



Measuring Moral Development

ARTIKEL

Het in kaart brengen van moraliteit is een ingewikkelde kwestie, die in de laatste jaren steeds meer in de belangstelling lijkt te komen. Begrippen als 'morele ontwikkeling' en 'morele vooruitgang' worden hierin vaak inwisselbaar gebruikt. Dit is niet correct volgens Michael Klenk: Het zijn verschillende concepten, maar ze staan niet compleet los van elkaar. Bovendien is het nog maar de vraag of ze beide meetbaar zijn.

In the aftermath of the financial crisis, heightened awareness of ethical issues has sparked increased efforts toward moral education within universities and businesses. In many cases, psychological tests are used to measure whether moral development occurs. As long as we understand *moral development* as synonymous with *moral progress*, this may seem like a good sign: it would appear that such tests give us a handle on moral progress. Alas, moral development and moral progress are two very different things. And although we know a lot about moral development, what we know has little to do with moral progress. Let's untangle both concepts.

Moral development theories aim to describe the development of moral judgments within individuals over time. They are not to be confused with theories on the evolutionary history of morality, which describe how the capacity or the intent for moral reasoning developed in the human species. The most influential theory of moral development, devised by Lawrence Kohlberg, depicts moral judgements as being closely related to cognitive development and the ability for adopting a social perspective. Six distinguishable stages of moral development appear to be universal: At the pre-conventional level, individuals think mostly in terms of the (physical) consequences of actions (stage 1) or the satisfaction

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of their personal needs (stage 2). At the conventional level, individuals focus on social expectations (stage 3) and the rules of society or other institutions of authority (stage 4). Finally, at the post-conventional



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level, individuals grasp moral rules as social, created constructs which are open to amendment from their creators (stage 5) or as universal and objective principles (stage 6). As you can see, to progress through developmental stages means to consider moral situations in ever more abstract ways.

The most widely-used tool to measure moral development according to the cognitive approach is the Defining Issues Test (DIT). The DIT has been used extensively: James Rest, inventor of the test, reports that well over a thousand DIT-based studies, encompassing several hundred thousands of subjects have been published. The DIT presents test-takers with five moral dilemmas. They are asked to decide what to do in each of these, and rank the importance of twelve reasoning fragments in relation to each scenario. If you were to take the test, for example, you would learn about the dire situation of Mustaq Singh whose family is near starvation while a rich neighbour is hoarding large amounts of food. You would have to decide whether Mr Singh ought to steal a small amount of food for his family and then rate and rank items such as ‘Is Mustaq Singh courageous enough to risk getting caught for stealing?’ and ‘What values are going to be the basis for social cooperation?’ in relation to their respective importance in the dilemma. The principal score of the test is based on how many of the highest ranked reasoning-fragments are from stages 5/6 of the cognitive moral development framework.

The DIT allows us to understand consistent and universal patterns in our thinking about moral matters, which are shared across the globe. Correlative studies reveal relevant influences on moral development: Education, more so than age, is the most influential factor. Moreover, related tests of moral development, such as the Moral Judgements Test, and tests based on alternative paradigms, such as the Moral Foundations Questionnaire, correlate significantly with the stages of the DIT. In that context, the measurement of moral development

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works. Interestingly, only about 20% of test takers reach stage 5 or higher. On a side note, psychologists sometimes interpret stage 6 as the ‘degree to which a person thinks about moral problems like a moral philosopher’. This suggests that philosophers’ assumptions about ‘folk moral judgements’ often might depict these as more objective than they really are.

More importantly, however, the DIT and related measurement techniques for moral development do not by themselves warrant inferences about moral progress. Moral development merely describes ways of thinking about moral matters and, as such, those ways of thinking can be dissociated from moral values. So, unfortunately, reasoning at the ‘moral philosopher’-stage of this developmental model does not yet make you a good person; nor does it mean that education leads to moral progress all by itself.

Moral *progress*, conversely, depends on moral values. As an example, consider whether the

continuous decrease of violence in human history is a sign of moral progress: I would say it does. But whether that is actually true depends on deeper normative and meta-ethical questions: It depends on what values themselves are understood to be, and on which values one acknowledges as such.

To judge that moral progress occurred is to make a comparative judgement that makes reference to values. What values there are will thus determine, as in our example, whether the decrease in violence counts as moral progress. But the issue with moral progress is not (only) the old issue of moral disagreement. In fact, most philosophers would agree that the extension of liberty and the reduction of poverty would count as moral progress. However, to say that the world today is a morally better place than it was in 1517 is to make a comparative judgment between states of affairs, which raises interesting questions about comparability and commensurability. Comparability

requires similarity, and it is often difficult to say whether two states of affairs are sufficiently similar in moral terms to warrant comparison. Commensurability affects how we stack up different values against each other. For instance, poverty might be declining globally, but we must ask how the values this satisfies relate to other values that might be detrimentally affected. For example, the environment is likely to suffer when the rest of the world catches up with the standards of living of the US and Western Europe. Ultimately, answers to both questions will depend on the nature of values how they relate to each other. Hence, while we can determine moral development independent of value judgements, we do still ultimately rely on them in judging whether moral progress has occurred.

Although moral development and moral progress are fundamentally different phenomena, they do relate to each other. We might, perhaps, think about moral development as an enabler for moral progress as it helps us to grasp more of the moral aspects of a given situation. Ultimately, however, we still have to pick the certain values to give direction to our thoughts, and we have to take action. This, quite independent of moral development, is where moral progress can take place.

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