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Theory of Moral Development

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The Theory of Moral Development is a very interesting subject that stemmed from Jean Piaget's theory of moral reasoning. Developed by psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, this theory made us understand that morality starts from the early childhood years and can be affected by several factors.

Morality can be developed either negatively or positively, depending on how an individual accomplishes the tasks before him during each stage of moral development across his lifespan.

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History of the Theory

How did Kohlberg come up with the theory of moral development? All his ideas started from the research he performed with very young children as his subjects. He found out that children are faced with different moral issues, and their judgments on whether they are to act positively or negatively over each dilemma are heavily influenced by several factors. In each scenario that Kohlberg related to the children, he was not really asking whether or not the person in the situation is morally right or wrong, but he wanted to find out the reasons why these children think that the character is morally right or not.

Levels and Stages of Moral Development

Level 1: Preconventional Morality

The first level of morality, preconventional morality, can be further divided into two stages: obedience and punishment, and individualism and exchange.

Stage 1: Punishment- Obedience Orientation

Related to Skinner's Operational Conditioning, this stage includes the use of punishment so that the person refrains from doing the action and continues to obey the rules. For example, we follow the law because we do not want to go to jail.

Stage 2: Instrumental Relativist Orientation

In this stage, the person is said to judge the morality of an action based on how it satisfies the individual needs of the doer. For instance, a person steals money from another person because he needs that money to buy food for his hungry children. In Kohlberg's theory, the children tend to say that this action is morally right because of the serious need of the doer.

Level 2: Conventional Morality

The second level of morality involves the stages 3 and 4 of moral development. Conventional morality includes the society and societal roles in judging the morality of an action.

Stage 3: Good Boy-Nice Girl Orientation

In this stage, a person judges an action based on the societal roles and social expectations before him. This is also known as the "interpersonal relationships" phase. For example, a child gives away her lunch to a street peasant because she thinks doing so means being nice.

Stage 4: Law and Order Orientation

This stage includes respecting the authorities and following the rules, as well as doing a person's duty. The society is the main consideration of a person at this stage. For instance, a policeman refuses the money offered to him under the table and arrests the offender because he believes this is his duty as an officer of peace and order.

Level 3: Postconventional Morality

The post-conventional morality includes stage 5 and stage 6. This is mainly concerned with the universal principles that relation to the action done.

Stage 5 : Social Contract Orientation

In this stage, the person is look at various opinions and values of different people before coming up with the decision on the morality of the action.

Stage 6 : Universal Ethical Principles Orientation

The final stage of moral reasoning, this orientation is when a person considers universally accepted ethical principles. The judgment may become innate and may even violate the laws and rules as the person becomes attached to his own principles of justice.

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