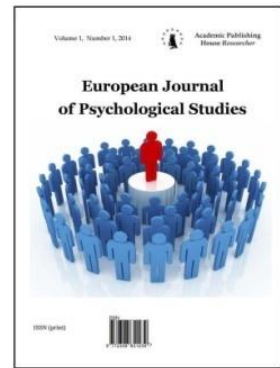


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Cognitive and Social Aspects of Moral Development

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Abstract

Anthropologists have long recognized that there has been a development in moral thinking as societies increase in complexity from band societies to literate civilizations. The increasing range of moral concern, the development from shame to guilt, and the increasing importance of intention in assessing responsibility are examples. There are clear resemblances between these findings and Kohlberg's stages of moral development, which have been validated cross-culturally. His stages of pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional thought providing important insights into the moral thinking characteristic of band societies, tribal societies, and literate civilizations. But it is also concluded that, especially at the more advanced stages of moral thinking, philosophical and religious beliefs about the world have a powerful influence on moral values that is distinct from cognitive development.

Keywords: atomistic societies, cultural anthropology, developmental psychology, Kohlberg, moral development, Piaget, pre-conventional, primitive society, post-conventional, stages of moral development.

1. Introduction

Anthropologists such as Hobhouse 1929, Ginsberg 1944, Read 1955, Kluckhohn 1960, and von Fürer-Haimendorf 1967, made it clear from their studies of primitive society that there has been an evolutionary development in the way that people have thought about moral issues. Some of the more notable aspects of this development are as follows:

1. The range of moral concern has steadily extended from one's immediate kin and neighbours to include human beings in general. 'The best established trend is the extension of the range of persons to whom moral judgements apply; it is not so much the sense of duty to a neighbour that had varied as the answer to the question who is my neighbour' (Ginsberg 1944:19).

2. The concept of duty is initially bound up with group membership and the performance of specific social roles. "In the early stages of ethics rights and duties do not attach to a human being as such. They attach to him as a member of a group" (Hobhouse 1929: 233). Only much later does it become the general principle of moral obligation, in which it becomes possible to think of other people as individual moral beings regardless of their social status.

3. The most elementary concept of justice is that of equal exchange, of reciprocity, of good for good and bad for bad. Only in more complex societies does it develop more fully into concepts of social fairness, and an explicit notion of the Golden Rule and mentally taking the place of others.

4. There is a general development from conventional to principled morality. One aspect of this is a growing distinction between the duties of custom and law, on one hand, and those of a purely moral nature on the other, between social conventions and natural law. This is related to the

ability to think about society as a whole and to criticise it on general moral grounds such as justice. Another aspect of the development of principled morality is the kind of justification for doing what is right. 'There gradually emerges the notion that goodness is something which the mind can apprehend as self-sustained and independent of external sanctions. Among simpler peoples, as described by anthropologists, the sanctions behind customary rules are relatively external and prudential' (Ginsberg 1944: 23).

5. This process is related to another major dimension of moral development that has been observed by anthropologists and historians, which is the growing awareness of the inner life of the individual, and of the mind in its cognitive aspects, as necessary to understand why other people behave as they do, and how it would feel to be in their place. So we find a development from objective to subjective responsibility, from a predominant concern with the act and its consequences towards the recognition of subjective factors of motive and intention on the part of the agent. This development is closely related to a further aspect of moral development, from a morality of *shame*, the consciousness that one has offended against an external, social rule, to that of *guilt*, an inner conviction of wrong-doing with its essential element of self-condemnation by one's conscience.

6. Another aspect of this growing awareness of the inner life of the mind is a clearer articulation of the idea of virtue in relation to the self. Members of primitive societies can easily give lists of what are regarded as desirable qualities – generosity, bravery, good temper, and so on – and these are remarkably similar cross-culturally. But there is no analysis of the essential elements of character that allow people to perform well as moral agents, such as the cardinal virtues of Plato and Aristotle; the virtues in primitive societies are simply lists of attributes that remain unsynthesized, a 'bag of virtues', as Kohlberg has described them.

2. Discussion

Psychological and social aspects of moral development

There are some important similarities between the development of moral thinking as described by anthropologists, and the development of moral thinking in the individual, both in Western society and cross-culturally, which have been identified by Piaget, Kohlberg, and other developmental psychologists. It will be useful if these are very briefly summarised here before we go further. These are that children initially understand society in the terms of concrete relations between individuals, in an atomistic, unsystematized fashion, yet with a rigid notion of rules and conventions. Rules are obeyed for fear of the consequences; right is what is fair, an equal exchange, a deal; no distinction is made between social and natural law; there is little awareness of the mental states of others, or of the mind in its cognitive aspects and responsibility is objective, so that punishments should be for actions rather than for motives and intentions, and the self is externally defined by size, gender, and so on.

The development of a sense of social order involves greater awareness of social roles, and the idea that what is right involves living up to the expectations of others, and having good motives. The social order is seen as authoritative, although social and natural law are still not clearly distinguished. Gradually society comes to be understood in a more systematic manner, and hierarchical structures and role differentiations are understood more clearly. What is right consists in maintaining the society as a whole, and more distinction is made between intentions and actions when awarding punishment.

Finally, conventions are understood as arbitrary rules that might have been different, adopted for the general good of society, while moral principles are distinguished from custom and law. The individual is distinguished from society, and it becomes possible to think of moral obligations to all human beings, regardless of the society to which they belong. One's own society can become the subject of criticism, and hypothetical social orders discussed. The idea of the self becomes predominantly defined by psychological and spiritual attributes, and is much more differentiated and integrated; the cognitive functions of the mind are realised, and the self can be the judge of the self.

While there is therefore a general correlation between the historical and the psychological development of moral thinking, this cannot be explained as a process by which growing social complexity is simply reflected in growing psychological complexity imprinted on the minds of

individuals. On the contrary, there has to be a dialectical relationship between the social environment and psychological factors.

So it has been found that interaction with non-kin in an urban environment, engagement in commercial relations, the experience of cultural diversity, acting as community leaders, or participating in state level institutions, all generate higher levels of cognitive functioning. These higher levels of moral thinking involve in particular *an enhanced degree of mutual perspective-taking*. Other cognitively stimulating activities such as planning, co-ordination, differences of opinion and debate, and settlement of legal disputes become specially important with emergence of the state. This greatly intensifies the degree of conscious, rational thought for raising taxes, organizing public works, planning conquest warfare, legal and theological debate, commercial calculations, and, with the advent of literacy, schooling. Literacy combined with mere rote learning, as in the scribal schools of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, has no significant cognitive consequences, but schooling and formal education that involve taking the pupils out of the context of their normal daily lives and their active participation and discussion with their teachers is of particular importance. It is closely involved with the ability to explain verbally one's reasons for making particular choices in test situations, and it also seems to develop the search for rules for the solution of problems, and the awareness of one's own mental operations. It is not surprising that social facilities for public debate which developed in the ancient civilizations were essential to the emergence of philosophy.

It follows that in simpler societies without these features we may expect to find simpler forms of moral thought, and it is therefore perfectly possible, in a cognitively undemanding milieu, for elementary cognitive structures to be viable and to persist indefinitely. For example, it was possible for the Tauade, a people whom I studied in Papua New Guinea, to have no more words for numbers beyond single and pair because in their simple circumstances they had managed to get along without them. In my earlier book *The Foundations of Primitive Thought* (1979) I also showed in detail that it was possible for pre-operational ideas of number, time, space, causality, and classification to be perfectly adequate in simple societies.

Conversely, because some ways of thinking about society are harder than others, they will naturally tend to occur later in the development of individual cognition, and will require the appropriate cultural environment. For example, the ability to conceptualise one's society as a total system, or to understand the nature of ideological conflict only develops in adolescence, if at all, as does the ability to understand one's own mental processes. This has very profound consequences for the history of moral development, because it explains the absence of higher levels of moral thinking in traditional small-scale societies. There is absolutely no *sociological* reason why hunter-gatherers, for example, should not say explicitly that one should treat others as one would like to be treated oneself, but they do not: what they actually say is that one should not cause trouble. There is nothing about the higher stages of moral reasoning, such as Kohlberg's Stage 5, that would make them *unworkable* among hunter-gatherers or simple agriculturalists, and we know that moral reasoning in some small agricultural groups, such as Hutterite colonies, or Israeli *kibbutzim*, may be at Stage 4 or 5 (Snarey 1985, Table 2). The reason that we do not find them is that their forms of social organization and cultural milieu have not led to sufficient cognitive development.

Piaget's and Kohlberg's models of moral development

We can now examine cognitive moral development in more detail. Piaget's seminal book, *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (1932/1970), focused on the development of children's attitude to rules. Young children are initially in a state of moral realism or heteronomy, in which authority is arbitrary; rules exist for their own sakes; conformity is good in itself; acts, not intentions or motives, are what matter; and moral guilt consists in being found out. Over time, as interaction with peers comes to replace the influence of parents, children begin to develop moral autonomy, in which authority is seen as based on mutual respect and co-operation; rules are put there for a reason; conformity is to their spirit rather than to their letter; motives and intentions are considered as well as actions; and there is subjective responsibility, or conscience, which involves more than not being caught.

Some decades later the American developmental psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg (1981, 1984) took up Piaget's ideas and elaborated a more complex stage model which focused in particular on the understanding of justice and social organization:

Level I. Pre-conventional

At this level the child is essentially individualistic, and rules and labels of good and bad, right or wrong, are interpreted in terms of punishment and reward and the power of those who make the rules.

Stage 1 The punishment and obedience orientation [No viable society could be based on this stage alone.]

The physical consequences of action determine its good or badness, regardless of the human meaning or value of these consequences. Avoidance of punishment and unquestioning deference to power are valued in their own right, not in terms of respect for an underlying moral order.

Reasons for doing right

Avoidance of punishment, and the superior power of authorities.

Social perspective of the stage

Egocentric point of view. Doesn't consider the interests of others or recognize that they differ from the actor's: Doesn't relate two points of view. Actions are considered physically rather than in terms of psychological interests of others.

Stage 2 The instrumental relativist orientation.

Right action is what satisfies one's own needs and occasionally the needs of others. Human relations are viewed like those of the marketplace. Elements of fairness or reciprocity and equal sharing are present, but they are always interpreted in a physical, pragmatic way. Reciprocity is a matter of 'You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours', not of loyalty, gratitude, or justice.

What is right

Following rules only when it is to someone's immediate interest; acting to meet one's own interests and needs and letting others do the same. Right is also what's fair, an equal exchange, a deal, an agreement.

Reasons for doing right

To serve one's own needs and interests in a world where you have to recognize that other people have their interests too.

Social perspective of stage

Concrete individualistic perspective. Aware that everybody has his own interest to pursue and these conflict, so that right is relative (in the concrete individualistic sense.)

Level II. Conventional

At this level, group relations become important. Maintaining the expectations of the individual's family, group, or nation is perceived as valuable in its own right, regardless of immediate and obvious consequences. The attitude is not only one of conformity to personal expectations and social order but also that of loyalty to them, of actively *maintaining*, supporting, and justifying the order and of identifying with the people or group involved in it.

Stage 3 Interpersonal concordance

Good behaviour is that which helps others and is approved by them. There is much conformity to stereotypical images of the majority of 'natural' behaviour. Behaviour is frequently judged by intention. Being good or moral and being loving are equated.

What is right

Living up to what is expected by people close to you or what people generally expect of you in your role as son, brother, friend, etc. "Being good" is important and means having good motives, showing concern about others. It also means keeping mutual relations, such as trust, loyalty, respect, and gratitude.

Reasons for doing right

The need to be a good person in your own eyes and those of others. Your caring for others. Implicit belief in the Golden Rule. Desire to maintain rules and authority which support stereotypical good behaviour.

Social perspective of stage

Perspective of the individual in relationships with other individuals. Aware of shared feelings, agreements, and expectations which take primacy over individual interests. Relates points of view through the concrete Golden Rule putting yourself in the other person's shoes. Does not yet consider generalized system perspective.

Stage 4. The 'law and order' orientation

There is an orientation toward authority, fixed rules, and the maintenance of the social order. Right behaviour consists of doing one's duty, showing respect for authority, and maintaining the given social order for its own sake.

What is right

Fulfilling the actual duties to which you have agreed. Laws are to be upheld except in extreme cases where they conflict with other fixed social duties.

Reasons for doing right

To keep the institution going as a whole, to avoid the breakdown in the system "if everyone did it", or the imperative of conscience to meet one's defined obligations. (Easily confused with Stage 3 belief in rules and authority.)

Social perspective of stage

Differentiates societal point of view from interpersonal agreement or motives. Takes the point of view of the system that defines roles and rules. Considers individual relations in terms of place in the system

Level III. Post-conventional or Principled.

At this level, thinking can transcend any particular society or culture. There is a clear effort to define moral values and principles that have validity and application apart from the authority of the groups or people holding these principles and apart from the individual's own identification with these groups.

Stage 5. Social contract or Utility and individual rights

What is right

Being aware that people hold a variety of values and opinions, that most values and rules are relative to your group. These relative rules should usually be upheld, however, in the interest of impartiality and because they are the social contract. Some non-relative values and rights like *life* and *liberty*, however, must be upheld in any society and regardless of majority opinion.

Reasons for doing right

A sense of obligation to law because of one's social contract to make and abide by laws for the welfare of all and for the protection of all people's rights. A feeling of contractual commitment freely entered upon, to family, friendship, trust, and work obligations. Concern that laws and duties be based on rational calculation of overall utility, 'the greatest good for the greatest number'.

Social perspective of stage

Prior-to-society perspective. Perspective of a rational individual aware of values and rights prior to social attachments and contracts. Integrates perspectives by formal mechanisms of agreement, contract, objective impartiality, and due process. Considers moral and legal points of view, recognizes that they sometimes conflict and finds it difficult to integrate them. (Modified from Kohlberg 1981:379-381; 1984:174-175)

Kohlberg originally proposed the existence of a 6th stage of moral development, of a very abstract nature, but subsequently abandoned it for lack of sufficient evidence. Even Stage 5, as we shall see, has been controversial among developmental psychologists, and is very much more dependent on philosophical and religious assumptions than the earlier stages.

It should perhaps not be necessary to emphasise that, despite using a stage model of moral development, Kohlberg does not suppose that individuals suddenly move from one stage to the next, or that all their moral thinking will be consistent with a single stage. The usual objections to any kind of developmental stages have been made in relation to Kohlberg's stages. In response, a number of psychologists have 'suggested that the stage construct can be salvaged if stages were regarded merely as characteristic tendencies and if each new stage were conceptualized not as a step but rather as a beginning new 'wave' that overlaps previous waves in the waxings and wanings of developmental advance' (Gibbs et al 2007:482) and Boom et al (2007), Dawson (2002).

There is, as one might expect, a general resemblance between the levels of moral development and those of Pre-operational, Concrete-operational, and Formal operational thinking, particularly in the increasing grasp of social organization. This has been studied closely by Connell 1971, in particular. Summarizing briefly, we can say that Connell's Stage 1, marked by disjointed thinking and the inability to distinguish the political from the non-political, corresponds in many respects to Pre-operational thought. Stage 2, Connell's 'Primitive Realism', corresponds to earlier concrete operations, and is marked by stable concepts of social roles, with some differentiation. Stage 3, Connell's 'Construction of Political Order', corresponds to more advanced concrete operations, when there develop a notion of hierarchy in an explicit form, and the decentering of party conflict – the concrete political order. Stage 4, Connell's 'Ideological thinking' involves the grasp of the whole political system which includes an understanding of policy disputes, and corresponds to the stage of formal operations, at which subjects are also able to think about 'society' in general and to formulate ideas about hypothetical forms of social organization.

"... the slightest acquaintance with the children themselves, is enough to show that they are not *simply* reproducing adult ideas ...taking the group as a whole we can see their political thinking passing through a sequence of phases which are much more than movements in the accumulation of a stock of adult ideas" (ibid.,230).

The increase in self-understanding and overcoming conceptual realism is also a key element of moral development, and Damon and Hart conclude that there is general agreement in the literature on the following basic stages of the process:

1. An early awareness of self based on one's own activity and contingencies arising from such activity.
2. An early awareness of physical categories of self like gender and size.
3. An age-related shift from defining oneself through external characteristics (physical, material, and active categories) to defining oneself through internal qualities (psychological and 'spiritual' categories).
4. An age-related tendency to integrate the diverse aspects of self into a seemingly coherent system (Damon and Hart 1988: 54).

Some of the characteristics of self-understanding which are widely reported as only developing with adolescence are:

The self is characterized by the ideological beliefs held.

The mental world is believed to have its own system of internal regulation.

The past and future of the self become increasingly important (the self as a stable, continuing system).

Distinctiveness from others is increasingly mentioned in self-definition.

The primacy and immediacy of self-knowledge, as opposed to the difficulty of knowing others, distinguishes the self from others.

The mind as the active processor of conscious experience can affect behaviour.

The self becomes the judge of self's actions.

Development of a feeling of self-direction connected with a sense of pride.

The emergence of both an awareness of self-awareness and a belief in unconscious experience – so a distinction between real and bogus selves.

Self-statements are organized into a self-system.

An awareness of potential conflicts among aspects of the self-system

(*ibid.*, 33-39, from Table 2.1).

This awareness of self is, of course, characteristic of formal operational thinking generally.

Cross-cultural studies of moral development

One of the advantages of Kohlberg's model is that it lent itself very well to cross-cultural testing, and a comprehensive survey of these cross-cultural tests was carried out by Snarey (1985). This considered 45 cross-cultural studies that had been carried out in 27 cultural areas (except the United States); 27% in Western Europe, 40% in non-European societies influenced by the West, and 33% include tribal or village folk populations (*ibid.*, 207). These studies generally support Kohlberg's hypothesis of a progressive increase in moral reasoning with age through the stages that he predicts, though the higher stages might not be reached. Studies of industrialized societies showed in almost every case that there are significant social class differences in moral reasoning. Snarey also concluded that 'Stage 4/5 or 5 was absent in 100% of the 8 traditional tribal or village folk societies, both non-Western and Western. The available data thus suggest that the significant difference lies between folk versus urban societies rather than between Western versus non-Western societies' (*ibid.*, 218).

Another comprehensive survey of Kohlbergian cross-cultural studies was carried out by Gibbs, Basinger, Grime, and Snarey (2007), which considered 75 cross-cultural studies from 23 countries. Gibbs *et al* again support the common finding that moral judgment development is associated with the extensiveness, breadth and diversity of social experience, social class, and education, and conclude 'Our review bolsters the conclusion that Kohlberg was in principle correct regarding the universality of basic moral judgment development, moral values, and related social perspective-taking across cultures' (*ibid.*, 491).

But the complete absence of Stage 5, Principled Moral Reasoning, in *all* traditional tribal and 'folk' societies caused considerable distress among many psychologists, who construed it either as a failure to demonstrate universality in Kohlberg's scheme of moral development, or as an ethnocentric weakness tainted by ideas of social evolution (discussed e.g. in Gibbs *et al.* 2007:451-59). Since, however, there is also no sign of formal operations generally in these societies, absence of Stage 5 moral development is exactly what we should expect. As Kohlberg rightly said, 'Principled thinking appeared first in human history in the period 600 – 400 BC, when universal human ideals and rational criticism of customary morality developed in Greece, Palestine, India, and China' (1981:378-383). That being so, how *could* principled moral thought possibly be universal?

In fact, while a few individual adults in tribal or folk societies reached 3/4 or 4, the modal scores were 2/3 and often 2. The first obvious conclusion from these data is that the *average* level of moral reasoning in primitive and small scale society is distinctly lower than that found in modern industrial society: White *et al* in a study of 426 rural Bahamian school children on a small island, both male and female, 8-17 years, found '...none of the individuals in the present sample reasoned at any stage beyond 3 but that the overwhelming majority reasoned at stages 1 and 2. Most of the changes longitudinally, and differences cross-sectionally indicate that with age there is a decrease in Stage 1 reasoning and an increase in Stage 2 reasoning with a small increase in Stage 3 reasoning' (White, Bushnell and Regnemer 1978:62-63). Gorsuch and Barnes (1973) in a study of the Black Caribs of British Honduras (Belize) of 84 boys from 10-16 years of age in rural or small town situations show responses at a Stage 1 level drop from 60% at ages 10-11 to 20% at ages 15-16, but no Stage 3 reasoning develops: 'with the higher stage of development being found in the oldest interviewees and the town's interviewees containing fewer initial stages and more advanced stages than the village interviewees' (Gorsuch and Barnes 1973:59).

It might be supposed that unless the predominant level of moral and social reasoning among the adult members of a society were at least at Kohlberg's Stage 3, it would be impossible to sustain a functioning social order at all. But this need not be the case. Gorsuch and Barnes say:

“It is apparent from our data that the highest developed frequent stage, a pure 2, is in a form appropriate to a village or small town society and is a distinct variant of the stage 2 found in more technologically developed society. The respondents, for example, seem to express a real concern with helping others, a concern seldom found in stage 2 in the United States. They were concerned not because of a moral norm within the culture, but *because they could reasonably expect to have the favour returned to them.*[my emphasis] Another element that makes these 2’s distinctive was that the possible violation of norms were not perceived as a live option *because group pressures would be immediately applied.*[my emphasis] Indeed, these expectations of immediate group reactions are more realistic in the Carib culture than in a city culture because of the physical proximity and interaction among the members of the former. In a sense, therefore, personal and village interests converge sufficiently so that one need not move above a stage 2 to be an accepted individual of that culture and to have a functional society.” (Gorsuch and Barnes 1973:296-297)

We shall see that in band societies, in particular, the direct reciprocity and group pressure referred to by Gorsuch and Barnes are basic modes of social control, and Stage 2 moral reasoning will be adequate because

“Primary reference groups such as family and friends provide role-taking opportunities suitable for the types of interpersonal thinking involved in stages 1 and 2. However, primary reference groups are not sufficient to promote higher moral thinking because children must be able to take a generalized social perspective in order to attain moral stages 3 and above.” (Edwards 1975:520)

Edwards also states that ‘...moral judgment Stages 4,5,and 6 are not generally found in interviews with traditional adults who live in small scale societies such as isolated tribal communities...’ rather, ‘only Stages 1 to 3 seems to dominate among such groups of people’ (Edwards 1981:268). Indeed, she notes a significant difference between the social assumptions of Stages 3 and 4, Stage 4 being associated with the development of the state.

“The stage 3 perspective presumes that society is a sort of homogenous, harmonious ‘we’ composed of people who share moral values...At stage 4, society is explicitly conceived as of a complex whole composed of competing groups with conflicting values and interests. Conflicts and preferences must be mediated through formal institutions such as courts and legislatures. Stage 4 is thus more abstract than stage 3 in its assumptions about the nature of society. Stage 4 represents what Kohlberg calls a ‘systems perspective’, because it posits the resolution of social conflicts in terms of political and legal institutions.” (ibid., 258)

These results also show that we need not expect to find that the level of thinking in any society will be uniform. First of all, urbanization and education are also closely associated with moral development. Edwards’s Kenyan sample of 52 students, median age 22.2 at the University of Nairobi, 71 persons from 5 different tribal groups, with a median age of 48, and 25 secondary students with median age of 19.6 shows the following distribution of moral judgment reasoning stages:

“...stage 4 reasoning is much more evident among the university subjects than the community leaders, although the leaders are on average much older than the university students (and have therefore more time to develop). Among the university students, 31 percent of subjects show major or minor stage usage of stage 4 reasoning. In contrast, among the community leaders, only 11 percent of subjects display in the stage 4.” (Edwards 1975:517)

Again, some individuals, typically leaders and mediators, will be able to operate on a higher cognitive level than ordinary folk. So Harkness et al. (1981) found significant differences in the moral reasoning of leaders and non-leaders among the rural Kipsigis of Kenya. Edwards (1975) points out the importance of experience of ethnic and racial differences, and attending school away from home, as further factors related to moral development:

“In Africa two salient dimensions of intra-society variation in peer interaction include the amount of cultural diversity and the extent to which schooling removes young people from traditional family life and parental authority. I...have found that Kenyan university students attribute the greatest changes in their personal values to encountering ethnic and racial heterogeneity at school and to going away from home to live. Students felt that these experiences helped to give them a social perspective on morality and also helped them to see themselves as moral agents.” (Edwards 1975: 519)

To sum up, these cross-cultural studies confirm the claim in §2 that there are certain features of social experience which retard cognitive development and others that stimulate it. Life in small, isolated, homogeneous rural communities, with lack of formal education, lack of participation in a commercial economy, lack of participation in leadership roles and in state-level institutions, and lack of experience of cultural diversity, are all retarding influences, in particular because of their limited opportunities for encountering different social perspectives. Interaction with non-kin in urban environments, formal education, higher socio-economic status, commercial relations, leadership, and participation in state-level institutions, and general experience of cultural diversity are all stimulating factors. ‘A variety of evidence across the data bases is consistent with the cognitive developmental expectation that moral judgment stage development is facilitated by social perspective-taking opportunities’ (Gibbs 489-90). They also found that ‘...diverse social experiences foster the development of more adequate psychological understandings or ‘theories’ of mind (one’s own and others’), and that it is the person’s theory of mind that then undergirds the moral judgment gain’ (ibid., 490). It will also be obvious that all the stimulating factors associated with mutual perspective-taking are inherently associated with those features of societal complexity which have evolved in the course of history and are not found at the simpler levels of social organization.

Moral thinking in atomistic societies

From the very general level of the analysis so far, we shall now provide some concrete anthropological detail about specific societies to show how their moral thinking is related to their social life. The notion of ‘atomistic society’, found primarily among hunter-gatherers and some shifting cultivators, has proved to be a useful label for a cluster of social traits. These form what I refer to as the structure of this type of society, and in general terms are as follows:

- 1) People place their main emphasis on their own individual interests and relationships, and on freedom from, or avoidance of, social constraint.
- 2) Interpersonal relations are marked by reserve and caution, and often by strain and envy.
- 3) Group structures are very weak beyond the range of immediate kin. When attempts at larger scale organization are made, they often fail because people are unready or unwilling to collaborate and cooperate, and reluctant to commit to large groups.
- 4) Exchange and reciprocity are strongly emphasized.
- 5) Such leadership as exists is generally weak and ineffectual, and we do not find inherited authority roles.
- 6) Effective mediation in disputes is generally lacking.

Social atomism therefore primarily refers to a form of social organization in which individual ties are paramount, and group structures are weakly articulated, where close sympathy and trust would not go much beyond the extended family, and where mediatory institutions are lacking. (See, for example, Benedict 1934, Honigman 1968:220-21, Leacock & Lee 1982:7-8, Cohen 1985:99-100, Morris 1991:266-67, Woodburn 1982:432)

There are significant resemblances between the moral thinking of atomistic societies and Kohlbergs Pre-Conventional Level, Stage 2, characterized as Individualism, instrumental purpose, and exchange:

What is right: Following rules only when it is to someone’s immediate interests and needs and letting others do the same. Right is also what’s fair, what’s an equal exchange, a deal, an agreement.

Reasons for doing right: To serve ones needs or interests in a world where you have to recognize that other people have interests, too.

Social perspective of Stage: Concrete individualistic stage. Aware that everybody has his own interest to pursue and these conflict, so that right is relative (in the concrete individualistic sense). (Kohlberg 1984:174)

There are also no judicial institutions, no persons who have the authority to act as go-between, or to mediate or arbitrate in disputes, which are so important as opportunities for mutual perspective-taking. Disputes are settled by public pressure and ridicule which may involve some discussion; mutual avoidance; payment of compensation; and vengeance, which may be formal, as when the wrong-doer permits the victim some limited physical retaliation before witnesses, or informal, involving assault or homicide.

While we may find richly developed cosmologies in these societies, and beliefs in many types of supernatural beings, these beings are not linked with groups or with social authority, as it might be with the elders or chiefs, nor are they associated in any significant way with the norms of proper conduct. While some forms of behaviour, particularly breaches of taboos, may be believed to incur the anger of supernatural beings, and therefore to incur unpleasant consequences for the offender and possibly the whole community, a list of such religious offences in any of these societies would not be significantly correlated with those types of act which are condemned from the social point view – assault, theft, quarrelsomeness, and so on.

Societies of corporate order

The term ‘corporate order’ is intended to stress the emergence of a clear organizational structure based on well defined corporate groups and their associated leadership and dispute settlement procedures. Social organization often takes the form of considerably larger residential communities than are found in atomistic societies, normally based on agriculture which may be quite advanced. A variety of corporate groups are typically based on kinship and descent, relative age and birth-order, and gender. They are considerably wider in membership than the familistic and cooperative groups of atomistic societies, and their internal solidarity both protects and controls their individual members. There are typically strong norms of loyalty and co-operation with members of one’s kin-group, neighbourhood, working-party and age-set, for example, with sanctions for defaulters. People now relate to one another much more as members of specific groups and categories than as the fairly free-floating individuals of atomistic societies.

The development of such types of group is linked with the emergence of authority in the form of specific offices, hereditary or elective, which are clearly defined, and are usually legitimated by religious status and sanctions. Clan and lineage heads, village councils, and the special roles of elders are typical examples. With increased political authority go more effective judicial procedures, involving the mandatory intervention of third parties, usually village councils and heads of descent groups, who typically function not only as mediators in private disputes but also as the agents of the political group as a whole to punish those offences against the group which impair its solidarity and harmony. Such tribunals are occasions for the development of articulate norms of conduct binding on all group members, and which can be appealed to in disputes, and greater opportunities for mutual perspective-taking.

In societies based on corporate order, balanced reciprocity, especially that involving gift exchanges between individuals, often loses much of the importance which it has in atomistic society. It tends to become transformed into prestations between groups for specific and limited purposes, notably for marriage payments and blood compensation, and into generalized reciprocity so that there are strong norms of co-operation and friendliness which do not rest on dyadic relations between individuals.

To say that societies of corporate order are characterized by generalized rather than by balanced reciprocity is only another way of saying that the norms of benevolence are extended beyond the family to fellow members of one’s ward or village, age-set, or voluntary association. In societies with a stable social organization based on clearly defined groups with accepted mutual obligations, it is possible to transcend the dyadic and individualistic relations of atomistic society, and to extend the morality of the ‘good’ to a much wider range of persons. Consideration of others, kindness, generosity, and mutual tolerance between non-relatives are thus given a firmer foundation, and good will is a normative expectation.

Education remains of the informal type, in which children absorb adult knowledge by participation in social life, not by specialized instruction out of context at schools and such societies are also without literacy. While there are, of course, in every society people who are acknowledged as experts on different matters, there is no scope for full-time specialist thinkers who can meet and debate together on matters of religion and philosophy, so that there is no way in which men can develop an articulate, synthesized, overall understanding of their society and culture as a whole.

In some respects the characteristic features of moral thought in corporate societies correspond with Kohlberg's Conventional, Stage 3.

What is right. Living up to what is expected by people who are close to you or what people generally expect of people in your role as son, brother, friend, etc. 'Being good' is important and means having good motives, showing concern about others. It also means keeping mutual relationships, such as trust, loyalty, respect, and gratitude.

Reasons for doing right. The need to be a good person in your own eyes and those of others. Your caring for others. Belief in the golden rule. Desire to maintain rules and authority which support stereotypical good behaviour.

Social perspective of the stage. Perspective of the individual in relationships with other individuals. Aware of shared feelings, agreements, and expectations which take primacy over individual interests. Relates points of view through the concrete golden rule, putting yourself in the other person's shoes. Does not yet consider generalized system perspective (Kohlberg 1984:174).

Kohlberg's Stage 3 is therefore a conception of society based on status, on socially defined relationships between individuals as members of different groups and categories, but that this does not involve any conceptualization of society as a total system. With the development of the state, however, and of centralized judicial, bureaucratic, and military institutions, the ruling class almost of necessity has to think in terms of society as a whole, as a total system, and law, in particular, becomes of crucial significance in moral thinking, through the centralization of the judicial function. There is therefore a strong resemblance between the social and ethical perspectives of the early states and Kohlberg's Stage 4 of moral development.

Stage 4. *What is right:* fulfilling the actual duties to which you have agreed. Laws are to be upheld except in extreme cases when they conflict with other fixed social duties. Right is also contributing to society, the group or institutions.

Reasons for doing right: to keep the institution going as a whole, to avoid the breakdown in the system, 'if everyone did it', or the imperative of conscience to meet one's defined obligations.

Social perspective of the stage: differentiates societal point of view from interpersonal agreement or motives. Takes the point of view of the system that defines roles and rules. Considers individual relations in terms of place in the system. (Kohlberg 1984:175)

"Where the responsibility for controlling the individual shifts from the face-to-face community to the state, the sanctioning agents for wrong doing change from being the people in the community to institutionalized legal authorities. This transition can be linked to differences between stage 3 and 4 concepts of punishments and of rules and laws (Edwards 1975:522)... Stage 3: Rules and laws are guides...to social or 'good end seeking'. They are guides to 'being good'. Stage 4: Rules and laws are a fixed system of general rules to be followed always, a system designed to prevent social disorder and chaos. Rules and laws define 'right and wrong', categorically." (ibid., 523)

The emergence of Principled Morality in ancient civilizations

We recall that Kohlberg's Stage 5 of Principled morality transcends any particular social order: 'At this level, there is a clear effort to define moral values and principles that have validity and application apart from the authority of the groups or people holding these principles and apart from the individual's own identification with these groups'.

It is clear that at least the philosophers of the ancient literate civilizations of the ancient world had attained Kohlberg's Stage 5. All these ethical systems shared certain essential features, and these were also closely linked together, forming a coherent intellectual structure.

1. The concepts of Righteousness/Justice/Truth – the precise emphasis varies – are extended beyond the thinker's own society, and become universal, even cosmic principles, of moral

order, valid for all societies. A permanent tension is therefore established between the eternal moral law and the institutions of actual societies.

2. In other words, society itself becomes an object of thought, and models of ideal societies are formulated. These debates focus on such issues as the authority of government; the difference between natural law and the laws of the state; whether the state should be governed by the moral example of the ruler or by clear laws rigorously enforced; and the origin of government itself – is it from nature, or from God, or is it a human invention?

3. Popular opinion or traditional authority are no longer treated as the obvious and only guides to proper conduct, and there is a new opposition between conventional opinion and the critical views of an intellectual elite of experts or sages. The claims of conscience in the face of social pressure to conformity become more clearly recognized.

5. Thus we find a growing awareness of the inner life of the individual. This manifests itself in a new consciousness of the need for self-awareness, and ‘know thyself’ becomes, in one form or another, a general maxim. Intentions and motives are closely scrutinized; an increasingly sophisticated range of psychological concepts develops, while in the realm of law the mental element is increasingly recognized.

6. The question ‘What is virtue?’ becomes central, and there is a clear progression from the notion of the virtues as a ‘bag’ of socially desirable attributes to concentration upon a few essential virtues which are the necessary excellences for all human beings as moral agents, and schemes of the virtues form an integrated whole.

3. Conclusion

The internal coherence of these ideas, their transcendence of society and their dynamic quality of representing societies and individuals as functioning wholes, all correspond well with Kohlberg’s criteria of Post-Conventional moral thought, with Piaget’s criteria of Moral Autonomy, and with advanced levels of social cognition and self-awareness. But it will be observed that Kohlberg’s Stage 5 moral thinking is expressed very much in terms of utility, human rights, life and liberty, the social contract, and the general idea of the individual as ‘prior to society’. These notions are the distinctive products of modern Western liberalism, however, and are very different from those of the ancient world we have been discussing. It is therefore essential to distinguish between the *cognitive abilities* necessary for abstract discussion of ethical issues, and the *philosophical assumptions* on which they are based.

The moral universalism of the ancient civilizations had its roots in the belief of that humans are linked to the divine source of universal order by reason, and the moral universalism of the Stoics, for example, has always been an integral part of Christian civilization. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the growing idea of the Rights of Man was also fundamentally Christian, being based on the idea of Man as made in the image of God (Hallpike 2016: 134-136). The idea that human beings have a unique relation to God through their souls also meant that they had a fundamentally different status in the scheme of things from animals.

It should be obvious, however, that the modern materialist Darwinian world-view cannot logically sustain Kohlberg’s belief in human rights and dignity, and liberal moral values in general. If humanity is just another species of animal existing in its natural setting of a purely physical world, the whole idea of a special human status, together with human rights, automatically becomes meaningless. We can have no more *value* than ants or wasps, or any other species because the very idea of value can have no meaning at all in a purely physical universe. Nor is there any reason in biology why merely belonging to the same species could itself create any mutual moral obligations between the members. Biologically speaking, mutual extermination between different groups of the same species would be perfectly normal as part of the struggle for survival.

Ultimately, then, our philosophical beliefs about the nature of things must have powerful consequences on our moral values quite distinct from the cognitive level at which we think about them.

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