

Recurrent issues in the moral development of children and the need for a new approach

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ABSTRACT This paper investigates how moral development occurs in children. It describes theoretical concepts of moral development—from past to present, especially contemporary thoughts on moral development, from preschool to post-compulsory education. The paper also examines both deterministic and non-deterministic current global moral situations or dilemmas such as moral judgments, ethics and cultures, that necessitate new ideas on the moral development of children. Finally, the paper suggests a new approach, based on group interaction, for children's moral development.

Keywords: Moral development, Moral education, Children, Ethics, Cultural practices

Introduction

Moral development is concerned with the principles of right and wrong behaviour. Being 'moral' means the courage to face opposition bravely [for example] when doing what is right. Moral development is based on people's sense of what is right—including legal rights and obligations—and which follows the standards of right behaviour and good virtues. Moral development can also be described as being able to understand the differences between right and wrong; the teaching of good behaviour (Oxford Dictionary, 1994, p. 804). Moral development is also the process through which children develop proper attitudes and behaviours towards other people, based on social and cultural norms, rules and laws.

Moral development of children should concern every parent. To teach a child to distinguish right from wrong and to behave accordingly should be the goal of

parenting. According to *enotes.com* (2010), moral development is a complex issue, which has not been studied in any scientific way until the late 1950s. Distinguished Turkish philosopher, Hancerlioglu (1989), states that morality is a science that determines or investigates whole behavioural roles of society. Another well known Turkish philosopher, Develioglu (1986) claims that morality is a science that teaches us some rules and norms about goodness—being good to oneself—and about eschewing all forms of inappropriate behaviour towards others.

The nature of morality and its relationships with our biology and our society have been debated by philosophers and psychologists for many centuries. Three main points were advanced—they include children's views on the relationship between convention and morality; the experiences that lead to different levels of moral judgment; and the importance of emotion in moral development (see Meadows, 2010, p. 100). Driscoll and Nagel (2008) explain that families should start to teach children why what is 'appropriate' is 'appropriate' and what is 'inappropriate' is 'inappropriate.' The traditions, customs and strategies of rearing and bringing up children are evergreen. Socialisation of children, for instance, is a form of moral development; it is also a feature of growing up. Therefore, certain ideas about human development influence or shape children upbringing, education and work.

This paper re-examines how people develop morality—from early to contemporary studies. Much has been written about moral development, but it seems contemporary writers on moral development are stuck on the ideas of early philosophers. This paper suggests a new approach for children's moral development.

Historical and philosophical perspectives of moral development

Confucius (551-479 B.C.E.) believed that humans are social beings: they must interact with society without necessarily surrendering to it—even though individuals may conform to a 'moral path' (Ozmon and Crover, 1999, p. 104). Idealist view of educational philosophy of moral development is concerned with moral character, which is seen as thoughtful actions. Kant (1991) sees character development as a proper aim of education. He made reason the source of moral law; consequently, goodwill, for example, is seen as a morally valuable. According to Horne (1977), students should be 'educated' to resist temptations and to apply themselves to the tasks at hand. Realist emphasised the 'practical' side of education, which includes education for moral and character development.

John Locke, Johann Herbart and Herbert Spencer all said education should be [in part] about 'moral education'. Whitehead (1967) added that 'the essence of education is that it should be religious.' Spencer (1916) held that science provides

for both moral and intellectual education because the pursuit of science demands integrity, self-sacrifice and courage. For Locke, a good character is superior to intellectual training; but Locke's views on character education seem to have been directed primarily at the English gentry of his day who were supposed to set examples for the rest of society (Locke, 2010). According to Ozmon (1999, pp. 72-73), Hebart believed that moral education is founded on knowledge and Spencer agreed with this theory.

Theoretical basis for moral development

Freud's work is considered a starting point in modern educational psychology, especially as it concerned personality development. Although Freud concentrates mainly on emotional development, his theory of morality is based on 'conscience' and 'superego.' In Freud's view, a 'desire for sex and aggression' [for instance] are serious issues of personality (Freud, 1961). Durkheim (1925, p. 104) viewed moral development as a process of instilling respect for society so each member would conform to social norms. He agreed with Piaget's (1932) 're-moral' development of young children—i.e. children learning to conform to social prescriptions. Children also learned how to cooperate, by reasoning, with one another analysing in the process, ways of reconciling competing goals and interests. In Piaget's view, not every aspect of morality is 'imposed by the group upon the individual or by the adult on the child'. Accordingly:

the morality of constraint is that of duty pure and simple and of heteronomy. The child accepts from the adult a certain number of commands to which it must submit whatever the circumstances may be. Right is what conforms to these commands; wrong is what fails to do so; the intention plays a very small part in this conception, and the responsibility is entirely objective (Piaget, 1932).

There are two major descriptions of children's motivation for moral behaviour: the first is mutual respect for one another [in a group] and desire for solidarity in coordinating group activity for mutual benefit. This mutual respect and solidarity should occur between a child and an adult. The second being differences between adults, and peers interaction between children. According to Piaget,

adults are overbearing, authoritarian, demand obedience; teach 'ought,' but not means of cooperation. Peers are less compelling; communicate their views and needs and rationales; respect the autonomous role of the child (Piaget).

Piaget makes clear how a child's development occurs cognitively. According to him, there are three moral developmental stages for any child. Rules, intention and punishment shape the child's moral development. 0—5 ages are named as premoral. In this stage, the child's age and limited interaction outside world cause little understanding about rules. 5—10 years are the moral realism stage when the child starts to face punishment and justice. Exploration of punishment and psychological immanent justice is one of the main factors in which the child interacts with the real world. After 10 years of age, the point of moral relativism starts: recognising personal aims, goals or intention and punishment of vice versus process are characteristics of this period.

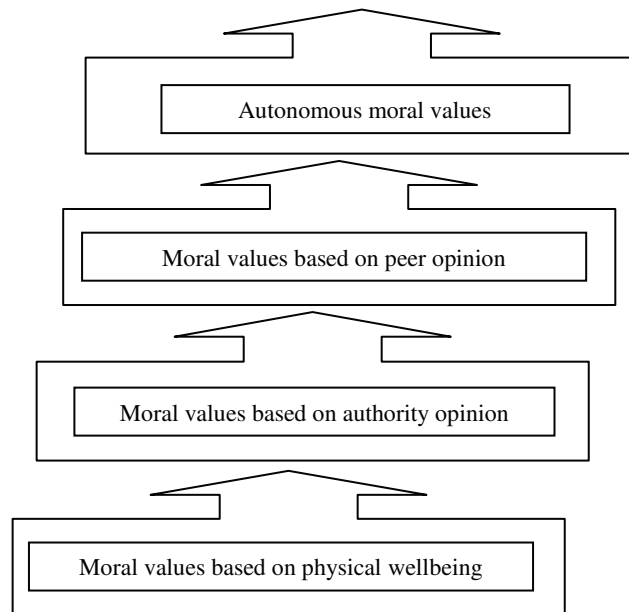


Figure 1: Piaget's Moral Development Hierarchy

Piaget initiated much of the scholarly research—discussion and theorising—that has characterised developmental and moral psychology until now. For Piaget, stages are descriptive taxonomic categories that classify formal 'morphological' properties of children's thinking on an epistemic level. Much the way a biologist might classify various species of mollusks on the basis of their structural characteristics, so too are forms of thought differentiated on the basis of structural properties. The resulting taxonomy is a stage sequence that describes species of knowledge, varieties and kinds of mental operations, and not different kinds of persons (Chapman, 1988). Piaget argues that educators can promote the development of

mature moral reasoning by talking with children as equal collaborators in the search for knowledge. According to Snarey and Samuelson (2008, p. 56), educators who speak with 'indoctrinative' authority, however, will promote the consolidation of childish reasoning.

The most widely discussed theory of moral development was advanced by Kohlberg (1984). Kohlberg asks subjects to resolve moral dilemmas. For example, he tells them about a man named Heinz who cannot afford to pay for a drug needed to save his wife from cancer. Kohlberg identifies six stages (operations), grouped into three levels. These operations make possible a deep appreciation of the moral point of view, one that seeks consensus, decries ethical relativism and accedes to the duties and obligations required by universal moral imperatives (Lapsley, 2006). Yet Kohlberg's research programme did not leave much room for reflection on how moral cognition intersects with personological processes, according to Lapsley (2008, p. 32).

Kohlberg's study, however, focused on cognitive elements of being moral. His work provides us with an insight into how children develop their own morality irrespective of their cultural backgrounds. Kohlberg feels that a child's moral development is not as simple as was explained by Piaget. According to Kohlberg (1971), moral development involves more stages than Piaget's four-structured hierarchy. Kohlberg developed a six-stage model which was broken down into three levels; two stages at each level. As can be seen from Table 1 (on page 102), there is no age interval; perhaps this is the one of the high points of Kohlberg's moral development theory. His theory not only helps us to explain 'past' moral judgment and behaviour of children but, also helps us to predict their 'future' moral behavioural theory. The moral education model, which is founded on Kohlberg's founded on his theory, therefore offers a clear guidance for children rearing/upbringing.

Critics of Kohlberg's 'traditional approach' say his theory provides no guiding principle for defining what 'virtues' are worthy of espousal—it wrongly assumes a 'community' consensus on what constitute 'positive values'. Gilligan (1982), a critic of Kohlberg, posits that the latter's was biased against women, because only males were used in his studies. In Gilligan's view, 'morality of care' could as well serve as the 'morality of justice and rights'. Gillian premised morality of 'caring and responsibility' in nonviolence; she based 'morality of justice and rights' on equality. As Peters (1971) stated, Kohlberg's findings are important, but there is a danger that they may become 'exalted' into a general theory of moral development. (Kohlberg was the first to admit that he did little to develop the details of such a general ethical theory.) Yet, without such a theory, the notion of moral development might not have been sustained (Kohlberg, 1971, pp. 263—264).

Table 1: Kohlberg's Moral Development (adapted from Kohlberg, 1960)

Level	Name	Characteristics
Level 1	Pre-conventional (Premoral Level)	
Stage 1	Heteronomous morality (Punishment and obedience orientation)	Sticks to the rules.
Stage 2	Individualism/instrumentalism (Naive instrumental orientation)	Concrete individual interests; awareness of others' interests.
Level 2	Conventional	
Stage 3	Mutual interpersonal (expectations and conformity; 'good boy', 'nice girl' orientation)	Lives up to others' expectations in order to be seen to be good; there is self-regard in being good.
Stage 4	Social system and conscience (Law and order orientation)	Fulfils social duties in order to keep the social system going.
Level 3	Post-conventional (Principle or Autonomous Level)	
Stage 5	Social contract	Upholds relative rules in the interest of impartiality and welfare for all.
Stage 6	Universal ethical principles	Follows self-chosen ethical principles, even when they conflict with the laws.

Contemporary approaches to moral development

Kohlberg and Candee (1984, p.53) see the 'development of moral judgment as a single-track process'. In this view, moral judgment arises out of moral action itself, although there is no single causal direction. A new stage of moral judgment may guide new behaviour, whereas a new action involving conflict and choice may lead one to construct a new stage of moral judgment.' Because Kohlberg theorised more than two stages of moral development, there is a future for new thought (a conscious realisation of the meaning of action, according to Piaget), which is yet to be fully explored. Rest (1984, p. 32) noted that, 'Reasoning about justice is no more the whole of morality than is empathy'. Instead, Rest proposed that we think of moral functioning as involving four inner processes or components that must perform adequately to produce moral behaviour and must involve 'cognitive

affective interaction' (1984, p. 27). Rest seems to be closer to Straughan's (1983, p.134) 'moderate internalism', in which moral knowledge is necessary but sufficient only when there are not other 'countervailing factors' at stake. Damon (1984, p. 110) noted that, 'A person's level of moral judgment does not determine the person's views on morality's place in one's life. To know how an individual deals with this latter issue, we must know about not only the person's moral beliefs but also the person's understanding of self in relation to these moral beliefs'. So, 'when there is perceived unity between self and morality, judgment and conduct are directly and predictably linked and action choices are made with great certainty' (Colby and Damon, 1993, p. 150).

Blasi (2004) suggests that the motivation for moral action does not spring directly from cognition, but rather from a deeply felt sense of fidelity to oneself in action. It springs from a moral identity that is deeply rooted in moral commitments so that to betray them is to betray oneself. For Blasi, moral motivation is a consequence of one's moral identity, and not to act is to betray oneself. Perhaps Kohlberg was unwilling to implicate himself more directly in moral deliberation lest it opens the door to *aretaic* evaluation of persons, a prospect that he assiduously kept out of his moral stage theory. Moral stage theory had recourse to the 'responsible self,' as a way of bridging the gap between moral thought and action (between knowing the right thing to do and doing it). Blasi's 'self model' has been particularly influential. Indeed, his account of oneself as an agent, whose identity is constructed by reference to moral reasons, is at the core of many contemporary accounts of moral identity (Lapsley, 2008, p. 32).

An insight of the philosopher, Wren (1991) may be helpful here. Wren distinguished between moral motives and moral motivation. Moral motives are 'relatively distinct cognitive dispositions ... such as kindness, courage, fidelity, and piety' (Wren, 1991, p. 10). According to Wren (1991, p. 81), moral motives are 'a necessary condition for any passage from moral judgment to moral action, whereas moral motivation makes possible the evaluative cognition from which moral judgments emerge.'

Baron (2007, p. 67) states that there are some emotions which are related to moral behaviour, in particular, guilt feelings, anger, and empathic sadness or joy. Understanding emotions is, therefore, an important part of children's 'theory of mind', part of their socialisation or moral development (see Meadows, 1986; Nunner-Winkler and Sodian 1988), and part of children's mental health. In the subsequent development of social understanding, contributions are made first by the intensity of the child's self-concern in the context of family relationships and second by the child's participation in the moral discourse of the family.

Moral development and group interaction

This paper briefly outlined recurrent issues in moral developmental theories; and drew the reader's attention to contemporary views on the subject, taking into consideration how global situations or dilemmas—i.e. moral judgments, ethics, cultures, religions, etc—affect children's moral development.

In discussing the multiplicity of social interactions, Piaget (1995, p. 276) warned against 'sweeping generalisations' in attempting to 'make sense of the systems of relations and interdependencies. The idea that children's social and moral development is a function of a multiplicity of different types of interactions is accord with the proposition that resistance and subversion reflect individuals' heterogeneous relations to cultural practices and individuals' efforts to transform those practices (see Turiel, 2005, p. 11).

The ecology of human development involves the study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives. The growing person is viewed not merely as a tabula rasa on which the environment makes its impact, but as a growing, dynamic entity that progressively moves into and restructures the milieu in which it resides. Since the environment also exerts its influence, requiring a process of mutual accommodation, the interaction between person and environment is viewed as two directional, that is, characterised by reciprocity.

Stating a contemporary perspective for moral development leads to our appreciation of the need for global change, from early philosophical to contemporary views, there is hardly any change in moral development. Doing or being good appears not to mean much now to many young people: more so, teenagers who may be in the habit of smoking, taking alcohol, drugs, or using narcotics. In many Western societies, children spend large proportion of their lives in school. In the United States, for example, children are expected to attend school for 6 or more hours per day. While at school, children are fully involved in a social institution with adults and children whose complex interactions are subject to and reflective of a system of rules that is supposed to reflect ethical and moral values. Most children spend more time in school than they do interacting with their parents or spend a greater proportion of their time receiving religious education; it would be surprising if schools did not influence moral development given how much time children spend in the educational environment (Atkins et al., 2008, p. 70).

Concluding remarks

Rapid globalisation appears to be ‘forcing’ educators to search for new arrangements for educational policy—in particular the implementation of new curriculum arrangements for moral education. Without groups and group interaction it might be pointless talking about moral development. The environment is a powerful teacher, a critical variable that classroom teachers can discern, critique, build, and rebuild to everyone’s advantage. The role of a teacher is to create an environment that will challenge and nurture moral development of students in the classroom. The teacher builds the learning context; s/he values learner experience of the learning environment. In some educational systems, the aim of forming morally good persons has been subsumed under religious education, which reflects a strong belief in some cultures that morality has to be rooted in religion especially in many faith schools in the Middle east. The belief that a good religious upbringing is the foundation of a good moral upbringing is prevalent in many faith schools. But schools in many countries today are secular. In secular schools, moral education has to be pursued in a different way (see Haydon, 2007, p. 34), where there is a shared expectation that schools should contribute to students’ moral development and character formation (see, also, Nucci and Narvaez, 2008, p. 1), or make an important contribution to the moral development of young people they serve.

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