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Process Theory of Moral Development

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Abstract:

Moral development is a cognition based mechanism, measured in the dimension of individuals' positive behaviour change, and based on universal interpretation of right and wrong. The society was aware of this important phenomenon throughout the recorded history, but "How to develop moral standards?" remains as an age-old question. Modern researchers have recommended various moral development techniques, which are being in practice among schools. However, it is difficult to find success stories, and it seems that moral education projects have been abandoned deliberately. My studies related to this discipline revealed that incomplete conceptualisation of the moral development process and unavailability of a process theory had retarded the growth of this discipline. Hence, the proposed conceptualisation of morality and the related process theory provide a universal solution to modify and control human behaviour, which is pragmatic and conducive to a just society.

Keywords: Character building, just society, moral development, morality, process theory of moral development

1. Introduction

Moral development, as a mechanism for shaping human behaviour by inducing good values, has been in practice among societies for thousands of years. Later this idea was institutionalised and considered to be a primary function of schooling (Dreeben, 1968) and parents expect teachers to contribute to children's moral development (Gallup, 1976). In modern era, more attention has been given to studying of subjects leading to affluent careers, and parents expect children develop morally during the studies.

The observable component of one's moral standards is the character. Many religious leaders, philosophers, and educators, agree that moral development is a requirement to character development of individuals. Therefore, the development of morality (or its constituents) was a priority in societies throughout the history to develop individuals' character. During the 20th century, scholars looked in to this matter from a psychological perspective and contributed to the understanding of moral development and its components. The ancient curriculum of discipline and habits of self-control remains an essential part of most moral education approaches today (e.g. Hunter, 2000; Lickona, 1997). Arthur (2005, p.20) states, the main objective of education in the history was moral development. Some scholars propose introduction of social-emotional learning theory in schools as a strategy to improve morality (Elias, Parker, Kash, & Dunkeblau, 2007), but could produce negative results also (Elias, 2009). Silverstein and Trombetti (2013) suggest 'habituation', which involves the training of moral perception, ethical decision making, and cooperative communal life. As a general rule, those attempts to improve moral reasoning are associated with the concept of moral education, suggesting a cognitive development approach.

However, the cognitive development approach to improve moral reasoning, which is widely practised as teaching of moral values in schools, has not shown the expected results. This is evident in the awareness of moral values by some educated people who nevertheless behave immorally. If people with awareness of moral standards behave immorally, the approach of cognition development becomes invalid. Therefore, it is evident the absence of a generally accepted and guaranteed mechanism to improve moral behaviour. Hypothetically there are two main reasons for this situation; incomplete understanding of the moral development process and unavailability of a process theory. This conceptual paper will theoretically examine the moral development process by utilising concepts of psychology, learning theory and sociology to identify the moral development process and a relevant theory.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of Moral Development

The phenomenon of moral development is an individuals' growth of behaviour standards based on universal interpretation of right and wrong. Accordingly, moral development concerns rules and values about what people should do in their interactions with others in three dimensions: reasoning, behaviour, and feelings. In the social dimension, morality is defined as principles for how individuals ought to treat one another, with respect to justice, others' welfare, and rights. Piaget (1932) and Kohlberg (1981) contributed heavily on the understanding and development of moral values. However, subsequent studies seem to contribute less to the moral development phenomenon.

Some scholars view moral development from a sociological point of view. Korsgaard (1996) states that morality is about how we should relate to each other, about having decent, caring, and respectful relationships. Jensen (2009) states, "with respect to reasoning, moral rules are justified in terms of references to justice, fairness, and the welfare of others." These standards are universally accepted and common to every culture. However conventional reasoning focuses on communal and religious norms, interests, and authorities.

2.2. *Psychological and Sociological Views*

According to Sigmund Freud a tension arises when needs of the society and of the individual meet each other. Concurrently, moral development proceeds when the individual's selfish desires are suppressed by socially desirable values. The present conceptualization of moral identity has two different aspects. As stated by Erikson (1964), it is rooted in the core of one's being, and it involves being true to oneself in action. It should be noted that most moral researchers are descendants of cultural-religious traditions (Edwards *et al.*, 2005). Most moral principles are the basis of all the major world religions, and therefore universal agreements on moral values are noticeable.

Interestingly, many professions have embraced moral values within their professional services. In the Medical profession, doctors are ethically bound to save the patient's life, irrespective of the country's law and order. The legal profession accepts all are equal in front of the law. The Japanese business community has recognised employees' happiness as part of the business culture. The Human rights concept, which flourished in Europe, is a developing stage of moral concept. However, these initiatives cannot be categorised as moral acts, but are rather, part of the legislature. An act cannot be moral if a business advocates moral values on the assumption of higher productivity, but it is still welcomed as a stepping stone towards a moral society. It is excellent if there is a legal obligation to comply with moral standards, considering the outcome and motivation.

There are evidences that moral development and psychological well-being are correlated (Farhan, Dasti, & Khan, 2015). It is interesting to discuss moral development as a conflict prevention mechanism also. Throughout history, conflicts have been the biggest threat to humanity. Large numbers of studies related to conflicts are available. However moral development has not been recognised as a conflict prevention tool in related literature. Conflicts erupt due to many reasons but every conflict originates in the human mind. If an individual can suppress his or her own thoughts or sacrifice something for the benefit of others, it will be a starting point of conflict prevention.

Religion and moral behaviour is an interesting topic and there are ample studies available. Many authors predicate moral standards on religious teachings. However, there is a danger of drawing conclusions without clear grounded theories. Bull (1969) sees a danger of making religion as the basis of morality because, if the two are closely associated, a decline of religious belief must be associated with a corresponding decline of morality. Basically, people want to accept religion and related teachings as solid concepts. Most people do not tend to criticise or evaluate such standards, even if they realise their limitations. Therefore, it is wise to consider religion and moral development as two disciplines, even if a friction between religion and moral development cannot be expected.

Politics and morals provide many open-ended questions for researchers. Politics can be viewed as a means to pursue social interests and is not inherently moral or immoral. However, it can be used to pursue moral or immoral ends. Unarguably, politics has played a major role in causing injustice to millions of innocent people (Sharp, Register & Grimes, 1998). Historical tyrants such as Ghengis Khan, Hitler, and Pol Pot, are key examples of immorality of politicians. However, Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi provide moral examples. Even though there are some criticisms, the democratic countries in Europe also provide good examples of democracy blended with moral standards.

Some scholars have doubts about 'what' are the moral standards, how to enforce such values, and their limits etc. Enoch (2009 p.45) questions the practicability of moral standards. In a disagreement, there is no way of finding who/what is right/wrong. This argument is slipping away from the moral concept. Moral behaviour should not be another set of rules, but a voluntary compilation. As such a member of society is not bound to adhere to moral standards, but honoured if he/she exhibits them. However, even though moral philosophy is historically very old, it was viewed from psychological perspective in 20th century in Western culture. In Asian culture, moral philosophy was partly cultural norms and partly religious norms and it has never been a subject for research. It should be noted that once a discipline amalgamates a religion, followers stop questioning or studying it, but rather worship it.

2.3. *Studies on Moral Development*

Scholars have developed their studies on three dimensions of the morality concept. What constitutes morality, what is the outcome, and how to impart moral standards among people, have been research areas. Han (2014) emphasised that the study of moral education is basically interdisciplinary; it includes moral philosophy, psychology, and educational research. However, according to my observations, either philosophers or psychologists have performed moral studies, but the contribution of educationists seems to be minimal. I did not find any author competent in all three disciplines.

Piaget (1932, 1965) hypothesised that playing games helps to improve moral values. He made some experiments by observing and questioning children, and concluded that children develop moral values as a result of game playing. He proposed four stages of moral development among children. The first stage has been called "punishment and obedience", where children obey rules to avoid punishment. The second stage is called "instrumentalism", where children behave well to receive appreciation. At stage two, children recognize the mutual benefits in cooperation. The third stage is characterized by incipient cooperation. Interactions are more social, and rules are mastered and observed. The child learns and understands both cooperative and competitive behaviour. In the fourth stage, cooperation is more earnest and the child understand rules in a more legalistic fashion. Piaget calls this as the stage of "genuine cooperation".

Based on Piaget's study, Kohlberg (1981) expanded Piaget's two stages into six, organized into three levels – each level consisting of two stages. The interest on moral development was inspired among psychologists by Kohlberg's (1984) work in moral judgment. He proposed case studies of real life scenarios and analysed each based on moral judgements. Many people have contributed to the debate by analysing the examples he provided to understand the dimensions of moral development. However, basically there is a widespread agreement with his moral theory. The influence of liberal philosophers such as Rawls (1971), along with Piaget (1932, 1965), and Baldwin (1902), stimulated Kohlberg's work. The development of understanding of moral issues such as rights and justice was a major contribution of Kohlberg's (1984) works to the society. Gilligan (1982) also proposes a stage wise moral development model. Primarily contributions of cognitive developmental and moral socialization theories focused on moral cognitions and socialization agents (such as parents). The contribution of family members has been the focus of many socialization researches. Several researchers identified the contribution of peers as shaping agents for moral behaviours (Hart, Atkins, Markey, & Youniss, 2004). However, other agents of change have been identified on the basis of biological factors and behaviours such as altruism and aggression (Coie & Dodge, 1998; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). Popular personality doctrines depicted human behaviour as impelled by needs, drives, and impulses (Bandura, 1971). One study showed specific brain regions as being activated during moral decision-making (De Quervain, Fischbacher, Treyer, Schellhammer, Schnyder, Buck & Fehr, 2004). However, it is rather a reactive incident and does not relate to the cognitive development process.

Many academics search for reasons for deteriorating moral values and working to develop such values among their students. *Education today* (September 29, 2013) reports that in many schools' students are morally not perfect. They behave irresponsibly and dealing with them is a huge problem. This situation challenges Killen and Smetana (2006)'s opinion of research achievements. Killen and Smetana (2006) state that "moral development in adolescence has reached maturity as an area of research". If the area of moral development has reached maturity, there should be practicable methodology to implement moral development tasks. Schaefer (2014) states that the content of moral norms, as well as appropriate means by which to manipulate them, are debatable. Some argue (Henderson, 1911) that moral education is not a specific subject but should be taught under different subjects in the classroom. After one hundred years the same view appears among educators who attempt to impart moral values by teaching. Some believe that everyday practical activities help to improve moral values (Akin, Dunne, Palontares, and Schilling, 1995), and Schaefer (2014) argue the best way to make people morally better may well be to make them better philosophers. Lickona, Schaps and Lewis (2000), put forward 11 Principles of effective character education. Narvaez (2006; 2007) in 'The Integrative Ethical Education model', proposes five steps to impart moral values. These factors have a social-cognitive approach of learning proposed by Bandura (1977). Unarguably these approaches help to improve moral reasoning, but will require a fully devoted moral environment including unlimited school hours and moral competent teachers.

Studies of Moral theory and related disciplines have been expanded after Kohlberg's contribution to the moral theory, resulting in a substantial body of work over the last 40 years. Killen and Smetana's (2006) conclusion, that moral development has reached maturity as an area of research, may be due to the availability of vast number of research papers. However, literature review shows that many attempts to identify moral issues and probable dimensions and lateral coherence with other disciplines have generated more questions. These studies cover key topics such as morality, identity, genetics, pro-social development, theory of mind, aggression, parenting, and culture, which contributes immensely to the study of moral development. However, they do not answer the mechanism of moral development and how to reach higher stages of moral development. Hart and Carlo (2005) state that many research papers related to moral development appears every year but synthesising various reviews has been neglected. This situation induces the need for a comprehensive moral development process theory.

3. Methodology

Teaching of moral values has been in practice for centuries as a behaviour changing mechanism. That clearly justifies the moral development process has been hypothesised as a cognitive development process. However, I could not find studies related to the success of teaching moral values. Apparently, this hypothesis has not been proved and implicit a failure. If the moral development is not a cognition development process, an alternate hypothesis needs to put forward. Therefore, in this conceptual paper, Learning theories and behaviour modification theories are critically assessed to filter out concepts to construct a related process theory.

3.1. Literature Analysis

3.1.1. Moral Development as a Cognition Development Process

It is necessary to understand the moral development process before attempting to manipulate it. Kohlberg formulated a cognitive development based theory for moral reasoning. According to his theory, it can be hypothesised that moral development is the awareness of moral values. However, it has been observed that criminal convicts are aware of what is good and what is bad. They know that killing, stealing, and socially unaccepted acts are wrong, but they have their own reasons for such acts. Hence, we have to reject the cognitive development concept, which equates knowledge of moral values with moral development.

Lawrence Kohlberg provided a starting point for identifying moral development by formulating his "cognitive-developmental" stage theory of moral judgment (Kohlberg, 1981, 1984). This approach suggests two things; (1) moral development is a development of cognition; (2) Moral standards are manipulatable. Narvaez, (2002) states that moral character is best thought of as a set of teachable, ethically-relevant skills. Nucci and Narvaez (2008) suggest that there are three mainstream theoretical frameworks of moral education: virtue ethics, moral reasoning, and moral emotion-based education. These three theoretical frameworks again support the cognitive development approach for moral education. In the article "Moral and Character Development" Vessels, G., and Huit, W. (2005) have

concluded without giving definitive and conclusive answers for moral development process. Han, H. (2014) her article of “Analysing Theoretical Frameworks of Moral Education through Lakatos’s Philosophy of Science” concluded stating that, this essay will contribute to the development of both theoretical and practical aspects of moral education. Lickona, Schaps and Lewis (2000), put forward following 11 Principles of Effective Character Education. These principles support cognitive development approach and socialisation process.

Lind (1992) states that morality is not a matter of having the right moral attitudes or knowing moral terminology, but a competency that could develop and be measured, and also that the process is complex and not fully understood. This statement suggests that moral development comprises two components: a known cognitive development component and an unknown psychological process.

Illeris (2007, p. 3) defines learning as, ‘any process that leads to permanent capacity change in living organisms, and which is not solely due to biological reasons (Illeris, 2007, p. 3). It suggests that moral development as a behaviour changing phenomenon, which should be a learning process. Driscoll (2000, p.11) defines learning as, “a persisting change in human performance.” These definitions suggest that the outcome of learning is a behaviour change. This implies that moral development could be understood by referring to learning theories.

The idea of teaching moral values (Henderson, 1911) has been reinforced by Kohlberg’s (1981) cognition development approach for moral development. Lind’s Konstanz method of dilemma discussion (Lind, 2016) also accepts a cognitive development approach. However, this approach has not produced expected results (*Education Today*, Sunday, September 29, 2013), and many school students behave irresponsibly, and dealing with them has become a serious issue.

According to Han (2014), moral education is usually defined as a form of education. This is the age-old definition of moral education, which deliberately practices within school system. Weissbourd (2012) states that 70% of parents want schools to teach standards of right and wrong, and 85% want schools to teach values. He further states that “the challenge is not simply moral literacy-in fact; research indicates that most students know these standards.”Kohlberg’s studies stressed the cognitive factors in moral understanding, but moral understanding and moral action have different meanings. According to Fleming (2005), “It is wrong to assume that a person’s moral understanding guides his/her moral behaviour.” This fact reveals that even though learning of moral literacy develops the cognition, it is entirely different from behaviour change (moral development). Therefore, it is unacceptable to conceptualise moral development as a cognitive development process.

3.1.2. Moral Development as a Conditioning Process

Some researchers suggest that moral education should comprehensively include training for moral thinking. This training should include moral thinking, feeling, and behaviour (Lickona, 1996). Silverstein and Trombetti (2013) also propose “training of moral perception,” but a mechanism has not developed for the practitioner. However, these studies provide a clue to generate a hypothesis as, “moral development process is a conditioning process.”

The concept of conditioning has been in operation within almost every society. The roots of this application are not recorded, and may be as old as human civilisation and continues to be a highly successful behaviour modification method. The conditioning process was psychologically analysed, developed, and documented, by many scholars (Thorndike, 1898; Pavlov, 1927; Skinner, 1938). Conditioning theories attempted to explain the effect of stimulus on learning processes. Pavlov’s studies (1927) focussed on manipulation of environmental factors to change behaviour in a process termed *classical conditioning*. Skinner (1938) theorised the process of changing behaviour by use of reinforcement, which is given after the desired response. This process was named *operant conditioning* and was in practice in many societies in the world. Kohlberg (1984 cited by Vessels, and Huit, 2005) proposed that moral thinking is based on an individual’s thinking regarding justice, fairness, and equity. He stated that children’s thinking about right and wrong begins with operant conditioning.

Historically, the world has used this technique to condition human behaviour. Each society has a collection of fairy tales and folk stories. Literature related to every major religion has a collection of stories. Most of these stories have some common features such as winning good virtues, humiliating villains, and appreciating of compassion and sympathy. Generally, many stories end up with encouraging good moral standards and discouraging bad. When a parent, whom a child mostly respects, appreciates good values, the child also respects such values. S/he thinks these are the patterns of behaviour that s/he should follow to please the adult. Reading of stories also has the same effect. A child’s respect for the immediate society is only second to that for his/her parents. When a child repeatedly read such stories, s/he assumes they reflect social norms and tries to adhere to such values to get social recognition. This phenomenon seems to be an application of the strategies proposed by: Lickona (1996), training of “moral thinking, feeling, and behaviour,” and Silverstein and Trombetti (2013) training of “moral perception.” Apparently, this was a successful application of operant conditioning in ancient societies. Modern society also has this option for conditioning their children. In this process, adults/social recognition works as the conditioning stimulus.

The process of behaviour change could be better explained as a process of conditioning but abandoning the cognitive development approach. However, if there is a hypothetical situation where the child is unaware of relevant standards, then a cognitive development should be a preceding process and the conditioning will be a succeeding process. Behaviour change is the process of converting accumulated information into predictable behaviour patterns, which are either positive or negative changes, and positive behaviour change can be viewed as moral development.

This phenomenon explains moral development as a combination of two processes; a cognitive development process followed by an operant conditioning process. However, it should be noted that behaviour change is dichotomous; it could be either positive or negative. As this article is limited to the process theory of moral development, its application will not be discussed here. As such, the following flow diagram shows the moral development process.

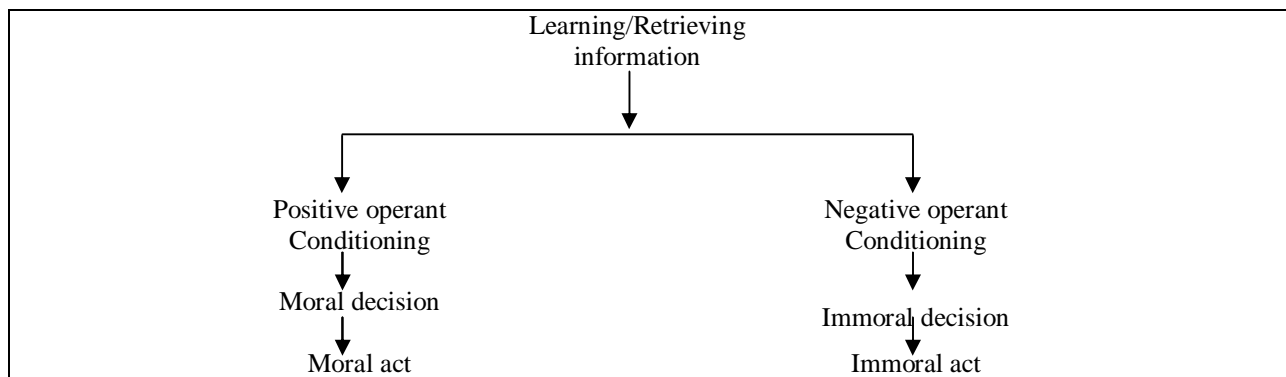


Figure 1: Moral Behaviour Changing Process

The above figure shows how to use conditioning process to change the behaviour. However, the behaviour change could be either positive or negative. This could be answered using the differential conditioning process. Logan (1968) states the Principle of differential conditioning applies to all basic conditioning paradigms. During the differential conditioning, one of the behaviour is non-reinforced and hence the organism learns not to respond. The organism responds to the stimulus which is reinforced.

As Logan (1968) exemplified, in one example of differential conditioning in the laboratory, a rat might be rewarded for running down a white alley and not rewarded for running down a grey alley. In the moral development process, also this reinforcement/non-reinforcement phenomenon could be applied. It should be noted that differential conditioning concept is the most relevant process that can explain moral conditioning process.

Moral development activities, such as reading stories, listening stories, watching drama/films or social activities includes both positive and negative moral standards. If we apply differential conditioning for these situations, the innate satisfaction or social appreciation works as positive reinforce. On the other hand, negligence and denunciation works as negative reinforce and helps for extinction process. This is a successful application of differential conditioning process for imparting moral values. Accordingly, moral development could be achieved by the combination of two processes: cognitive development process and differential conditioning process.

4. Discussion

The concept of moral development is a universally accepted phenomenon for imparting good values among individuals. Therefore, the societies used many techniques to improve moral reasoning of people throughout the known history. However, there was not a practicable methodology for this purpose, and the schools and parents deliberately taught moral standards to children, anticipating a moral growth. Modern researchers also identified the value of moral education and had performed many types of research and published their findings. Most of these studies have attempted to identify moral reasoning and moral standards. Accordingly, moral education programmes are designed in schools to promote students' moral development and character formation. The framework of moral education included virtue ethics, moral reasoning, and moral-emotional education. However, this trichotomy of education has not proved the expected results. My studies related to this discipline have revealed that incomplete conceptualisation of morality and unavailability of a moral development process theory have retarded the growth of this discipline.

Conventional moral development activities: reading stories, listening to stories, watching drama/films, or engaging in social activities may produce negative/zero effects because these activities consist both positive and negative moral standards. Here the basic arithmetic concept of plus and minus phenomenon may apply and produce zero/minus effects. Therefore, these standards should be identified at the beginning and reinforce positive values while discriminating negative values. Differential conditioning concept fits this situation. In the development of moral standards, the innate satisfaction or social appreciation works as positive reinforce. On the other hand, negligence and denunciation works as negative reinforce and helps for extinction process. This is a successful application of differential conditioning process for imparting moral values. Accordingly, moral development could be achieved by the combination of two processes: cognitive development process and differential conditioning process. The proposed moral development process theory provides a solution for modifying and controlling human behaviour, which is pragmatic and conducive to a just society.

5. Conclusion

Being a self is inseparable from existing in the space of moral issues, and the immediate benefit of moral development is the ability to minimise frictions among societies, which eventually helps to lessen human suffering. Human rights can be achieved if we improve moral standards among individuals and ensure justice, fairness, and human welfare within the institutions. Even though the value of moral development was clear to the societies for thousands of years, a practicable solution was not invented to impart moral values. The moral development process theory provides a solution to fill this gap.

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