

What is right and what is wrong?

Throughout our lives, we face situations that require a decision at which point our subconsciousness kicks in to tell us what is right and what is wrong. Sometimes we make the right choice, but sometimes we do not and there are certain factors that we take into account when making that judgment. As humans, we are prone to errors and might make a mistake for one of our many choices. But how do we even know what we should and should not do?

Behaviourists have conducted numerous researches and experiments on the topic of moral development, the behaviour that is considered right and good. This article gives an insight on how behaviourists think we learn the difference between right and wrong.

There are four different approaches to Moral Behaviour: the Behaviourist Approach, the Social Learning Approach, the Cognitive Approach and the Psychoanalytic Approach. Each of the four approaches use different methods to input the values needed for moral development.

The Behaviourist Approach is based on the idea of classical and operant conditioning that focuses on the idea that behaviour associated with a pleasant experience will be repeated whilst behaviour associated with an unpleasant experience will be avoided. Parents therefore reward the morally good behaviours and punish the morally bad behaviours. This approach is simply based on reinforcements.

The Social Learning Approach is related to the social learning theory, the idea that we tend to copy and imitate the behaviour of others, 'role models'. Children will observe other people who are being rewarded or punished for their behaviour and so develop the idea of what is wrong and what is right from others' experience. They will then imitate the above behaviour when facing a similar situation.

The Cognitive Approach is based on the way children think and the result of that on their behaviour. There were two psychologists who based a theory on this approach: Piaget's Stage Theory of Moral Development and Kohlberg's Model of Moral Development.

According to Piaget, after interviewing children about the rules of marbles and moral dilemmas, there are two stages of moral development. The first stage is the heteronomous stage, during which others are in charge, occurring up until the age of eight years. Throughout this stage, children only take into account the consequences when reasoning and this is known as moral realism. They believe that rules are made by an authority figure and are unchangeable. Once past the age of eight, children enter the autonomous stage, during which we set our own rules. The type of moral reasoning employed by them is called moral relativism, taking into account the intention causing the guilt. Children at this stage believe that rules can be made by other children and then changed to suit different situations.

Kohlberg constructed a more complex model than Piaget. There are three levels, each consisting two stages during moral development. Level 1, the Pre-conventional is concerned with individuals gaining benefits for themselves; Stage 1, Punishment and Obedience follows the principal of whatever is right gains a reward and whatever is wrong is punished and Stage 2, Instrumental abides by the rule that the right thing to do is whatever is in your best interest. Level 2, the conventional moves onto concerning individuals fitting in with others; Stage 3, Interpersonal Concordance has the guiding principal of gaining approval of others and the right thing is whatever makes you look good in front of people and Stage 4, Law and Order is about doing whatever is good for the society. The final level, level 3, the Post-conventional is regarding justice and individual rights; Stage 5, Social Contract is about breaking a law if it is in the way of an individual's rights and Stage 6, Universal-ethical is when we arrive at a decision through our own ethical principles by reason and thought.

The Psychoanalytic Approach is based on Freud's theory centred on his idea of Superego, one of the three structures in the unconscious mind. This part of our mind checks whether the behaviour and thoughts of a person are morally good or right. If the act is immoral, the Superego will punish the person with feelings of guilt whereas if the person does a good thing, it will reward the person with feelings of pride or self-esteem. The Superego is developed during the phallic stage of Psychosexual Development when the Oedipus Complex needs to be resolved. During this stage, the child 'falls in love' with its opposite sex parent and therefore realise they are rivals with their same sex parent for the love of the opposite sex parent. To solve this complex, the child internalises the same-sex parent and this includes the parent's moral code, in hopes of winning over the opposite sex parent. The Superego is therefore of the internalised parent.

The above are all the four approaches that behaviourists feel are responsible for the moral development in us. Each of them impacts us in different ways and lead to the way we make up our minds on what is right and what is wrong.