Stages of Moral Development

by Lawrence Kohlberg (1971)

I. Pre-conventional Level

At this level, the child is responsive to cultural rules and labels of good and bad, right or wrong, but he interprets the labels in terms of either the physical or hedonistic consequences of action (punishment, reward, exchange of favors) or the physical power of those who enunciate the rules and labels. The level is divided into the following three stages:

Stage 1: The punishment and obedience orientation. The physical consequences of action determine its goodness or badness regardless of the human meaning or value of these consequences. Avoidance of punishment and unquestioning deference to power are values in their own right, not in terms of respect for an underlying moral order supported by punishment and authority (the latter is stage 4).

Stage 2: The instrumental relativist orientation. Right action consists of what instrumentally satisfies one's own needs and occasionally the needs of others. Human relations are viewed in terms such as those of the market place. Elements of fairness, reciprocity, and equal sharing are present, but they are always interpreted in a physical, pragmatic way. Reciprocity is a matter of "you scratch my back and I'll scratch your", not loyalty, gratitude, or justice.

II. Conventional Level

At this level, the individual perceives the maintenance of the expectations of his family, group, or nation as valuable in its own right, regardless of immediate and obvious consequences. The attitude is not only one of *conformity* to personal expectations and social order, but of loyalty to it, of actively maintaining, supporting, and justifying the order and identifying with the persons or group involved in it. The level consists of the following two stages:

Stage 3: The interpersonal concordance or "good boy-nice girl" orientation. Good behavior is what pleases or helps others and is approved by them. There is much conformity to stereotypical images of what is majority or "natural" behavior. Behavior is frequently judged by intention -- "he means well" becomes important for the first time. One earns approval by being "nice".

Stage 4: The "law and order" orientation. The individual is oriented toward authority, fixed rules, and the maintenance of the social order. Right behavior consists in doing one's duty, showing respect for authority, and maintaining the given social order for its own sake.

III. Post-Conventional, Autonomous, or Principled Level.

The individual makes a clear effort to define moral values and principles that have validity and application apart from the authority of the groups of persons holding them and apart from the individual's own identification with the group. The level has the two following stages:

Stage 5: The social-contract legalistic orientation (generally with utilitarian overtones). Right action tends to be defined in terms of general individual rights and standards that have been critically examined and agreed upon by the whole society. There is a clear awareness of the relativism of personal values and opinions and a corresponding emphasis upon procedural rules for reaching consensus. Aside from what is constitutionally and democratically agreed upon, right action is a matter of personal values and opinions. The result is an emphasis upon the "legal point of view", but with an additional emphasis upon the possibility of changing the law in terms of rational considerations of social utility (rather than freezing it in terms of stage 4 "law and order"). Outside the legal realm, free agreement, and contract, is the binding element of obligation. The "official" morality of the American government and Constitution is at this stage.

Stage 6: The universal ethical-principle orientation.

Right is defined by the decision of conscience in accord with self-chosen ethical principles that appeal to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency. These principles are abstract and ethical (the Golden Rule, the categorical imperative); they are not concrete moral rules like the Ten Commandments. At heart, these are universal principles of justice, of the reciprocity, and equality of the human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons.

Kohlberg's conception of justice follows that of the philosophers Kant and Rawls, as well as great moral leaders such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King. According to these people, the principles of justice require us to treat the claims of all parties in an impartial manner, respecting the basic dignity, of all people as individuals. The principles of justice are therefore universal; they apply to all. Thus, for example, we would not vote for a law that aids some people but hurts others. The principles of justice guide us toward decisions based on an equal respect for all.

In actual practice, Kohlberg says, we can reach just decisions by looking at a situation through one another's eyes. In the Heinz dilemma, this would mean that all parties--the druggist, Heinz, and his wife--take the roles of the others. To do this in an impartial manner, people can assume a "veil of ignorance" (Rawls, 1971), acting as if they do not know which role they will eventually occupy. If the druggist did this, even he would recognize that life must take priority over property; for he wouldn't want to risk finding himself in the wife's shoes with property valued over life. Thus, they would all agree that the wife must be saved--this would be the fair solution. Such a solution, we must note, requires not only impartiality, but the principle that everyone is given full and equal respect. If the wife were considered of less value than the others, a just solution could not be reached.

The basic interview consists of a series of dilemmas such as the following:

Heinz Steals the Drug

In Europe, a woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to make. He paid $200 for the radium and charged $2,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could only get together about $ 1,000 which is half of what it 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, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." So Heinz got desperate and broke into the man's store to steal the drug-for his wife. Should the husband have done that? (Kohlberg, 1963, p. 19)

The emphasis for Kohlberg here is not on whether one answers "yes" or "no", but rather the reasoning behind the answer.

Theoretically, one issue that distinguishes stage 5 from stage 6 is civil disobedience.

Summary

At stage 1 children think of what is right as that which authority says is right. Doing the right thing is obeying authority and avoiding punishment. At stage 2, children are no longer so impressed by any single authority; they see that there are different sides to any issue. Since everything is relative, one is free to pursue one's own interests, although it is often useful to make deals and exchange favors with others.

At stages 3 and 4, young people think as members of the conventional society with its values, norms, and expectations. At stage 3, they emphasize being a good person, which basically means having helpful motives toward people close to one At stage 4, the concern shifts toward obeying laws to maintain society as a whole.

At stages 5 and 6 people are less concerned with maintaining society for it own sake, and more concerned with the principles and values that make for a good society. At stage 5 they emphasize basic rights and the democratic processes that give everyone a say, and at stage 6 they define the principles by which agreement will be most just.

The Stage Concept

Piaget, you will recall, proposed that true mental stages meet several criteria. They (1) are qualitatively different ways of thinking, (2) are structured wholes, (3) progress in an invariant sequence, (4) can be characterized as hierarchic integrations. and (5) are cross-cultural universals. Kohlberg has taken these criteria very seriously, trying to show how his stages meet them all. Let us consider these points one at a time.

1. *Qualitative differences*. It seems fairly clear that Kohlberg's stages are qualitatively different from one another. For example, stage 1 responses, which focus on obedience to authority, sound very different from stage 2 responses, which argue that each person is free to behave as he or she wishes. The two stages do not seem to differ along any quantitative dimension, they seem qualitatively different.

2. *Structured wholes*. By "structured wholes," Kohlberg means that the stages are not just isolated responses but are *general* patterns of thought that will consistently show up across many different kinds of issues. One gets a sense that this is true by reading through his scoring manual; one finds the same kinds of thinking reappearing on diverse items. For example, one item asks, "Why should a promise be kept?" As on the Heinz dilemma, children at stage 1 again speak in terms of obedience to rules, whereas those at stage 2 focus on exchanging favors that are in one's self-interest (e.g., "You never know when you're going to need that person to do something for you"). Similarly, as children proceed through the stages they keep giving responses that are similar to those to the Heinz dilemma (Gibbs et al., 1983, pp. 315-82).

   In addition, Kohlberg and his co-workers (Colby et al., 1983) have obtained quantitative estimates of the extent to which subjects respond in terms of one particular stage. Since some subjects might be in transition between stages, one does not expect perfect consistency. Nevertheless, Kohlberg found that subjects scored at their dominant stage across nine dilemmas about two-thirds of the time. This seems to be a fair degree of consistency, suggesting the stages may reflect general modes of thought.

3. *Invariant sequence*. Kohlberg believes that his stages unfold in an invariant sequence. Children always go from stage 1 to stage 2 to stage 3 and so forth. They do not skip stages or move through them in mixed-up orders. Not all children necessarily reach the highest stages; they might lack intellectual stimulation. But to the extent they do go through the stages, they proceed in order.

4. Most of Kohlberg's evidence on his stage sequence comes from *cross-sectional* data. That is, he interviewed different children at various ages to see if the younger ones were at lower stages than the older ones. Stages 1 and 2 are primarily found at the youngest age, whereas the higher stages become more prevalent as age increases. Thus, the data support the stage sequence.

   Cross-sectional findings, however, are inconclusive. In a cross-sectional study, different children are interviewed at each age, so there is no guarantee that any individual child actually moves through the stages in order. For example, there is no guarantee that a boy who is coded at stage 3 at age 13 actually passed through stages 1 and 2 in order when he was younger. More conclusive evidence must come from *longitudinal* studies, in which the same children are followed over time.

   The first two major longitudinal studies (Kohlberg and Kramer, 1969; Holstein, 1973) began with samples of teenagers and then tested them at three-year intervals. These studies produced ambiguous results. In both, most subjects either remained at the same stage or moved up one stage, but there were also some who might have skipped a stage. Furthermore, these studies indicated that some subjects had regressed, and this finding also bothered Kohlberg, because he believes that movement through his stages should always be forward.

Kohlberg's response to these troublesome findings was to revise his scoring method. He had already become uncomfortable with his first (1958b) scoring manual, believing that it relied too heavily on the *content* of subjects' answers rather than their underlying *reasoning.* and he had made some improvements on it. So, when these longitudinal findings emerged, he decided to develop a much more precise and adequate scoring system and, to some extent, to revise his definitions of the stages.

To create the latest scoring manual, Kohlberg and his co-workers (Colby et al., 1983) worked with seven boys from his original (1958) sample who had been retested every three or four years for 20 years. It was during this work that Kohlberg decided to drop stage 6.

Kohlberg then examined the hypothesis of invariant sequence for 51 other boys from his original sample, who also had been retested at least twice (every three or four years) over the 20-year period. This time, Kohlberg and his colleagues (Colby et al., 1983) found no stage-skipping, and only about 6 percent of the subjects showed signs of regressing. Four recent longitudinal studies have obtained similar results although, two have found somewhat more regression (up to 15 percent) (see Colby et al., 1983). In general, then, the new longitudinal studies seem to support the invariant-sequence hypothesis.

Kohlberg's new, longitudinal study has also changed the earlier picture of moral development in other ways. Stage 4 had become the dominant stage by age 16. In the new scoring system, however, it is more difficult to achieve the higher stages--the reasoning must be more clearly demonstrated--and Kohlberg finds that stage 4 does not become dominant until the boys are in their 20s and 30s. Stage 5, too, only appears in the mid-20s and never becomes very prevalent.

5.   **Hierarchic integration.** When Kohlberg says that his stages are hierarchically integrated, he means that people do not lose the insights gained at earlier stages, but integrate them into new, broader frameworks. For example, people at stage 4 can still understand stage 3 arguments, but they now subordinate them to wider considerations. They understand that Heinz had good motives for stealing, but they point out that if we all stole whenever we had a good motive, the social structure would break down. Thus stage 4 subordinates a concern for motives to a wider concern for the society as a whole.

The concept of hierarchic integration is very important for Kohlberg because it enables him to explain the direction of his stage sequence. Since he is not a maturationist, he cannot simply say that the sequence is wired into the genes. So he wants to show how each new stage provides a broader framework for dealing with moral issues. Stage 4, as mentioned, transcends the limitations of stage 3 and becomes more broadly concerned with social organization. Stage 5, in turn, sees the weakness of stage 4; a well-organized society is not necessarily a moral one. Stage 5 therefore considers the rights and orderly processes that make for a moral society. Each new stage retains the insights of the prior stage, but it recasts them into a broader framework. In this sense, each new stage is more cognitively adequate than the prior stage.

If Kohlberg is right about the hierarchic nature of his stages, we would expect that people would still be able to understand earlier stages but consider them inferior, In fact, when Rest (Rest et al., 1969; Rest, 1973) presented adolescents with arguments from different stages, this is what he found. They understood lower-stage reasoning, but they disliked it. What they preferred was the highest stage they heard, whether they fully understood it or not. This finding suggests, perhaps, that they had some intuitive sense of the greater adequacy of the higher stages.

Werner, we remember from Chapter 4, described hierarchic integration as a process that occurs alongside *differentiation,* and Kohlberg believes his stages represent increasingly differentiated structures as well. Kohlberg points out that the stage 5 value on life, for example, has become differentiated from other considerations. Stage 5 respondents say that we ought to value life for its own sake, regardless of its value to authorities (stage 1), its usefulness to oneself (stage 2), the affection it arouses in us (stage 3), or its value within a particular social order (stage 4). Stage 5 subjects have abstracted this value from other considerations and now treat it as a purely moral ideal. Their thinking, Kohlberg says, is becoming like that of the moral philosophers in the Kantian tradition (1981, p. 171).

6.   **Universal sequence.** Kohlberg, like all stage theorists, maintains that his stage sequence is universal; it is the same in all cultures. At first glance, this proposal might be surprising. Don't different cultures socialize their children differently, teaching them very different moral beliefs?

Kohlberg's response is that different cultures do teach different beliefs, but that his stages refer not to specific beliefs but to underlying modes of reasoning (Kohlberg and Gilligan, 197 1). For example, one culture might discourage physical fighting, while another encourages it more. As a result, children will have different beliefs about fighting, but they will still reason about it in the same way at the same stage. At stage 1, for example, one child might say that it is wrong to

fight when insulted "because you will get punished for it, "while another says that "it is all right to fight; you won't get punished." The beliefs differ, but both children reason about them in the same underlying way, in terms of the physical consequences (punishment). They do so because this is what they can cognitively grasp. Later on, the first child might argue that fighting is bad "because if everyone fought all the time there would be anarchy," while the second child argues that "people must defend their honor, because if they don't everyone will be insulting everyone, and the whole society will break down." Once again, the specific beliefs differ, reflecting different cultural teachings, but the underlying reasoning is the same--in this case it is stage 4, where people can consider something as abstract as the social order. Children, regardless of their beliefs, will always move to stage 4 thinking some time after stage 1 thinking because it is cognitively so much more sophisticated.

Kohlberg, then, proposes that his stage sequence will be the same in all cultures, for each stage is conceptually more advanced than the next. He and other researchers have given his interview to children and adults in a variety of cultures, including Mexico, Taiwan, Turkey, Israel, the Yucatan, Kenya, the Bahamas, and India. Most of the studies have been cross sectional, but a few have been longitudinal. Thus far, the studies have supported Kohlberg's stage sequence. To the extent that children move through the stages, they appear to move in order (Edwards, 1980).

At the same time, people in different cultures seem to move through the sequence at different rates and to reach different end-points. In the United States most urban middle-class adults reach stage 4, with a small percentage using some stage 5 reasoning. In urban areas of other countries the picture is fairly similar. In the isolated villages and tribal communities of many countries, however, it is rare to find any adult beyond stage 3 (Edwards, 1980).

Kohlberg (Nisan and Kohlberg, 1982) suggests that one can understand these findings in terms of Piagetian theory. Cultural factors, in this theory, do not directly shape the child's moral thought, but they do stimulate thinking. Social experiences can challenge children's ideas, motivating them to come up with new ones. In traditional villages, however, there may be little to challenge a stage 3 morality; the norms of care and empathy work very well in governing the face-to-face interactions of the group. Thus, there is little to stimulate thinking beyond this stage.

When, in contrast, young people leave the village and go off to the city, they witness the breakdown of interpersonal ties. They see that group norms of care and empathy have little impact on the impersonal interactions of city life, and they see the need for a formal legal structure to ensure moral conduct. They begin to think in terms of stage 4 morality. Furthermore, as Keniston (1971) notes, if young people attend the universities, they may take classes in which the teachers deliberately question the unexamined assumptions of their childhoods and adolescences. Thus they are stimulated to think about moral matters in new ways.

Moral Thought and Moral Behavior

Kohlberg's scale has to do with moral thinking, not moral action. As everyone knows, people who can talk at a high moral level may not behave accordingly. Consequently, we would not expect perfect correlations between moral judgment and moral action. Still, Kohlberg thinks that there should be some relationship.

As a general hypothesis, he proposes that moral behavior is more consistent, predictable. and responsible at the higher stages (Kohlberg et al., 1975), because the stages themselves increasingly employ more stable and general standards. For example, whereas stage 3 bases decisions on others' feelings, which can vary, stage 4 refers to set rules and laws. Thus, we can expect that moral behavior, too, will become more consistent as people move up the sequence. Generally speaking, there is some research support for this hypothesis (e.g., with respect to cheating), but the evidence is not clear-cut (Blasi, 1980; Brown and Herrnstein, 1975).

Some research has focused on the relationships between particular stages and specific kinds of behavior. For example, one might expect that juvenile delinquents or criminals would typically reason at stages 1 or 2, viewing morality as something imposed from without (stage 1) or as a matter of self-interest (stage 2), rather than identifying with society's conventional expectations (stages 3 and 4). Again, some research supports this hypothesis, but there also are some ambiguous results (Blasi, 1980).

Several studies have examined the relationship between postconventional thinking and student protest. In a landmark study, Haan et al. (1968) examined the moral reasoning of those who participated in the Berkeley Free Speech Movement in 1964. Haan found that their thinking was more strongly postconventional than that of a matched sample of nonparticipants, but this f inding was not replicated for some other protests, apparently because moral principles were not at stake (Keniston, 1971, pp. 260-6 1).

Blasi (1980), after reviewing 75 studies, concludes that overall there is a relationship between moral thought and action, but he suggests that we need to introduce other variables to clarify this relationship. One variable may simply be the extent to which individuals themselves feel the need to maintain consistency between their moral thoughts and actions (Blasi, 1980, Kohlberg and Candee, 1981).

Moral Thought and Other Forms of Cognition

Kohlberg has also tried to relate his moral stages to other forms of cognition. He has first analyzed his stages in terms of their underlying cognitive structures and has then looked for parallels in purely logical and social thought. For this purpose, he has analyzed his own stages in terms of implicit *role-taking capacities,* capacities to consider others' viewpoints (Kohlberg, 1976; see also Selman, 1976, and Rest, 1983).

At first, at stage 1, children hardly seem to recognize that viewpoints differ. They assume that there is only one right view, that of authorities. At stage 2, in contrast, they recognize that people have different interests and viewpoints. They seem to be overcoming egocentrism; they see that perspectives are relative to the individual . They also begin to consider how individuals might coordinate their interests in terms of mutually beneficial deals.

At stage 3, people conceptualize role-taking as a deeper, more empathic process; one becomes concerned with the other's feelings. Stage 4, in turn, has a broader, society-wide conception of how people coordinate their roles through the legal system..

Stages 5 and 6, finally, take a more idealized look at how people might coordinate their interests. Stage 5 emphasizes democratic processes, and stage 6 considers how all parties take one another's perspectives according to the principles of justice.

The moral stages, then, reflect expanded insights into how perspectives differ and might be coordinated. As such, the moral stages might be related to stages of logical and social thought which contain similar insights. So far, the empirical evidence suggests that advances in moral thinking may rest upon prior achievements in these other realms (Kohlberg, 1976; Kuhn et al., 1977). For example, children seem to advance to stage 2, overcoming their egocentrism in the moral sphere, only after they have made equivalent progress in their logical and social thought. If this pattern is correct, we can expect to find many individuals who are logical and even socially insightful but still underdeveloped in their moral judgment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

Kohlberg would like to see people advance to the highest possible stage of moral thought. The best possible society would contain individuals who not only understand the need for social order (stage 4) but can entertain visions of universal principles, such as justice and liberty (stage 6) (Kohlberg, 1970).

How, then, can one promote moral development? Turiel (1966) found that when children listened to adults' moral judgments, the resulting change was slight. This is what Kohlberg might have expected, for he believes that if children are to reorganize their thinking, they must be more active.

Accordingly, Kohlberg encouraged another student, Moshe Blatt, to lead discussion groups in which children had a chance to grapple actively with moral issues (Blatt and Kohlberg, 1975). Blatt presented moral dilemmas which engaged the classes in a good deal of heated debate. He tried to leave much of the discussion to the children themselves, stepping in only to summarize, clarify, and sometimes present a view himself (p. 133). He encouraged arguments that were one stage above those of most of the class. In essence, he tried to implement one of Kohlberg's main ideas on how children move through the stages. They do so by encountering views which challenge their thinking and stimulate them to formulate better arguments (Kohlberg et al., 1975).

Blatt began a typical discussion by telling a story about a man named Mr. Jones who had a seriously injured son and wanted to rush him to the hospital. Mr. Jones had no car, so he approached a stranger, told him about the situation, and asked to borrow his car. The stranger, however, refused, saying he had an important appointment to keep. So Mr. Jones took the car by force. Blatt then asked whether Mr. Jones should have done that.

In the discussion that followed, one child, Student B, felt that Mr. Jones had a good cause for taking the car and also believed that the stranger could be charged with murder if the son died. Student C pointed out that the stranger violated no law. Student B still felt that the stranger's behavior was somehow wrong, even though he now realized that it was not legally

wrong. Thus, Student B was in a kind of conflict. He had a sense of the wrongness of the stranger's behavior, but he could not articulate this sense in terms that would meet the objection. He was challenged to think about the problem more deeply.

In the end, Blatt gave him the answer. The stranger's behavior, Blatt said, was not legally wrong, but morally wrong--wrong according to God's laws (this was a Sunday School Class). At this point, Blatt was an authority teaching the "correct" view. In so doing, he might have robbed Student B of the chance to formulate spontaneously his own position. He might have done better to ask a question or to simply clarify the student's conflict (e.g,, "So it's not legally wrong, but you still have a sense that, it's somehow wrong. . ."). In any case, it seems clear that part of this discussion was valuable for this student. Since he himself struggled to formulate a distinction that could handle the objection, he could fully appreciate and assimilate a new view that he was looking for.

The Kohlberg-Blatt method of inducing cognitive conflict exemplifies Piaget's equilibration model. The child takes one view, becomes confused by discrepant information, and then resolves the confusion by forming a more advanced and comprehensive position. The method is also the dialectic process of Socratic teaching. The students give a view, the teacher asks questions which get them to see the inadequacies of their views, and they are then motivated to formulate better positions.

In Blatt's first experiment, the students (sixth graders) participated in 12 weekly discussion groups. Blatt found that over half the students moved up one full stage after the 12 weeks. Blatt and others have tried to replicate these findings, sometimes using other age groups and lengthier series of classes. As often happens with replications, the results have not been quite so successful; upward changes have been smaller--usually a third of a stage or less, Still, it generally seems that Socratic classroom discussions held over several months can produce changes that, while small, are significantly greater than those found in control groups who do not receive these experiences (Rest, 1983).

One of Blatt's supplementary findings was that those students who reported that they were most "interested" in the discussions made the greatest amount of change. This finding is in keeping with Piagetian theory. Children develop not because they are shaped through external reinforcements but because their curiosity is aroused. They become interested in information that does not quite fit into their existing cognitive structures and are thereby motivated to revise their thinking Another Kohlberg student--M. Berkowitz (1980)--is examining actual dialogues to see if those who become most challenged and involved in the tensions of moral debate are also those who move forward.

Although Kohlberg remains committed to the cognitive-conflict model of change, he has also become interested in other strategies. One is the "just Community" approach. Here the focus is not the individuals but groups. For example, Kohlberg and some of his colleagues (Power and Reimer, 1979) set up a special democratic high school group and actively encouraged the students to think of themselves as a community. Initially, little community feeling was present. The group's dominant orientation was stage 2; it treated problems such as stealing as purely individual matters. If a boy had something stolen, it was too bad for him. After a year, however, the group norms advanced to stage 3; the students now considered stealing to be a community issue that reflected on the degree of trust and care in the group.

It will be interesting to see if the just community approach can promote further advances in moral thinking. In the meantime, this approach has aroused some uneasiness among some of Kohlberg's associates. In particular, Reimer et al. (1983) have wondered whether Kohlberg, by explicitly encouraging the students to think of themselves as a community, is not practicing a form of indoctrination. Reimer says that he has talked to Kohlberg about this, and he has come away convinced that Kohlberg is committed to democratic groups in which students are encouraged "to think critically, to discuss assumptions, and. when they feel it is necessary, to challenge the teacher's suggestions" (p. 252). Thus, moral development remains a product of the students' own thinking.