**KOHLBERG'S STAGES OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT**

Lawrence Kohlberg was a moral philosopher and student of child development. He was director of Harvard's Center for Moral Education. His special area of interest is the moral development of children - how they develop a sense of right, wrong, and justice.

Kohlberg observed that growing children advance through definite stages of moral development in a manner similar to their progression through Piaget's well-known stages of cognitive development. His observations and testing of children and adults, led him to theorize that human beings progress consecutively from one stage to the next in an invariant sequence, not skipping any stage or going back to any previous stage. These are stages of thought processing, implying qualitatively different modes of thinking and of problem solving at each stage.

These conclusions have been verified in cross-cultural studies done in Turkey, Taiwan, Yucatan, Honduras, India, United States, Canada, Britain, and Israel.

An outline of these developmental stages follows:

**A. PREMORAL OR PRECONVENTIONAL STAGES:**

**FOCUS:** Self

**AGES:** Up to 10-13 years of age, most prisoners

            Behavior motivated by anticipation of pleasure or pain.

**STAGE 1: PUNISHMENT AND OBEDIENCE:  *Might Makes Right***

            Avoidance of physical punishment and deference to power. Punishment is an  automatic

            response of physical retaliation. The immediate physical consequences of an action

            determine its goodness or badness. The atrocities carried out by soldiers during the

            holocaust who were simply "carrying out orders" under threat of punishment, illustrate that

            adults as well as children may function at stage one level. "Might makes right."

**QUESTIONS:** What must I do to avoid punishment? What can I do to force my will upon

                                    others?

**STAGE 2: INSTRUMENTAL EXCHANGE:  *The Egoist***

Marketplace exchange of favors or blows. "You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours." Justice

            is: "Do             unto others as they do unto you." Individual does what is necessary, makes

            concessions only as necessary to satisfy his own desires. Right action consists of what

            instrumentally satisfies one's own needs. Vengeance is considered a moral duty. People

            are valued in terms of their utility. "An eye for an eye."

**QUESTIONS**: What's in it for me? What must I do to avoid pain, gain pleasure?

**B. CONVENTIONAL MORALITY:**

**FOCUS:** Significant Others, "Tyranny of the They" (They say….)

**AGES:** Beginning in middle school, up to middle age - most people end up here

            Acceptance of the rules and standards of one's group.

**STAGE 3: INTERPERSONAL (TRIBAL) CONFORMITY:  *Good Boy/Good Girl***

Right is conformity to the stereotypical behavioral, values expectations of one's society or

            peers. Individual acts to gain approval of others. Good behavior is that which pleases or

            helps others within the group. Everybody is doing it." Majority understanding ("common

            sense") is seen as "natural." One earns approval by being conventionally "respectable" and

            "nice." Peer pressure makes being different the unforgivable sin. Self sacrifice to group

            demands is expected. Values based in conformity, loyalty to group. Sin is a breach of  the

            expectations of one's immediate social order (confuses sin with group, class norms).

            Retribution, however, at this stage is collective. Individual  vengeance is not allowed.

            Forgiveness is preferable to revenge. Punishment is mainly for deterrence. Failure to

            punish is "unfair." "If he can get away with it, why can't I?" Many religious people end up

here.

**QUESTION:** What must I do to be seen as a good boy/girl (socially acceptable)?

**STAGE 4: LAW AND ORDER (SOCIETAL CONFORMITY): *The Good Citizen***

Respect for fixed rules, laws and properly constituted authority. Defense of the given social

            and institutional order for its own sake. Responsibility toward the welfare of others in the

            society. "Justice" normally refers to criminal justice. Justice demands that the wrongdoer

            be punished, that he "pay his debt to society," and that law abiders be rewarded. "A good

            day's pay for a good day's work." Injustice is failing to reward work or punish demerit. Right

            behavior consists of maintaining the social order for its own sake. Self-sacrifice to larger

            social order is expected. Authority figures are seldom questioned. "He must be right. He's

            the Pope (or the President, or the Judge, or God)." Consistency and precedent must be

            maintained. For most adults, this is the highest stage they will attain.

**QUESTION:** What if everyone did that?

**STAGE 4 ½: The Cynic**

Between the conventional stages and the post-conventional Levels 5 and 6, there is a

            transitional stage. Some college-age students who come to see conventional morality as

            socially constructed, thus, relative and arbitrary, but have not yet discovered universal

            ethical principles, may drop into a hedonistic ethic of "do your own thing." This was well

            noted in the hippie culture of the l960's. Disrespect for conventional morality was especially

            infuriating to the Stage 4 mentality, and indeed was calculated to be so. Kohlberg found

            that some people get "stuck" in this in-between stage marked by egoism and skepticism,

            never able to completely leave behind conventional reasoning even after recognizing its

            inadequacies. Such people are often marked by uncritical cynicism ("All politicians are

            crooks…nothing really matters anyway"), disillusionment and alienation.

**QUESTION:** Why should I believe anything?

**C. POSTCONVENTIONAL OR PRINCIPLED MORALITY:**

**FOCUS:** Justice, Dignity for all life, Common Good

**AGES:** Few reach this stage, most not prior to middle age

**STAGE 5: PRIOR RIGHTS AND SOCIAL CONTRACT: *The Philosopher/King***

            Moral action in a specific situation is not defined by reference to a checklist of rules, but

            from logical application of universal, abstract, moral principles. Individuals have natural or

            inalienable rights and liberties that are prior to society and must be protected by society.

            Retributive justice is repudiated as counterproductive, violative of notions of human rights.

            Justice distributed proportionate to circumstances and need. "Situation ethics." The

            statement, "Justice demands punishment," which is a self-evident truism to the Stage 4

            mind, is just as self-evidently nonsense at Stage 5. Retributive punishment is neither

            rational nor just, because it does not promote the rights and welfare of the individual and

            inflicts further violence upon society. Only legal sanctions that fulfill that purpose are

            imposed-- protection of future victims, deterrence, and rehabilitation. Individual acts out of

            mutual obligation and a sense of public good. Right action tends to be defined in terms of

            general individual rights, and in terms of standards that have been critically examined and

            agreed upon by the whole society--e.g. the Constitution. The freedom of the individual

            should be limited by society only when it infringes upon someone else's freedom.

            Conventional authorities are increasingly rejected in favor of critical reasoning. Laws are

            challenged by questions of justice.

**QUESTIONS:** What is the just thing to do given all the circumstances? What will bring the

                                    most good to the largest number of people?

**STAGE 6: UNIVERSAL ETHICAL PRINCIPLES:  *The Prophet/Messiah***

An individual who reaches this stage acts out of universal principles based upon the

            equality and worth of all living beings. Persons are never means to an end, but are ends in

            themselves. Having rights means more than individual liberties. It means that every

            individual is due consideration of his dignity interests in every situation, those interests

            being of equal importance with one's own. This is the "Golden Rule" model. A list of rules

            inscribed in stone is no longer necessary. At this level, God  is understood to say what is

            right because it is right; His sayings are not right, just because it is God who said them.

            Abstract principles are the basis for moral decision making, not concrete rules. Stage

            6 individuals are rare, often value their principles more than their own life, often seen as

            incarnating the highest human potential. Thus they are often martyred by those of lower

            stages shamed by seeing realized human potential compared with their own partially

            realized levels of development. (Stoning the prophets, killing the messenger). Examples:

            Mohandas Gandhi, Jesus of Nazareth, Gautamo Buddha, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dag

            Hamerskjold

**QUESTIONS:**What will foster life in its fullest for all living beings? What is justice for all?

**THE FOLLOWING ARE OBSERVATIONS THAT WERE MADE BY KOHLBERG  FURTHER EXPLAINING HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN STAGES.**

**1. STAGE DEVELOPMENT IS INVARIANT AND SEQUENTIAL.**

One must progress through the stages in order, and one cannot get to a higher  stage without passing through the stage immediately preceding it. Higher stages incorporate the thinking and experience of all lower stages of reasoning into current levels of reasoning but transcends them for higher levels. (e.g, Stage Four reasoning will understand the reasoning of Stages 1-3 but will reason at a higher level) A belief that a leap into moral maturity is possible is in sharp contrast to the facts of developmental research. Moral development is growth, and like all growth, takes place according to a pre-determined sequence. To expect someone to grow into high moral maturity overnight would be like expecting someone to walk before he crawls.

**2. IN STAGE DEVELOPMENT, SUBJECTS CANNOT COMPREHEND MORAL REASONING AT A STAGE MORE THAN ONE STAGE BEYOND THEIR OWN.**

If Johnny is oriented to see good almost exclusively as that which brings him satisfaction, how will he understand a concept of good in which the "good" may bring him no tangible pleasure at all.The moral maxim "It is better to give than to receive" reflects a high level of development. The child who honestly asks you why it is better to give than to receive, does so because he does not and cannot understand such thinking. To him, "better" means better for him. And how can it be better for him to give, than to get. Thus, higher stages can comprehend lower stages of reasoning though they find it less compelling. But lower stages cannot comprehend higher stages of reasoning.

**3. IN STAGE DEVELOPMENT INDIVIDUALS ARE COGNITIVELY ATTRACTED TO REASONING ONE LEVEL ABOVE THEIR OWN PRESENT PREDOMINANT LEVEL.**

The person has questions and problems the solutions for which are less satisfying at his present level. Since reasoning at one stage higher is intelligible and since it makes more sense and resolves more difficulties, it is more attractive. For example, two brothers both want the last piece of pie. The bigger, stronger brother will probably get it. The little brother suggests they share it. He is thinking at level two, rather than at level one. The solution for him is more attractive: getting some rather than none. An adult who functions at level one consistently will end up in prison or dead.

**4. IN STAGE DEVELOPMENT, MOVEMENT THROUGH THE STAGES IS EFFECTED WHEN COGNITIVE DISEQUILIBRIUM IS CREATED, THAT IS, WHEN A PERSON'S COGNITIVE OUTLOOK IS NOT ADEQUATE TO COPE WITH A GIVEN MORAL DILEMMA.**

The person who is growing, will look for more and more adequate ways of solving problems. If he has no problems, no dilemmas, he is not likely to look for solutions. He will not grow morally. (The Hero, prior to his calling, lives in comfortable stagnation. Small towns are notorious for their low level "provincial" reasoning). In the apple pie example. The big brother, who can just take the pie and get away with it, is less likely to look for a better solution than the younger brother who will get none and probably a beating in the struggle. Life crises often present opportunities for moral development. These include loss of one's job, moving to another location, death of a significant other, unforeseen tragedies and disasters.

**5. IT IS QUITE POSSIBLE FOR A HUMAN BEING TO BE PHYSICALLY MATURE BUT NOT**

**MORALLY MATURE**

Development of moral reasoning is not automatic. It does not simply occur in tandem with chronological aging. If a child is spoiled, never having to accommodate for others needs, if he is raised in an environment where level two thinking by others gets the job done, he may never generate enough questions to propel him to a higher level of moral reasoning. People who live in small towns or enclaves within larger cities and never encounter those outside their tribal boundaries are unlikely to have cause to develop morally. One key factor in development of moral reasoning is the regularity with which one encounters moral dilemmas, even if only hypothetically. Kohlberg found that the vast majority of adults never develop past conventional moral reasoning, the bulk of them coming to rest in either Stage 3 Tribal or Stage 4 Social Conventional stages. This is partly because the reinforcement mechanisms of the "common sense" of everyday life provided little reason or opportunity to confront moral dilemmas and thus one's own moral reasoning.

CRITICISMS OF KOHLBERG'S THEORY:

**A. Carol Gilligan,***In a Different Voice*

- Women are socialized differently from men.

            - Concerns for the other (nurturing, serving behaviors connected to socially dictated

                        female roles) prevent women from developing moral reasoning per

                        Kohlberg's model

            - Gilligan proposes three level of female development

                        A. FOCUS ON SELF TO EXCLUSION OF OTHER

                        B. FOCUS ON OTHER TO EXCLUSION, DETRIMENT OF SELF

                        C. FOCUS ON ALL WHICH INCLUDES SELF

            - BUT, these levels seem to parallel Kohlberg's pre-conventional, conventional and post-

                        conventional levels

            - Gilligan also produced little data to support her critique of Kohlberg, her former mentor at

                        Harvard

**B. Charles Bailey, UCF**

- Kohlberg's model is biased against conservative worldviews, values in favor of liberal

                        worldviews

            - But Kohlberg's model does not consider content of reasoning, only process

            - Some conservatives reason at post-conventional levels, some radicals at pre-

                        conventional levels

            - BUT, ongoing studies of Kohlberg's model by James Rest at University of Minnesota

                        have documented both the regularity of more liberal worldviews found in higher

                        levels of moral development as well as the potential for conservative content to be

                        argued at post-conventional levels

Taken from <http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu/~ncoverst/Kohlberg's%20Stages%20of%20Moral%20Development.htm>

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