

# Free Will from the Viewpoint of Moral Development

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## Abstract

During infants' earlier moral development, the most significant role belongs to the primary caregivers. As reward-punishment systems, discipline methods, and authority figures have an enormous impact on a child's behavior, freedom of choice remains in the background of people's actions during these years. Gradually, individuals' faculty to recognize the mental states of others starts to develop. Empathy skills and the feeling of guilt are the two critical elements of this process (Hoffman, 1979). Individuals with disorders characterized by a lack of empathy skills at a certain level, like psychopathy, therefore go through a different moral development process. Can the difficulty in relating and responding to the particular feelings of others, like fear and sadness, give these individuals more freedom of choice since they are not bound by empathy as much as healthy individuals are? As the development of empathy and socialization are two parallel processes, social interactions, norms, and the need for acceptance start to reveal their effects on moral agents. However, after people develop morals that go against social conventions, being accepted by society starts to lose importance; universally applicable rules and people's own created values become apparent in their way of thinking and acting since they are in the post-conventional part of their development. From this point, it is possible to mention concepts that help us define autonomy, such as justice and liberty. Approaching these concepts at a particular stage of life does not necessarily mean that people think and behave without the influence of others, as the socially provided conformity has already been internalized. This paper analyzes Kohlberg's moral development theory in terms of free will by emphasizing empathy skills and their effects on psychopathic individuals through the lens of R.J.R. Blair's studies and suggests that personal autonomy does not exist at all.

*Keywords:* free will, moral development, empathy, socialization, psychopathy

The interactionist definition explains the concept of moral development as an output of the communication between individuals' cognitive framework and the sophistication of their environment (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977, p. 57). Therefore, it is necessary to examine the cognitive development of individuals, the transformations in their social setting and the primary agents involved in these processes.

The Moral Development Theory introduced by Lawrence Kohlberg suggests a six-stage model, explaining moral development by subdividing it into three levels: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. The first stage is mainly centered around behaviors based on the direct consequence of the actions (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977, p. 54). During this period, reward-punishment systems are critical in determining children's behavior. Besides, the concept of obedience is crucial in identifying the relationship between authority and children. At this stage, the primary authority figures are usually parents and caregivers. In the second stage, behaving according to moral codes is an instrument for the child to achieve personal needs and desires (Kohlberg, 1975, p. 49). Other people's needs are only responded to when they match the child's needs. Some aspects of equality, mutuality and fairness are present at this stage. However, these aspects are viewed practically rather than from a more complex judgement structure.

When individuals reach the conventional level where they become active members of society, social acceptance starts to gain importance. Responding to the norms and expectations of the community is essential, and how the community is defined can vary from a small group like friends, peers, or family to a national state. The third stage at the conventional level mainly focuses on social harmony. Thus, behavior is evaluated in terms of the intention behind one's actions, and whether they fit the social norms (Kohlberg, 1975, p. 49).

In the fourth stage, the relationship between the individual and the system, rather than the relationships with other subjects becomes central (Garz, 2009). Maintaining order and obeying the laws is the distinguishing element of the fourth stage.

Kohlberg (1975) uses the term "social contract" to explain the fifth stage (p. 49). Individuals' rights and uniqueness are valued if the whole of society agrees with them. This democratic approach also involves a gap in altering the laws in a way that will benefit society. The last stage consists of ethical rules applicable in any and every place in the world. They result from individuals' rational precepts about justice, right, equality, and reciprocity; moreover, these principles regard general human rights (Kohlberg, 1975, p. 671).

Dworkin defines autonomy as the reflection of one's choices, motivations, and wills by themselves and without the influence of any external

source (Dworkin, 1981). Defining those elements requires a high level of self-awareness and self-control. Although a certain degree of awareness can provide the person with a vision of the influences of other elements in the self, is it still possible to suggest that thoughts, desires, and goals are derived from such external effects?

Regarding Kohlberg's theory and the cognitive development of individuals, it is possible to suggest that such awareness can only occur at the post-conventional level. In the first two stages, a child's behavior reveals more of a maladaptive characteristic such as instant satisfaction where the reward is obtained after behaving according to parents' moral codes and avoiding other behaviors in order not to be punished. Besides, the conventional level requires a particular consistency and a growing active individual who puts effort into maintaining the social order rather than questioning and analyzing the structure of the social organizations. However, Kohlberg (1975) also uses the term "autonomous" as a synonym for the post-conventional level (p. 671). Although both the fifth and sixth stages are in the autonomous phase, the democratic and utilitarian characteristic of stage five limits personal autonomy in several ways. For example, the individual is aware of the variety of ideas but believes that the right decisions and actions should benefit the whole of society and that the majority must achieve a consensus. This particular feature can influence personal decisions, and even if "-the good of the many-" idea is internalized by the individual, utilitarianist perspectives have several sides may be considered as external.

The only stage on which it is possible to argue that autonomy exists is the sixth one. Deciding what is fair, just, and moral requires a particular moral reasoning and judgment. Although individuals at this stage have the peculiar faculty to act upon such judgment, it is not easy to set universal laws when it comes to applying those in every context. The subjects' awareness of the effects of their current context and background is a long period that can only be achieved during the post-conventional phase which occurs in adulthood. Going through an intense socialization process during the conventional level and learning by sharing everyday experiences with other individuals significantly affect people's decision-making mechanisms. Although unique, abstract ideas are also generated through experience, the time individuals spend in behaving according to norms and order will result in the internalization of some external values. Kohlberg (1975) states that higher stages consist of previous levels of thinking, and that this stage-like process always moves forward (p. 670). Based on this idea, it is possible to suggest that a person cannot go to the next stage without adopting some values from the previous one. Individuals who once placed obeying authority and getting accepted by society as a priority cannot leave their influence behind, even at the post-conventional level.

At this point, it is essential to state that Kohlberg's theory adequately explains Western, especially North American, subjects' moral development (Mathes, 2019). The suggestion is not that there is no being who has freedom of will in the world. However, it is impossible to say that Kohlberg's moral development theory gives individuals enough space to develop autonomy. Furthermore, those individuals who view the world and its development according to their social codes would have difficulties establishing universal principles. As Kohlberg approaches moral development through an individualistic point of view, it is possible to say that all the arguments written so far regard personal autonomy. The theory can be criticized for being ethnocentric since the theory only considers white Americans. Moreover, the concept of free will is related to personal autonomy.

Kohlberg's moral development theory parallels Piagetian development theories. For example, regarding the child's moral judgment, Piaget suggests that the concept of good and the awareness needed to achieve good comes at a later period than the concept of duty (Isaacs, 1934, p. 85). This distinction helps explain the difference in the mindset between conventional and principled (post-conventional) levels. Thus, Piaget views the notion of good as the primary state of reciprocal morality. The first two stages in child development are based on motor functions and egocentric judgment (Isaacs, 1934, p. 87). Moreover, the third stage of moral judgment is about a consensus on the rules, whereas the final stage is centered around strict principles acknowledged by the whole (Isaacs, 1934, p. 87). As has been highlighted, Piagetian theory only considers moral judgement by considering the motivation behind the child's action rather than the behavior and emotions (Isaacs, 1934, p.85).

However, Martin L. Hoffman has studied the role of feelings in moral thinking. The primary focus of this research is on empathy, and Hoffman's definition of morality is highly related to the elements connecting individuals and society (Hoffman, 1979, p. 958). Moral development is seen as a way to diminish the obstacles to this connection. Hoffman also suggests that norms are internalized and still present in a person's morality even though there is no outer authority or discipline system. Several factors such as intense discipline methods and punishment systems cause this internalization (Hoffman, 1979, pp. 958-959). One reason is the child's egocentric state at this level of morality. According to Piaget, egocentrism is a conflict about what belongs to the self and others (Isaacs, 1934, p. 87). The absence of this specific distinction may thus be one factor that arouses the feeling of guilt. Although Bandura argues that identification is not a possible outcome of this process because a child tends to imitate behavior rather than internalize the motives behind it, this claim cannot oppose

the cause of guilt (as cited in Hoffman, 1979, p. 956). The complementary and essential feeling that needs to be talked about while arguing guilt is empathy. Since these feelings are contextually related to concepts of rights and social contracts it is important to highlight them while talking about moral development (Tomasello, 2009). It is a responsive state against something that occurs somewhere other than the self. Additionally, the distress in this state is one of the causes of guilt (Hoffman, 1979, p. 964). The identification and the future distinctions in the child due to different levels of sensitivity and various discipline techniques can affect individuals' cognitive progress and socialization process.

As feelings are an important part of social interactions, it is possible to argue that abandoning the egocentric stages and transitioning to the conventional level is highly affected by the development of empathy. Kohlberg (1975) states that the direction of the stages always goes towards the higher level, the only exception being exposure to trauma (p. 670). Discussing this argument from a Freudian standpoint raises an important question. If an extreme trauma occurs at the egocentric stage, causing a fixation, and the individual cannot develop a certain level of empathy, is it possible to consider such an individual as psychopathic? Is lack of empathy related to psychopathy, and how can a psychopathic individual develop moral values? Is it possible to assume that psychopathic individuals have more freedom of will as they go through a different socialization process?

Firstly, empathic dysfunction is an important criterion when diagnosing psychopathy. Besides, the dysfunctions in psychopathic individuals can cause impairment in their freedom of choice (Glannon, 2015). However, a distinction between adults and children is necessary for examining the relationship between empathy and psychopathy. R.J.R. Blair studied the theory of mind impairment in psychopathic individuals. Theory of Mind is a widely used task and is important for assessing whether individuals can predict others' mental states. Research results have shown that psychopathic individuals do not suffer any impairment in Theory of Mind tasks (Blair, 2007).

On the other hand, scholars found that children with psychopathic tendencies show impairment when faced with sad and fearful facial expressions, while for adults this situation only occurs in cases for fear recognition (Blair et al., 2001). This conclusion was reached after researchers conducted several tests to determine feelings such as happiness, disgust, surprise, and anger. These experiments examine emotional empathy, unlike the Theory of Mind analysis, which focuses on cognitive empathy. Dadds (2009) and his colleagues examined cognitive empathy without including the Theory of Mind, and found that cognitive deficien-

cies exist in childhood; however, males with severe psychopathic conditions may overcome this during their teenage years (p. 599). On the other hand, affective (emotional) empathy deficiency is not a particular feature for females with psychopathy, while it is present in males regardless of whether they are children or adults (Dadds et al., 2009, p. 603). Recognizing the mental states of others is not possible for children who show psychopathic traits; however, during puberty, males can develop this ability, but they are not able to respond with an appropriate reaction. On the contrary, females cannot identify another person's inner states at any period of their lives while they can react appropriately (Dadds et al., 2009)

When this theory is placed on the Kohlbergian scale, it is possible to assume that psychopathic individuals cannot go through conventional and post-conventional levels. The cognitive empathy deficiency in childhood is not uncommon at the egocentric pre-conventional level. Although this specific group of men can overcome this, the lack of emotional empathy and the continuity in women's cognitive skills is the starting point of this argument. However, the place of women in Kohlbergian theory can be interpreted as questionable. It is stated that women are primarily identified with stage three, whereas men generally continue their lives in stage four (Mathes, 2019, p. 3909). The division between having domestic and financial roles has led Kohlberg to make this distinction. Moreover, it is suggested that women cannot go through the post-conventional level. Kohlberg's study could not find any male subjects in the post-conventional level except people who have not studied the philosophy of morality (Mathes, 2019, p. 3911). This situation is due to the dominance of males in academia during Kohlberg's era.

Kohlberg's approach to moral development was severely criticized by some as sexist. Carol Gilligan, a former colleague of Lawrence Kohlberg, has updated the theory by centering a care-based perspective on female moral progress, unlike Kohlberg's judgement focused theory (Bairer, 1987). Gilligan's theory assesses the place of women in men's life cycle. Although this is a valuable contribution to the literature, Gilligan's work cannot explain women's roles and status according to the flow of 21<sup>st</sup> century feminist movements. Besides being able to talk about concepts of freedom, justice, and autonomy, the judgmental approach is necessary. Since Gilligan's approach lacks this judgmental perspective contemporary feminist approaches should be considered in further research.

Whether a fixation causes psychopathy due to trauma to prevent individuals from socializing, internalizing, and responding to norms and expectations, or the psychopathic tendency exists from birth, these individuals continue to exist in the first two stages. If the satisfaction from psychopathic behavior shows the character of a typical reward mecha-

nism, the arguments suggesting that psychopathic individuals stay at the pre-conventional level would be supported. In order to test this argument, further research should be conducted on children, adolescents, and adult subjects with psychopathic tendencies.

In conclusion, the Kohlbergian approach that consists of stages and levels of morality is a much used theory, although it has been criticized for being ethnocentric (Mathes, 2019) and sexist (Baier, 1987). The theory is influenced by Piaget's developmental approach (Isaacs, 1934) and has influenced other theories including Gilligan's care approach to moral development (Gilligan, 1993). There is a hierarchy within the six stages, and the direction of development is from a lower to a higher level (Kohlberg, 1975, p. 670). Besides, the other individuals involved in the moral development of the agent change between these different levels and stages due to the enormous effect of socialization. Although the theory includes a level named autonomous (post-conventional) and considers concepts of justice and equality, the freedom of the will does not exist in either of these stages because of the different characteristics of the fifth and sixth stages such as egocentrism, utilitarianism, and internalization of norms (Kohlberg, 1975). There are counterarguments about cultural, organizational, and gender differences, which were neglected in the theory. However, individuals with psychopathic tendencies have been examined regarding feelings of empathy and guilt, which play an essential role in the transition from the pre-conventional to the conventional level. The conclusion derived from this analysis suggests that individuals with psychopathy are unable to go further than the pre-conventional level due to the dysfunction in their cognitive and affective empathy skills. Since they tend to stay in a position lacking such socialization, psychopathic individuals also cannot develop autonomy due to the Kohlbergian scale of development.

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