Mood

Loosely defined and subjectively experienced general emotional condition.

A mood, while relatively pervasive, is typically neither highly intense nor sustained over an extended period of time. Examples of mood include happiness, sadness, contemplativeness, and irritability. The definitions of phrases to describe moods—such as good mood and bad mood—are imprecise. In addition, the range of what is regarded as a normal or appropriate mood varies considerably from individual to individual and from culture to culture.

Further Reading


See also Affect; Emotion

Moral development

The formation of a system of underlying assumptions about standards and principles that govern moral decisions.

Moral development involves the formation of a system of values on which to base decisions concerning “right” and “wrong,” “or “good” and “bad.” Values are underlying assumptions about standards that govern moral decisions.

Although morality has been a topic of discussion since the beginning of human civilization, the scientific study of moral development did not begin in earnest until the late 1950s. Lawrence Kohlberg (1927-1987), an American psychologist building upon Jean Piaget’s work in cognitive reasoning, proposed six stages of moral development in his 1958 doctoral thesis. Since that time, morality and moral development have become acceptable subjects of scientific research. Prior to Kohlberg’s work, the prevailing positivist view claimed that science should be “value-free”—that morality had no place in scientific studies. By choosing to study moral development scientifically, Kohlberg broke through the positivist boundary and established morality as a legitimate subject of scientific research.

There are several approaches to the study of moral development, which are categorized in a variety of ways. Briefly, the social learning theory approach claims that humans develop morality by learning the rules of acceptable behavior from their external environment (an essentially behaviorist approach). Psychoanalytic theory proposes instead that morality develops through humans’ conflict between their instinctual drives and the demands of society. Cognitive development theories view morality as an outgrowth of cognition, or reasoning, whereas personality theories are holistic in their approach, taking into account all the factors that contribute to human development.

The differences between these approaches rest on two questions: 1) where do humans begin on their moral journey; and 2) where do we end up? In other words, how moral are infants at birth? And how is “moral maturity” defined? What is the ideal morality to which we aspire? The contrasting philosophies at the heart of the answers to these questions determine the essential perspective of each moral development theory. Those who believe infants are born with no moral sense tend towards social learning or behaviorist theories (as all morality must therefore be learned from the environment). Others who believe humans are innately aggressive and completely self-oriented are more likely to accept psychoanalytic theories (where morality is the learned management of socially destructive internal drives). Those who believe it is our reasoning abilities that separate us from the rest of creation will find cognitive development theories the most attractive, while those who view humans as holistic beings who are born with a full range of potentialities will most likely be drawn to personality theories.

What constitutes “mature morality” is a subject of great controversy. Each society develops its own set of norms and standards for acceptable behavior, leading many to say that morality is entirely culturally conditioned. Does this mean there are no universal truths, no cross-cultural standards for human behavior? The debate over this question fuels the critiques of many moral development theories. Kohlberg’s six stages of moral development, for example, have been criticized for elevating Western, urban, intellectual (upper class) understandings of morality, while discrediting rural, tribal, working class, or Eastern moral understandings. (See Kohlberg’s theory of moral reasoning.) Feminists have pointed out potential sexist elements in moral development theories devised by male researchers using male subjects only (such as Kohlberg’s early work). Because women’s experience in the world is different from men’s (in every culture), it would stand to reason that women’s moral development might differ from men’s, perhaps in significant ways.

Definitions of what is or is not moral are currently in a state of upheaval within individual societies as well as, at least, in the Western world. Controversies rage over the morality of warfare (especially nuclear), ecological conservation, genetic research and manipulation, al-
ternative fertility and childbearing methods, abortion, sexuality, pornography, drug use, euthanasia, racism, sexism, and human rights issues, among others. Determining the limits of moral behavior becomes increasingly difficult as human capabilities, choices, and responsibilities proliferate with advances in technology and scientific knowledge. For example, prenatal testing techniques that determine birth defects in utero force parents to make new moral choices about whether to birth a child. Other examples of recently created moral questions abound in modern-day society.

Therefore, the study of moral development is lively today. The rise in crime, drug and alcohol abuse, gang violence, teen parenthood, and suicide in recent years in Western society has also caused a rise in concern over morality and moral development. Parents and teachers want to know how to raise moral children, and they turn to moral development theorists to find the answers. Freudian personality theories became more widely known to the Western public in the 1960s and were understood to imply that repression of a child’s natural drives would lead to neuroses. Many parents and teachers were therefore afraid to discipline their children, and permissiveness became the rule. Cognitive development theories did little to change things, as they focus on reasoning and disregard behavior. (After a great deal of criticism in this regard, Kohlberg and other cognitive development theorists did begin to include moral actions in their discussions and education programs, but their emphasis is still on reasoning alone.) Behaviorist theories, with their complete denial of free will in moral decision-making, are unattractive to many and require such precise, dedicated, behavior modification techniques to succeed that few people are able to apply them in real-life situations.

The continuing breakdown of society, however, is beginning to persuade people that permissiveness is not the answer and another approach must be found. Schools are returning to “character education” programs, popular in the 1920s and 1930s, where certain “virtues” such as honesty, fairness, and loyalty, are taught to students along with the regular academic subjects. Unfortunately, there is little or no agreement as to which “virtues” are important and what exactly each “virtue” means. For example, when a student expresses dislike of another student, is she or he exercising the virtue of “fairness” or, rather, being insensitive to another’s feelings? If a student refuses to salute the flag, is he or she betraying the virtue of “loyalty” or, rather, being loyal to some higher moral precept? These complex questions plague “character education” programs today, and their effectiveness remains in dispute.

Another approach to moral education that became popular in the 1960s and 1970s is known as “values clarification” or “values modification.” The purpose of these programs is to guide students to establish (or discern) their own system of values on which to base their moral decisions. Students are also taught that others may have different values systems, and that they must be tolerant of those differences. The advantages of this approach are that it promotes self-investigation and awareness and the development of internal moral motivations (which are more reliable than external motivations), and prevents fanaticism, authoritarianism, and moral coercion. The disadvantage is that it encourages moral relativism, the belief that “anything goes.” Pushed to its extreme, it creates social chaos because no one can be held to any universal (or societal) moral standard. “Values clarification” is generally seen today to be a valuable component of moral education, but incomplete on its own.

Lawrence Kohlberg devised a moral education program in the 1960s based on his cognitive development theory. Called the Just Community program, it utilizes age-appropriate (or stage-appropriate) discussions of moral dilemmas, democratic rule-making, and the creation of a community context where students and teachers can act on their moral decisions. Just Community programs have been established in schools, prisons, and other institutions with a fair amount of success. Exposure to moral questions and the opportunity to practice moral