Kohlberg’s Stages of Moral Development

Working as a developmental psychologist then turning his interest to the field of moral education, Lawrence Kohlberg became to be well known for his theory of moral development. His theory spurred the interest of the psychological community on moral development (Nucci, 2002). His ideas were influenced by Jean Piaget, John Dewey, and James Mark Baldwin. He argued that experiences shape children’s understandings of moral concepts such as justice, rights, equality, and human welfare. Kohlberg developed his theory from the research that he conducted at Harvard’s Center for Moral Education (Barger, 2000). To evaluate the moral stages, Kohlberg made a series of moral dilemmas that pit one moral value against another (Kalat, 2002). He observed the explanations, not the choices, that the subject made. The explanations were used to match the subject to one of Kohlberg’s stages. Kohlberg’s theory of levels and stages of moral reasoning is supported by findings from longitudinal and cross-cultural research. Kohlberg divided moral development into six distinguished stages which can be identified into three major levels.

The first level is the level of pre-conventional morality. The first stage is defined by punishment and obedience. This stage is characterized by the elementary school level (Barger, 2000). People follow the rules of authority because they are afraid of punishment, which is related to Piaget’s identification of the stage of ego-centrism (Nucci, 2002). In this stage, people consider something to be bad if it is related with punishment. In contrast, if something brings rewards, it is considered as good. People also consider something to be good if it is in their immediate self-interest (Kalat, 2002). As a small child in elementary school, I learned that doing homework is a good thing only because when I finished my homework before playing, my mom gave me a piece of candy or chocolate as a reward. I learned that stealing is bad when I was
punished by my mom for stealing a quarter from her purse. As a punishment, my mom made me raise both of my arms up for an hour. It was only the fear of punishment that stopped me from stealing more money from my mom’s purse. The second stage is characterized by individualism and instrumentalism. It is distinguished from the first stage by the emergence of moral reciprocity (Nucci, 2002). People do things that seem practical in their own perspective. The second stage is similar to the Golden Rule, thinking in terms of an agreement, exchange, or a deal. One helps another only for the benefit and expectation that the other will help him when he himself needs help. This attitude is attained by understanding that everyone has his or her own interest that can be relatively related to each other to bring mutual benefits. People of the second stage accept delayed benefits (Kalat, 2002). Giving gifts can be an act that can be explained by the second stage. A young adult, or teenager like me, gives birthday gifts to his or her friends and in return, he or she expects those friends to return the favor by giving him or her presents on his or her birthday. Every semester, I spend countless hours studying to earn good grades. Even though I would rather go out with friends, I choose to study at home because I believe that earning good grades will secure a better future for me. In broad context, the first level is marked by the dominance of egocentrism in reasoning.

Kohlberg called the second level the level of conventional morality. This level is generally found in society, inferred by its title, “conventional” (Barger, 2000). The third stage, or first stage of the second level, is marked by interpersonal concordance. People of this stage act to receive the others’ approval and acceptance. They prioritize agreements and expectations over their personal interests. They conform to the expectations of their local community or their families. Peer pressure is an example of this stage. Most teenagers do things so that they can be accepted by their friends, even if it is against their personal interest. As a student, I follow the
rules of the school. As an offspring, I obey to the words of my parents over my own opinions because I am expected to show them my respect. In the fourth stage, defined as law and order orientation, right and wrong is determined by the person’s role in the society or his duty (Kalat, 2002). Under the fourth stage, people abide the law and act to fulfill their responsibilities. Different from the third stage, the fourth stage focuses on the wider perspective, on the larger society instead of one’s own local community. People see themselves as a “member of society.” They see the necessity to obey the law. What society defines as right, people act obediently and conform to its demands. Their acts are results of the belief that conventions are necessary to uphold the society (Nucci, 2002).

The third level of moral development, the level of post-conventional or principled morality, is characterized by a “prior to society” perspective (Nucci, 2002). Instead of blindly reasoning on the law itself, people in the third level focus on the principles that underlie those rules. To them it is not the law itself that is important, but it is the purpose and goal of having the law, such as justice and order, that is important. Kohlberg believed that the majority of adults do not reach the third level of moral thinking (Barger, 2000). The fifth stage, social-contract legalistic orientation, is marked by the belief that laws are flexible. If there are necessity to change the laws, it is right to change certain laws. When the law is not fully carrying out its purpose such as promoting for people’s benefits, it is right to change the law. There can be exceptions to strictly conforming to the law. The sixth stage, universal ethical principle orientation, focuses on absolute values such as respect for human life (Kalat, 2002). There can be situations where breaking the law is considered right and moral. People of this stage show respect for human life itself, not human law. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. are exemplary figures who have attained the sixth level of moral reasoning. These figures acted
according to what they saw as an act of justice, instead of blindly following the law. Because they saw that some laws of the society were unjust, they refused to behave obediently to those laws. Instead, they took a step further ahead and aroused movements to put justice into the law system.

Kohlberg’s stages of moral reasoning based on justice is analogous to Piaget’s stages of intellectual development. Kohlberg defined moral reasoning as a process that is similar to stages of intellectual growth. He believed people pass through distinct stages. They start low at the first stage of the process, then slowly advance into the next stages as they mature. However, Kohlberg’s view of distinct stages did not always seem to be consistent with the findings from his devised series of moral dilemmas. Some people fluctuated in their stages of reasoning. They skipped a stage or went back to a lower stage after reaching a higher stage. It was also noticed that there was a big gap between the level of moral reasoning of 10 year olds and the one of 16 year olds. Kohlberg suggested that this sudden growth of moral reasoning results from cognitive growth that occurs between those years (Kalat, 2002).
References

