Introduction

Welcome to this lecture on moral development and the ethics of care.

The Development of Moral Reasoning and the Ethics of Care

The ethics of care is a recent development. Its proponents, notably psychologist Carol Gilligan, were motivated to highlight what they thought was a crucial aspect of ethics that was being neglected by mainstream approaches to ethics: the relational character of caring, which occurs in particular circumstances and cannot be universalized. Psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, Gilligan’s mentor, had developed a way to measure the development of moral judgment, which ordered people’s moral development on a scale, 1 marking the lowest level and 6 the highest.

The Kohlbergian assessment of moral development asks subjects to respond to moral problems. The most famous one is the Heinz dilemma: A man named Heinz considers whether or not to steal a drug which he cannot afford to buy in order to save the life of his wife.

Subjects’ moral development score depends on how they answer such moral problems. This kind of test is still being administered. The Defining Issues Test (DIT), for instance, rests on Kohlberg’s framework.

Kohlberg, following in the footsteps of developmental psychologist Jean Piaget, assumed that lower stages of development are marked by a reliance on concrete thinking, while higher levels require abstract thought. Dependence on concrete objects and circumstances is an indication of a lower level of reasoning. Relying on feeling is associated with a lack of abstraction and lack of reasoning. The next three slides present Kohlberg’s description of the moral stages. You will notice that they recapitulate the approaches to thinking about ethics that we have examined in previous modules.

Kohlberg’s Level I: Preconventional Moral Thinking

Kohlberg describes this level as characteristic of the outlook of most children under 9, some adolescents, and many criminal offenders. At this level, individuals do not yet understand nor uphold societal rules and expectations. Rules and social expectations are something external to the self. At the first stage, the individual responds strictly to threats or rewards directed to self. At the second stage, the individual anticipates that what other people do impacts what is in one’s interest. He sees morality in terms of exchanges with others that impact self-interest.

Kohlberg’s Stage II: Conventional Moral Thinking

Kohlberg describes this level as characteristic of the outlook of most adolescents and adults. At this level, individuals conform to and uphold the rules of society or authority, not out of calculation for personal advantage, but because they accept these rules. The Level 2 individual has internalized the rules and expectations of others, especially of authorities. The perspective of a stage 3 individual is the perspective of the individual as a member of a small group, such as family or friends. The stage 3 individual thinks of morality in terms of relationships of caring and trust. In stage 4, the individual graduates to thinking of roles and responsibilities in institutional wholes, or in society as a whole.

Kohlberg’s Stage III: Postconventional Moral Thinking
Kohlberg describes this level as something that is reached by a minority of adults, usually only after the age of 20. At the postconventional level, individuals accept society’s rules because they understand and accept the general moral principles that underlie them. Postconventional individuals are capable of reflecting on matters of principle. They will not follow rules merely by convention, but because they have chosen them on the basis of reflective examination. As you may notice, the highest level of moral development in Stage 6 is in effect the implementation of Kantian duty theory: the highest forms of ethical reasoning are universalizable and recognize the dignity of persons who are capable of making choices based on reason. Stage 5 runners-up are reasoning in accordance with moral rights, reasoning in accordance with the principle of utility, and thinking in terms of the social contract.

Gilligan’s Critique of Kohlberg’s Assumptions

Gilligan found that girls’ responses to the Heinz dilemma were rated as inferior to boys’ responses. Kohlberg’s finding that, in general, girls and women demonstrate an inferior level of moral development to boys and men seemed counterintuitive. Examining responses to the Heinz dilemma by two eleven-year-olds, Amy and Jake, Gilligan saw that Amy’s responses were noted as evasive and confused. According to Gilligan, Amy tried to think of possible ways of solving the problem. She thought of the problem in terms of a narrative that evolves over time and that involves the relationships between Heinz, Heinz’ wife, and the pharmacist. Her narrative incorporated getting the people involved in the story to communicate as a way to solve the problem. Jake thought of the issue as a conflict between life and property and took it to be a math problem with humans.

Gilligan’s point is that it is plainly odd to think of Amy’s way as morally inferior to Jake’s way. Amy’s way is registered in Kohlberg’s approach as an inability to think systematically. Broadening the point, Gilligan thought that Amy’s way is characteristic of an ethics of care. Kohlberg’s approach accepts the assumption that universalizing reason, basically Kant’s way, marks the highest accomplishment of human moral thinking, followed by thinking in terms of rights and utility. Gilligan rejects the assumption of a hierarchical ordering that places abstract thinking above thinking in terms of narratives involving human relations. Nevertheless, she too accepts that the egocentric preconventional stage, as Kohlberg described it, denotes a stage of moral immaturity.