

Moral Development

A chapter by [Dianne K. Daeg de Mott](#) in [Encyclopedia of Childhood and Adolescence](#)

Moral development involves the formation of a system of values on which to base decisions concerning "right" and "wrong," or "good" and "bad." **Values** are underlying assumptions about standards that govern moral decisions.

Although morality has been a topic of discussion since the beginning of human civilization, the scientific study of moral development did not begin in earnest until the late 1950s. Lawrence Kohlberg (1927-1987), an American psychologist building upon Jean Piaget's work in cognitive reasoning, posited six stages of moral development in his 1958 doctoral thesis. Since that time, morality and moral development have become acceptable subjects of scientific research. Prior to Kohlberg's work, the prevailing positivist view claimed that science should be "value-free"--that morality had no place in scientific studies. By choosing to study moral development scientifically, Kohlberg broke through the positivist boundary and established morality as a legitimate subject of scientific research.

There are several approaches to the study of moral development, which are categorized in a variety of ways. Briefly, the social learning theory approach claims that humans develop morality by learning the rules of acceptable behavior from their external environment (an essentially behaviorist approach). Psychoanalytic theory proposes instead that morality develops through humans' conflict between their instinctual drives and the demands of society. Cognitive development theories view morality as an outgrowth of cognition, or reasoning, whereas personality theories are holistic in their approach, taking into account all the factors that contribute to human development.

The differences between these approaches rest on two questions: 1) where do humans begin on their moral journey; and 2) where do we end up? In other words, how moral are infants at birth? And how is "moral maturity" defined? What is the ideal morality to which we aspire? The contrasting philosophies at the heart of the answers to these questions determine the essential perspective of each moral development theory. Those who believe infants are born with no moral sense tend towards social learning or behaviorist theories (as all morality must therefore be learned from the external environment). Others who believe humans are innately aggressive and completely self-oriented are more likely to accept psychoanalytic theories (where morality is the learned management of socially destructive internal drives).

Those who believe it is our reasoning abilities that separate us from the rest of creation will find cognitive development theories the most attractive, while those who view humans as holistic beings who are born with a full range of potentialities will most likely be drawn to personality theories.

What constitutes "mature morality" is a subject of great controversy. Each society develops its own set of norms and standards for acceptable behavior, leading many to say that morality is entirely culturally conditioned. Does this mean there are no universal truths, no cross-cultural standards for human behavior? The debate over this question fuels the critiques of many moral development theories. Kohlberg's six stages of moral development, for example, have been criticized for elevating Western, urban, intellectual (upper class) understandings of morality, while discrediting rural, tribal, working class, or Eastern moral understandings. (See Kohlberg's theory of moral reasoning.) Feminists have pointed out potential sexist elements in moral development theories devised by male researchers using male subjects only (such as Kohlberg's early work). Because women's experience in the world is different from men's (in every culture), it would stand to reason that women's moral development might differ from men's, perhaps in significant ways.

Definitions of what is or is not moral are currently in a state of upheaval within individual societies as well as, at least, in the Western world. Controversies rage over the morality of warfare (especially nuclear), ecological conservation, genetic research and manipulation, alternative fertility and childbearing methods, abortion, sexuality, pornography, drug use, euthanasia, racism, sexism, and human rights issues, among others. Determining the limits of moral behavior becomes increasingly difficult as human capabilities, choices, and responsibilities proliferate with advances in technology and scientific knowledge. For example, prenatal testing techniques that determine birth defects in utero force parents to make new moral choices about whether to birth a child. Other examples of recently created moral questions abound in modern-day society.

Therefore, the study of moral development is lively today. The rise in crime, drug and alcohol abuse, gang violence, teen parenthood, and suicide in recent years in Western society has also caused a rise in concern over morality and moral development. Parents and teachers want to know how to raise moral children, and they turn to moral development theorists to find the answers. Freudian personality theories became more widely known to the Western public in the 1960s and were understood to imply that repression of a

child's natural drives would lead to neuroses. Many parents and teachers were therefore afraid to discipline their children, and permissiveness became the rule. Cognitive development theories did little to change things, as they focus on reasoning and disregard behavior. (After a great deal of criticism in this regard, Kohlberg and other cognitive development theorists did begin to include moral actions in their discussions and education programs, but their emphasis is still on reasoning alone.) Behaviorist theories, with their complete denial of free will in moral decision-making, are unattractive to many and require such precise, dedicated, behavior modification techniques to succeed that few people are able to apply them in real-life situations.

The continuing breakdown of society, however, is beginning to persuade people that permissiveness is not the answer and another approach must be found. Schools are returning to "character education" programs, popular in the 1920s and 1930s, where certain "virtues" such as honesty, fairness, and loyalty, are taught to students along with the regular academic subjects. Unfortunately, there is little or no agreement as to which "virtues" are important and what exactly each "virtue" means. For example, when a student expresses dislike of another student, is she or he practicing the virtue of "fairness" or, rather, being insensitive to another's feelings? If a student refuses to salute the flag, is he or she betraying the virtue of "loyalty" or, rather, being loyal to some higher moral precept? These complex questions plague "character education" programs today, and their effectiveness remains in dispute.

Another approach to moral education that became popular in the 1960s and 1970s is known as "values clarification" or "values modification." The purpose of these programs is to guide students to establish (or discern) their own system of values on which to base their moral decisions. Students are also taught that others may have different values systems, and that they must be tolerant of those differences. The advantages of this approach are that it promotes self-investigation and awareness and the development of internal moral motivations (which are more reliable than external motivations), and prevents fanaticism, authoritarianism, and moral coercion. The disadvantage is that it encourages moral relativism, the belief that "anything goes." Pushed to its extreme, it creates social chaos because no one can be held to any universal (or societal) moral standard. "Values clarification" is generally seen today to be a valuable component of moral education, but incomplete on its own.

Lawrence Kohlberg devised a moral education program in the 1960s based on his cognitive development theory. Called the Just Community program, it utilizes age-appropriate (or stage-appropriate) discussions of moral dilemmas, democratic rule-making, and the creation of a community context where students and teachers can *act* on their moral decisions. Just Community programs have been established in schools, prisons, and other institutions with a fair amount of success. Exposure to moral questions and the opportunity to practice moral behavior in a supportive community appear to foster deeper moral reasoning and more constructive behavior.

Overall, democratic family and school systems are much more likely to promote the development of internal self-controls and moral growth than are authoritarian or permissive systems. Permissive systems fail to instill *any* controls, while authoritarian systems instill only fear of punishment, which is not an effective deterrent unless there is a real chance of being caught (punishment can even become a reward for immoral behavior when it is the only attention a person ever gets). True moral behavior involves a number of internal processes that are best developed through warm, caring parenting with clear and consistent expectations, emphasis on the reinforcement of positive behaviors (rather than the punishment of negative ones), modeling of moral behavior by adults, and creation of opportunities for the child to practice moral reasoning and actions.

As previously stated, there is disagreement as to the exact motivations involved in moral behavior.

Whatever the motivations, however, the internal processes remain the same.

The Four Component model describes them as follows:

- 1) moral sensitivity = empathy (identifying with another's experience) and cognition of the effect of various possible actions on others;
- 2) moral judgment = choosing which action is the most moral;
- 3) moral motivation = deciding to behave in the moral way, as opposed to other options; and
- 4) implementation = carrying out the chosen moral action.

According to personal (social) goal theory, moral (or prosocial) behavior is motivated by the desire to satisfy a variety of personal and social goals, some of which are self-oriented (selfish), and some of which are other-oriented (altruistic). The four major internal motivations for moral behavior as presented by personal (social) goal theorists are: 1) empathy; 2) the belief that people are valuable in and of themselves and therefore should be helped; 3) the desire to fulfill moral rules; and 4) self-interest. In social domain theory, moral reasoning is said to develop within particular social "domains": 1) moral (e.g., welfare, justice, rights); 2) social-conventional (social rules for the orderly function of society); and 3) personal (pure self-interest, exempt from social or moral rules).

Most people in fact have more than one moral "voice" and shift among them depending on the situation. In one context, a person may respond out of empathy and place care for one person over concern for social rules. In a different context, that same person might instead insist on following social rules for the good of society, even though someone may suffer because of it. People also show a lack of consistent morality by sometimes choosing to act in a way that they know is not moral, while continuing to consider themselves "moral" people. This discrepancy between moral judgment (perceiving an act as morally right or wrong) and moral choice (deciding whether to act in the morally "right" way) can be explained in a number of ways, any one of which may be true in a given situation:

- weakness of will (the person is overwhelmed by desire);
- weakness of conscience (guilt feelings are not strong enough to overcome temptation); or
- limited/flexible morality (some latitude allowed in moral behavior while still maintaining a "moral" identity).

The Moral Balance model proposes that most humans operate out of a limited or flexible morality. Rather than expecting moral perfection from ourselves or others, we set certain limits beyond which we cannot go. Within those limits, however, there is some flexibility in moral decision-making. Actions such as taking coins left in the change-box of a public telephone may be deemed acceptable (though not perfectly moral), while stealing money from an open, unattended cash register is not. Many factors are involved in the determination of moral acceptability from situation to situation, and the limits on moral behavior are often slippery. If given proper encouragement and the opportunity to practice a coherent inner sense of morality, however, most people will develop a balanced morality to guide their day-to-day interactions with their world.

