Kohlberg’s Stages of Moral Development

Lawrence Kohlberg (1927-1987) was a moral psychologist. He taught at the University of Chicago and later at Harvard University. His research focused on the development of moral judgment in children. He interviewed a group of 75 American boys every 3 years, from ages 10 to 28, posing questions prompting them to make and explain their moral judgments about some hard cases. He later extended his study to boys in other cultures.

Ontogenesis

Biologists and psychologists use the term “ontogenesis” to refer to structured growth from infancy to maturity, involving identifiable stages of development. Kohlberg was influenced by the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1896-1980) in studying the ontogenesis of moral judgment.

- A key assumption of ontogenesis is that the process is progress—each new stage is an improvement upon the prior stage, with the final stage of maturity being the goal. Ontogenesis is thus the process by which normal functioning emerges. Kohlberg’s ontogenetic theory is about the process of learning how to make correct moral judgments.

- Learning developed through ontogenesis does not require teaching. It is assumed to be a natural process, which all of us undergo on our own; though some may not develop fully.

Levels and Stages

Kohlberg found that boys progress through three levels in developing maturity of moral judgment, with each level having two stages.

1. **The Preconventional Level** (before age 10)
   
   Moral restrictions regarded as important for purely personal reasons: in order to avoid being punished for violating them (stage 1); and in order to be rewarded for obeying (stage 2).

2. **The Conventional Level** (ages 10-16)
   
   Conformity to moral rules regarded as meeting social expectations: others’ approval is important (stage 3); and law and authority must be obeyed, regardless of rewards (stage 4).

3. **The Post Conventional Level** (age 16 and after)
   
   Separation of morality from social authority: recognition of individuals’ moral values, with a contractual or utilitarian basis for a common morality (stage 5); and subsequently, recognition of abstract universal principles like the “Golden Rule” and the “Categorical Imperative” (stage 6).
Would A Mercy-Killing Be Right?

One of Kohlberg’s examples of stage-transition is the different moral judgments made by the same subject at different ages. When asked whether it would be right for a doctor to kill a woman patient suffering unbearable pain, he gave these three explanations:

Age 16: “In one way, it’s murder, it’s not a right or privilege of man to decide who shall live and who should die. God put life into everybody on earth....There’s something of God in everyone.”

Age 20: “If it’s her own choice, I think there are certain rights and privileges that go along with being a human being. I am a human being and have certain desires for life and I think everybody else does too.”

Age 24: “A human life takes precedence over any other moral or legal value, whoever it is. A human life has inherent value whether or not it is valued by a particular individual.”

Kohlberg suggests the subject exhibited stage-4 thinking at age 16, basing morality on God’s authority. At 20 he was at stage 5, recognizing individuals’ moral authority over their own lives. At 24, his stage-6 thinking is evident in his recognition of a universal value overriding individual preference.

Moral Development: Judgment or Character?

Kohlberg explained that he purposely focused his research on the development of moral judgment rather than on moral-character development, because he was skeptical that moral character traits exist.

The earliest major psychological study of moral character, that of Hugh Hartshorne and Mark May in 1928-1930, focused on a bag of virtues including honesty, service (altruism or generosity), and self-control. To their dismay, they found that there were no character traits, psychological dispositions or entities which correspond to words like honest, service, or self-control. Regarding honesty, for instance…if a person cheats in one situation, it doesn't mean that he will or won't in another. In other words, it is not an identifiable character trait, dishonesty, that makes a child cheat in a given situation.


 Criticisms of Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development

- The research focused only on boys. Women’s moral thinking is ignored. Kohlberg found that girls rarely advance past stage 3.

- The theory focuses too heavily on rationality and justice. Many see empathy and caring virtues as important parts of morality not reflected in Kohlberg’s research.

- The theory deals poorly with inconsistencies in moral judgment. Subjects in higher stages of development do not always judge as predicted for their stage.