

**Jörg Böttcher**

**The Ability of Young Children to  
Distinguish Between Morality and  
Convention**

**Diploma Thesis**

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# The Ability of Young Children to Distinguish Between Morality and Convention

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# 1. Question

In this diploma thesis I want to consider several approaches in the area of moral development research. Given the theory of Lawrence Kohlberg, young children (younger than 10 years of age) seem to stay completely under the constraints of authorities and rules. According to Kohlberg, children's social judgments and behaviors are determined by instrumental aims to satisfy their own needs and wishes, or to avoid punishment. In this regard, the helping of others or meeting the needs of others is only motivated by instrumental considerations. Thus, in Kohlberg's view young children are not able to think or to act in a genuinely moral way.

In reaction to Kohlberg, other researchers have suggested that young children *are* capable to make genuinely moral judgments and to act in a moral way. Eisenberg (e.g. 1986) has suggested that young under the age of 10 years children can have empathic or altruistic feelings which lead them to conduct prosocial acts. Other researchers (e.g. Keller, 1996; Nunner-Winkler, 1993) assert that children under the age of ten years are able to understand and feel moral emotions, which they consider as constitutive or as indicators for morality. Turiel and his associates (e.g. Turiel, 1983) suggest that even children at about 2 years of age (Smetana, 1981) are able to differentiate between a moral, conventional, and personal domain of social knowledge, and that children subordinate the importance of personal and conventional rules under the importance of moral rules. These approaches to the morality of young children – approaches to *early morality* – revealed differing results to differing aspects of morality. The aim of my work is to examine the above mentioned approaches in order to evaluate the obvious differences between their obtained results and the results of Kohlberg.

My questions are: Is Kohlberg's approach of using authority dilemmas appropriate to investigate children's moral reasoning? To what extent do the results of the researchers, who claim an early emergence of morality in children's development, disprove Kohlberg's claims of children's dependency and moral immaturity with regard to authority rules? Where are the boundaries of the presented approaches?

I will begin with an introduction to Kohlberg's approach (chapter 2). Then, I will present the research of Eisenberg, Keller and Nunner-Winkler, who investigated the role of emotions in moral development (chapter 3). Chapter 4 and 5 deals with the domain approach of Turiel and the question, how it could be possible to bridge the gap between their results and the results of Kohlberg. In the last chapter (6) I will make several conclusions from my considerations about the research of children's morality.

## 2. Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development

Lawrence Kohlberg (1927-1987) devised a theory of the development of moral judgment which he called cognitive developmental theory (Kohlberg, 1976, 1969). He worked out and revised his theory across a period of time of about 30 years (Heidbrink, 1991).

Kohlberg had started with the developmental theory of Piaget (1973, orig. 1932). From him he adopted the assumption of human development as a universal growing and unfolding of the appreciation of justice principles:

More broadly, however, Piaget is correct in assuming a culturally universal age development of a sense of justice, involving progressive concern for the needs and feelings of others and elaborated conceptions of reciprocity and equality. (Kohlberg, 1968, p. 489)

Kohlberg designed a model of moral development, that goes beyond Piaget's approach. He integrated assumptions of Piaget's moral and cognitive models of development, and combined them with Selman's (1980) concept of perspective taking and Rawls' (1971) reflections about justice principles.

First, I will shortly describe Kohlberg's stage model of moral development. After that I will sketch the theoretical assumptions which lead Kohlberg to his model.

### 2.1. The stage model

The stage model of morality sensu Piaget consists of two moralities:

[According to Piaget] there is not one morality, but two. There is the morality of constraint and, later, as cognitive development proceeds, the morality of cooperation. (Rest, 1983, p. 571)

Kohlberg's stage model of moral development is more differentiated than Piaget's. It consists of six stages. These stages are divided into three main levels. That is, each main level contains two stages (see table 2.1). Kohlberg named these three levels the preconventional, the conventional, and the postconventional level.

Kohlberg describes the distribution of ages of the individuals on the different levels as follows: