Lawrence Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development

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For many years Lawrence Kohlberg was a professor at Harvard University. He became famous for his work there beginning in the early 1970s. He started as a developmental psychologist and moved to the field of moral education. He was particularly well-known for his theory of moral development which he popularized through research studies conducted at Harvard's Center for Moral Education.

His theory of moral development was dependent on the thinking of the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget and the American philosopher John Dewey. He was also inspired by James Mark Baldwin. These men had emphasized that human beings develop philosophically and psychologically in a progressive fashion. Kohlberg believed, and was able to demonstrate through studies, that people progressed in their moral reasoning (i.e., in their bases for ethical behavior) through a series of stages. He believed that there were six identifiable stages that could be more generally classified into three levels. Kohlberg's classification can be outlined in the following manner:

Pre-conventional Level
The first level of moral thinking is that generally found at the elementary school level.

- Stage 1: Obedience and Punishment
  In the first stage of this level, people behave according to socially acceptable norms because they are told to do so by some authority figure (e.g., parent or teacher). This obedience is compelled by the threat or application of punishment.

- Stage 2: Individualism, Instrumentalism and Exchange
  Characterized by a view that right behavior means acting in one's own best interests.

Conventional Level
The second level of moral thinking is that generally found in society, hence the name "conventional."

- Stage 3: "Good boy/girl" - Mutual Interpersonal Expectations, Relationships and Conformity
  Characterized by an attitude that seeks to do what will gain the approval of others.

- Stage 4: "Law and Order: - Social System and Conscience Maintenance
  Oriented to abiding by the law and responding to the obligations of duty.

Post-conventional Level
The third level of moral thinking is one that Kohlberg felt is not reached by the majority of adults.

- Stage 5: "Social Contract" - Prior Rights and Social Contract or Utility
  An understanding of social mutuality and a genuine interest in the welfare of others.

- Stage 6: "Principled Conscience" - Universal Ethical Principles
  Based on respect for universal principle and the demands of individual conscience. While Kohlberg always believed in the existence of Stage 6 and had some nominees for it, he could never get enough subjects to define it, much less observe their longitudinal movement to it.

Kohlberg believed that individuals could only progress through these stages one stage at a time. That is, they could not "jump" stages. They could not, for example, move from an orientation of selfishness to the law and order stage without passing through the good boy/girl stage. They could only come to a comprehension of a moral rationale one stage above their own. Thus, according to Kohlberg, it was important to present them with moral dilemmas for discussion which would help them to see the reasonableness of a "higher stage" morality and encourage their development in that direction. The last
comment refers to Kohlberg's moral discussion approach. He saw this as one of the ways in which moral development can be promoted through formal education. Note that Kohlberg believed, as did Piaget, that most moral development occurs through social interaction. The discussion approach is based on the insight that individuals develop as a result of cognitive conflicts at their current stage.

Further Examination of the Stages of Moral Development

Level A. Pre-conventional Level
Stage 1. The Stage of Punishment and Obedience

Content
Right is literal obedience to rules and authority, avoiding punishment, and not doing physical harm. What is right is to avoid breaking rules, to obey for obedience’s sake, and to avoid doing physical damage to people and property. The reasons for doing right are avoidance of punishment and the superior power of authorities.

Social Perspective
This stage takes an egocentric point of view. A person at this stage doesn’t consider the interests of others or recognize they differ from actor’s, and doesn’t relate two points of view. Actions are judged in terms of physical consequences rather than in terms of psychological interests of others. Authority’s perspective is confused with one’s own.

Stage 2. The Stage of Individual Instrumental Purpose and Exchange

Content
Right is serving one’s own or other’s needs and making fair deals in terms of concrete exchange. What is right is following rules when it is to someone’s immediate interest. Right is acting to meet one’s own interests and needs and letting others do the same. Right is also what is fair; that is, what is an equal exchange, a deal, an agreement. The reason for doing right is to serve one’s own needs or interests in a world where one must recognize that other people have their interests, too.

Social Perspective
This stage takes a concrete individualistic perspective. A person at this stage separates his own interests and points of view from those of authorities and others. He or she is aware that everybody has individual interests to pursue and these conflict, so that right is relative (in the concrete individualistic sense). The person integrates or relates conflicting individual interests to one another through instrumental exchange of services, through instrumental need for the other and the other’s goodwill, or through fairness giving each person the same amount.

Level B. Conventional Level
Stage 3. The Stage of Mutual Interpersonal Expectations, Relationships, and Conformity

Content
The right is playing a good (nice) role, being concerned about the other people and their feelings, keeping loyalty and trust with partners, and being motivated to follow rules and expectations. What is right is living up to what is expected by people close to one or what people generally expect of people in one’s role as son, sister, friend, and so on. "Being good" is important and means having good motives, showing concern about others. It also means keeping mutual relationships, maintaining trust, loyalty, respect, and gratitude. Reasons for doing right are needing to be good in one’s own eyes and those of others, caring for others, and because if one puts oneself in the person’s place one would want good behavior from the self (Golden Rule).

Social Perspective
This stage takes the perspective of the individual in relationship to other individuals. A person at this stage is aware of shared feelings, agreements, and expectations, which take primacy over individual interests. The person relates points of view through the "concrete Golden Rule," putting oneself in the other person’s shoes. He or she does not consider generalized "system" perspective.

Stage 4. The Stage of Social System and Conscience Maintenance
Content
The right is doing one’s duty in society, upholding the social order, and maintaining the welfare of society or group. What is right is fulfilling the actual duties to which one has agreed. Laws are to be upheld except in extreme cases where they conflict with other fixed social duties and rights. Right is also contributing to society, the group, or institution. The reasons for doing right are to keep the institution going as a whole, self-respect or conscience as meeting one’s defined obligations, or the consequences: "What if everyone did it?"

Social Perspective
This stage differentiates societal point of view from interpersonal agreement or motives. A person at this stage takes the viewpoint of the system, which defines roles and rules. He or she considers individual relations in terms of place in the system.

Level B/C. Transitional Level
This level is post-conventional but not yet principled.

Content of Transition
At Stage 4 choice is personal and subjective. It is based on emotions, conscience is seen as arbitrary and relative, as are ideas such as "duty" and "morally right."

Transitional Social Perspective
At this stage, the perspective is that of an individual standing outside of his own society and considering himself as an individual making decisions without a generalized commitment or contract with society. One can pick and choose obligations, which are defined by particular societies, but one has no principles for such choice.

Level C. Post-conventional and Principled Level
Moral decisions are generated from rights, values, or principles that are (or could be) agreeable to all individuals composing or creating a society designed to have fair and beneficial practices.

Stage 5. The Stage of Prior Rights and Social Contract or Utility

Content
The right is upholding the basic rights, values, and legal contracts of a society, even when they conflict with the concrete rules and laws of the group. What is right is being aware of the fact that people hold a variety of values and opinions, that most values and rules are relative to one’s group. These "relative" rules should usually be upheld, however, in the interest of impartiality and because they are the social contract. Some nonrelative values and rights such as life and liberty, however, must be upheld in any society and regardless of majority opinion. Reasons for doing right are, in general, feeling obligated to obey the law because one has made a social contract to make and abide by laws for the good of all and to protect their own rights and the rights of others. Family, friendship, trust, and work obligations are also commitments or contracts freely entered into and entail respect for the rights of others. One is concerned that laws and duties be based on rational calculation of overall utility: "the greatest good for the greatest number."

Social Perspective
This stage takes a prior-to-society perspective – that of a rational individual aware of values and rights prior to social attachments and contracts. The person integrates perspectives by formal mechanisms of agreement, contract, objective impartiality, and due process. He or she considers the moral point of view and the legal point of view, recognizes they conflict, and finds it difficult to integrate them.

Stage 6. The Stage of Universal Ethical Principles

Content
This stage assumes guidance by universal ethical principles that all humanity should follow. Regarding what is right, Stage 6 is guided by universal ethical principles. Particular laws or social agreements are usually valid because they rest on such principles. When laws violate these principles, one acts in accordance with the principle. Principles are universal principles of justice: the equality of human rights and respect for the dignity of human beings as individuals. These are not merely values that are recognized, but are also principles used to generate particular decisions.
The reason for doing right is that, as a rational person, one has seen the validity of principles and has become committed to them.

Social Perspective
This stage takes the perspective of a moral point of view from which social arrangements derive or on which they are grounded. The perspective is that of any rational individual recognizing the nature of morality or the basic moral premise of respect for other persons as ends, not means.