg proposed that as people become increasingly aware of the weaknesses in their current way of reasoning about moral issues, they begin to restructure their thoughts and gradually move from one stage to the next.

Subsequent research of Kohlberg's stage theory has supported his idea that people tend to progress through the stages in the sequence that he proposed but has found that people do not always reason in the same stage. Often their reasoning will reflect a particular stage but will sometimes reflect a stage below or a stage above. Researchers have also found that children are not as authority oriented as Kohlberg suggested. Other scholars have also pointed out that Kohlberg's theory only explains how people reason, not what they actually do. There seems to be an imperfect relationship between moral thinking and moral behavior, possibly because nonmoral considerations, such as what is the easiest or most practical action to take, are not factored in.

### **Gilligan and Gender Differences**

Carol Gilligan challenged Kohlberg's theory based on his definition of morality. She argued that Kohlberg's definition of morality was based solely on the notion of justice. She proposed an "ethic of care" in which fairness in terms of an equal distribution of resources is not always the most ethical action. Because girls are socialized differently than boys, she argued, they tend to place more of an emphasis on meeting everyone's needs. Therefore, girls should be more likely to base their moral judgments on making sure that everyone is cared for.

The idea that girls rely on an "ethic of care" while boys use an "ethic of justice" has not been empirically validated. There does not appear to be much difference between the way that boys and girls reason about moral issues. Both genders use both orientations, although some studies have found differences between genders in which moral dilemmas they think are most important.

Other researchers are less interested in moral reasoning and instead choose to focus on the emotions that drive moral action. Those who focus on the emotional components of moral behavior suggest that people act morally out of love, attachment, sympathy, and empathy. To act immorally would bring shame, guilt, and anxiety.

### **Freudian Guilt**

Sigmund Freud was one of the first psychologists to explain moral behavior in terms of guilt and other emotions. He theorized that moral energy resulted from repressed sexual impulses. At about the age of 3, Freud claimed that children become sexually attracted to their opposite-sex parent and hostile towards their same-sex parent. This is what is referred to as the Oedipus complex (if the child is a boy) or the Electra complex (if the child is girl). Because children realize that they cannot express these emotions overtly, they repress these impulses and use this energy to drive moral behavior.

When children successfully resolve their Oedipus or Electra conflict, they identify with

their same-sex parent and, in turn, internalize their parent's code of moral conduct. The violation of a moral rule then leads to guilt and anxiety.

Although researchers in the field of child development agree that the avoidance of guilt contributes to moral behavior, most of them do not think that guilt is the result of the repression of sexual or hostile impulses. They think guilt is the result of parental disapproval stemming from children's wrongdoing. Parents who rely on inductive discipline (using reasons when disciplining children, especially pointing out the harmful effects of certain behaviors on other people), in particular, raise children who internalize moral rules and feel guilty when they violate them.

## **Empathy**

The most common emotion studied in relation to morality is empathy. Empathy is an emotional response to the perception of another person's emotional state that is congruent with the other's emotional state. Empathy is usually positively related to measures of prosocial behavior. Prosocial behavior includes positive social behaviors such as sharing, helping, and comforting. It has been suggested that empathy does not always lead to prosocial behavior because empathy may cause so much distress that it may cause people to feel the need to escape the situation instead of helping. The relationship between empathy and prosocial behavior is usually stronger for older children and adults because they have more control over their emotions and are more likely to sympathize than to feel distress.

How does empathy relate to moral behavior? Is there not a difference between helping people you know and a global morality? Hoffman has proposed that empathy and prosocial behavior in children are usually directed at friends and others whom the child likes. Eventually, this behavior expands to encompass all people, leading to a more just morality. Hoffman also thinks that the happy emotions that result from empathy-driven prosocial behavior are a significant motivational force even when behaving morally conflicts with self-interest.

## **Eisenberg's Levels of Prosocial Reasoning**

Nancy Eisenberg was specifically interested in prosocial behavior. Like Kohlberg, she used moral dilemmas, such as the following, to study children's reasoning.

One day a girl named Mary was going to a friend's birthday party. On her way she saw a girl who had fallen down and hurt her leg. The girl asked Mary to go to her house and get her parents so the parents could come and take her to the doctor. But if Mary did run and get the child's parents, she would be late for the birthday party and miss the ice cream, cake, and all the games. What should Mary do? Why?

The reasons that children gave for their decisions helped Eisenberg to identify five developmental levels of prosocial reasoning.

1. Hedonistic: pursues own pleasure
2. Needs-oriented: concerned with the needs of others but does not demonstrate internalized prosocial norms
3. Approval, interpersonal: acts to gain social approval or stereotyped
- 4a. Self-reflecting empathy: expresses sympathy and says how action or inaction would lead to positive feelings or guilt

- 4b. Transitional: reasons based on internalized values, but these ideas are not clearly stated
- 5. Strongly internalized: reasons based on internalized values and is concerned with maintaining self-respect by living up to one's values

Most preschoolers and many elementary school children reason at the hedonistic level, which means they primarily look out for themselves and decide whether to help based on how much they like the person in need. But there are also some preschoolers as well as many older children who reason at the needs-oriented level. These children are concerned with the needs of others, although do not directly express sympathy.

Eisenberg's third level is very similar to Kohlberg's third stage. Children who reason at this level try to do what they think a good person would do. Some elementary and high school students fall into this category.

Those who reason at Eisenberg's fourth level explicitly take the perspectives of others and understand the need to protect people's rights. Many high school students and adults reason at this level. Finally, like Kohlberg's postconventional level, those who reason at Eisenberg's highest level are motivated to live up to their own moral code. A few high school students and adults reason at this level.

But does prosocial reasoning predict prosocial behavior? The relationship between prosocial reasoning and prosocial behavior is imperfect. Eisenberg has suggested that this is because prosocial reasoning is only one factor that influences prosocial behavior. Other factors include the interpretation of the situation, whether empathy is felt, and beliefs about the costs and benefits of helping. Prosocial behavior also requires knowing what to do and having the perceived ability to do it. And lastly, children also need self-control to follow through in order to carry out prosocial behavior.

Although Eisenberg's model is relatively new and has not been extensively tested yet, current data support her stage model of prosocial reasoning.

The relationship between moral reasoning, moral emotion, and moral behavior is not very impressive. A stronger correlation, although not as strong as some researchers would like, is found between moral reasoning and moral behavior. One factor that may contribute to this less-than-perfect relationship is moral obligation. A person can understand what the right thing to do is and still not feel obliged to do it.

### **Can Morality Be Taught?**

In light of current social trends, "character education" has become increasingly popular. Many are quick to blame youth violence and risky health behaviors on a lack of character. Others think the best reasons for including ethics and morality in the curriculum may be less rooted in "fixing" young people and more rooted in the importance of human flourishing and citizenship. As technology advances, we become more and more of a global community. This growing interdependence could be the best reason to attempt to foster moral development.

But can morality be taught? Many scholars and educators think that it can be taught but disagree as to the best method of doing so. Instilling values in others is difficult at best.

### **Modeling and Induction**

Some of the most traditional methods of moral education rely on modeling. Children learn not only by what adults say, but also by what they do. Induction, or the practice of explaining to children why a certain behavior is unacceptable (often with a focus on the pain or distress that this behavior has caused another), is another effective way to promote moral development. The purpose of both modeling and induction is to help children internalize their family's and/or community's values.

Family and friends are not the sources of learning for children. Children learn how the world works from the books they read, the television programs they watch, and the Internet sites they visit. In other words, pop culture also serves to educate. Researchers interested in moral development realize the powerful influence of pop culture and use it to provide positive modeling. *Sesame Street*, for example, has included a strong prosocial message in its curriculum since its inception in 1969. More recently, however, psychologists have begun to apply cognitive-developmental principles to moral education curriculums.

### **Cognitive-Developmental Approaches to Moral Education**

Cognitive theorists think that moral development is based on interpretation and reasoning. Kohlberg, like other cognitive-developmental psychologists, thinks that moral development is the result of cognitive disequilibrium. In other words, it is only when people realize the limitations of their current way of reasoning that former ideas are abandoned in favor of reasoning at higher levels.

When does cognitive disequilibrium occur? It is most likely to occur when reasoning is challenged by someone who reasons at the next higher level. Because of this, Kohlberg has suggested the use of moral discussion in order to promote moral development. Not only are moral discussions useful in challenging the current level of thinking, but they also improve perspective-taking ability. Although moral discussion can take place in the classroom, it most often happens with parents and peers. Research suggests that peers are most influential.

Another important element is a social environment in which justice and a sense of community prevails. In order to create such an environment, Kohlberg developed what he called the "just community." The just community was based on self-governance and democracy. Just communities set up in public high schools consisted of about 100 students and five teachers. They operated as special "schools within a school." All decisions for the group were made by majority rule. Teachers did not have veto power but were responsible for encouraging the students to think about the moral implications of their decisions. Only a few just communities were actually set up, but they were effective in promoting moral development.

Most current moral curriculums are based either on modeling character or on teaching reasoning by challenging students with moral dilemmas. Darcia Narvaez has proposed a new moral education curriculum based on the idea of "moral experts" or those who automatically perceive the ethical implications of a situation that others may not. Her moral education model, called the ethical expertise (ETHEX) framework, is based on the idea that moral reasoning can be broken down into a list of specific skills such as the ability to take the perspective of others and the ability to understand consequences. Narvaez contends that in order to help people become "moral experts" they need to acquire and practice these specific skills. Although this program is too new to have

been sufficiently independently evaluated, the integrative approach that Narvaez took, utilizing what researchers know from the fields of cognitive psychology, social psychology, and the moral education tradition, makes this curriculum promising.

## Parenting Style

Parents and caregivers can be very influential in helping to shape ideas and direct behavior. It is important that parents make the rules for moral behavior clear and that they express them in an emotionally intense way so that children will pay attention. Parents should also be sure to place the highest value on moral behavior, trying not to overemphasize achievement.

One of the most effective ways for parents to promote moral development in children is for them to give reasons for discipline. Explaining to children how their behavior affects other people is beneficial because it encourages perspective taking. Research suggests that prosocial behavior is encouraged when mild punishment is paired with a focus on the hurt and distress that their behavior has caused others.

Maybe most importantly, parents need to model warmth and empathy. They should not only talk about moral issues with their children but they should also try to create a positive emotional environment. Authoritative parenting, or maintaining high standards of behavior in addition to demonstrating emotional warmth, is especially effective.

- moral reasoning
- prosocial behavior
- morals
- moral development
- moral rules
- morality
- empathy

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See also

- [Gilligan, Carol](#)
- [Gilligan's Theory of Feminine Morality](#)
- [Kohlberg, Lawrence](#)
- [Stages of Moral Development](#)

## Further Readings and References

The Character Education Partnership, <http://www.character.org/>

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