

Xi Chen

ORCID: 0000-0001-6892-0725

Graduate School for Social Research, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology,  
Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland

# Children's Moral Development: Rationality or Empathy?

Children's Moral Development: Rationality or Empathy?

## Abstract

In what ways should children be nurtured with rationality? This article makes inquiry into this topic. Following an opening paragraph of an anecdote, the author traces a general history of theories embedded in the lieu of children's development of morals. There engenders two main theoretical approaches of moral development as the children grow and develop: rationality and empathy. It is in a long standing debates whether children's morals induced from rational development or whether they blooming from empathy experiences. The author examines theoretical tracks of these two approaches (rationality and empathy) ,and the author argues that morality of children should be developed by cultivating both children's rationality and their empathy.

## Keywords

moral development; rationality; empathy; children

## Introduction

I came to be interested into this topic because of a photo I accidentally saw on a social media website. In the photo, a child, about four to five years old, held a small white board. The white board said something like “I don't want you to be my president.” It was during one of the multiple protests after the 2016 United States' presidential election. The child was accompanied by her caretakers to participate in the protest. My initial reaction was “How cute is this photo!” I immediately shared this photo through that social media. However, on the next day, I suddenly came to realize that I had made a mistake. I analyzed this mistake, and found it two-folded. First, the child had little, or almost no, idea of what was happening around her.

What were the protests? Why were there many protests? What was a presidential election? Was the president good or bad? Those questions could possibly be asked by the child, but were indeed out of the range of her cognitive capacity. Second, having a child hold a white board that represented adults' political views and sharing this photo on social media were wrong, for we adults were taking advantage of the child's ignorance. Moreover, we definitely found joy and elicited confidence by projecting our political messages in the way of child-talk. I deleted my shared post.

A political protest is often triggered by people's ethical judgements on certain political issues. Is the little child capable of judgements on political issues? No, she is not. This incident prompts me to reflect on the relations between morality and child development. For minor issues in daily life, such as lying, cheating and stealing, a child can distinguish the good from the bad. Is there a developmental progress of morality? How do the child's concepts of morals develop from the incipient stage to more mature stages? Driven by these questions, I research on this topic in multiple fields such as psychology, sociology, and philosophy. My research turns out productive. According to several significant figures such as Freud, Piaget and Kohlberg, there exists a progressive development of morality as the child grows and matures. And the morality develops in accordance with improvement of rationality along with a child's growth.

However, I should not just focus on development of rationality. I continue to broaden my vision and to change my way of thinking. Let's go back to the child in the photo. Was it possible that she considered it "right" to join her caretakers into the activity she was incapable to comprehend? She might feel, or even share some parts of the anger and disappointment of her caretakers. This child is not capable of judging due to insufficient rationality, but is able to be, to some degree, compassionate or emphatic. This possibility reminds me of Rousseau's conception of social equality and its relation to morality. From Rousseau's perspective, equality is sustained by an equilibrium between man's self-love and man's compassion for others. In his educational tenets *Emile*, Rousseau concludes that individuals should be cultivated to have compassion beside a sense of duty towards the society and justice. Does morality also comprise of compassion, or empathy? Yes. Works by Noddings, Hoffman, and Gilligan suggest that morality is also about exerting emotions.

Sociologist Emile Durkheim traces two extreme and opposite types of moral characters: one abides rigidly by rules and orders, and the other is inclined to helping others but not restrained by rules or orders. Durkheim supports the view that moral characters are formed with both reason and compassion. There are debates over these two traditions of morality (reason and emotion) among scholars of ethics and psychology since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. My research question is pertained to the debates on whether morality is built on rationality or empathy. Specifically,

my inquiry is closely linked to child development. Reflecting on contemporary trends of moral education on young children, I think there is a division of teaching children morality by whether cultivating their rationality or by fostering their empathy. Thus, my question is: should children develop morality through rationality or empathy? Based on the historical debates of moral development, I argue that rationality and empathy should be integrated into redefining autonomy in terms of current and future moral development for young children. It is necessary to note that the two words, compassion and empathy, are interchangeable in this essay.

## Morality as Rationality

There defines three elements of moral values: authority and discipline, attachment to social communities, and autonomy.<sup>1</sup> This definit holds that authority and discipline are crucial to morality, for they constrain human's passions, desires, and habits within the boundaries of laws.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, morality emerges in the social aspect of life. In terms of a conception of autonomy, Rich and DeVitis agrees with Kant that a behavior cannot be judged moral unless there is "a substantial degree of 'autonomous' reflection."<sup>3</sup>

We fashion autonomy... ourselves to the extent that we achieve a more complete knowledge of things. Autonomy does not imply that the human being, in any of his aspects, escapes the world and its laws... But, if in some measure we are the products of things, we can through science, use our understanding to control both the things that exert an influence upon us and this influence itself. In this way, we again become our master.<sup>4</sup>

Psychologist Sigmund Freud also analyzes morality and writes several significant essays on this topic. It is necessary to give a brief overview of Freud's major theory of child psychology, before elaborating his conception of morality. Freud establishes three tiers of child's psyche. The lowest is Id, which represents human's animal-like instincts and desires. Id can be demonstrated through unconscious mental activities such as dreams and fantasies. Id is the dominant forces for a child in infancy and early childhood. The second tier is Ego, which is pertained to the child's sense of self, and develops as the child grows and matures. The highest level of personality is called Superego, which is the inhibiting force imposed on the child in order to prevent him from acting on instincts and impulses. Superego is

---

<sup>1</sup> J.M. Rich, J.L. DeVitis, *Theories of Moral Development*, Springfield, Illinois 1985, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

associated with rules, norms, and ideologies of higher standards. In childhood, Superego is typically influenced or taught by caretakers or teachers. Civilization, to Freud, is a process of repression of individualism (Ego) in order to achieve higher natures of mankind (Superego). Freud analyzes conflicts between social life and individuals. In his *Civilization and Its Discontents*, he writes: "Civilization thus obtains mastery over the dangerous love of aggression in individuals by enfeebling and disarming it, and setting up an institution (superego) within their minds to keep watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city."<sup>5</sup> Freud forms his theoretical construction of moral development. Morality develops in civil society through suppressing pursuits of individual interests (Ego) for the sake of promotion of common interests (Superego). Per my understanding, achieving restraints of self-interest is manifested by the use of rationality to adjust and modulate selfish predispositions according to interests of the larger communities. And this process of adjustment and modulation with reason is a demonstration of autonomy. Thus, I think Freud's morality is closely related to autonomy.

Psychologist Jean Piaget defines morality as "a system of rules, and the essence of morality is to be sought for in the respect which the individual acquires for those rules."<sup>6</sup> Piaget designs and conducts extensive studies on children's moral development. In his studies, he simulates the morality system in real world with rules of marble games. The studies show that a child, on average, does not develop morality before age six. From age six to twelve, the stages of moral development are stratified as heteronomy and autonomy.

1) heteronomous morality (or moral realism), in which the very young child bases his moral judgment on unilateral respect for authority figures, i.e., objective rules of parents and other adults. This stage primarily reflects a morality of constraints, absolutistic thought patterns, and only immanent concepts of fairness and justice;

2) autonomous morality (or morality of equity and cooperation), in which the young person, by middle childhood to early adolescence, begins to develop a more subjective sense of autonomy and reciprocity. In this stage, social experience, principally peer interaction, becomes the main vehicle for increasing cooperative, egalitarian growth.<sup>7</sup>

Heteronomy, which refers to child's obedience to the "sacred" rules given by adults, occurs typically for younger children. Autonomy is defined as child's compliance with the rules through his understanding and respect of the rules. Children in the state of heteronomy have a rudimentary comprehension of rules.<sup>8</sup> Autonomy

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> R. Duska, M. Whelan, *Moral Development: A Guide to Piaget and Kohlberg*, New York 1975, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> J.M. Rich, J.L. DeVitis, *Theories of Moral Development*, *op. cit.*, pp. 48–49.

<sup>8</sup> R. Duska, M. Whelan, *Moral Development...*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

is associated with freedom from the constraints of heteronomy.<sup>9</sup> Piaget also points out that “unilateral respect develops a morality of heteronomy, while mutual respect develops a morality of autonomy.”<sup>10</sup> Piaget distinguishes from Durkheim, who sustains that children are not yet ready for social life. Instead, Piaget considers children possessing potentialities for socialization.<sup>11</sup> Early stages of childhood, to Piaget, are periods of egocentrism. Once the child differentiates his internal reality of self from the external reality, he is at the inception of social life. Rich and DeVitis considers cooperation the standard criteria for development of culture and personality: “one may conceive of cooperation as constituting the ideal from form of equilibrium towards which society tends when compulsory conformity comes to break down... Cooperation... seems to be essentially the social relation which tends to eliminate infantile phenomenon. It is the limit and norm of every human group that has ever come into being.”<sup>12</sup>

Psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg contributes to the theory of moral development. He spends three decades analyzing children in many regions of the world and eventually constructs the six stages of moral development. The first stage, “the punishment and obedience orientation,” is the state that “avoidance of punishment and unquestioning deference to power are valued in their own right, not in terms of respect for an underlying moral order supported by punishment and authority.”<sup>13</sup> At stage two, “the instrumental relativist orientation” emerges, as sense of reciprocity and equality have been developed but only in a pragmatic and physical way. In this stage, ideas such as gratitude and loyalty are absent. Stage three is the interpersonal concordance of “good boy and nice girl orientation.” In this period, good behaviours such as helping others are determined by desires for approvals. At stage four, the subject progresses to “the law and order orientation” that the subject perceives the absoluteness of rules and orders to maintain social security and stability. Stage five, the social contract legalistic orientation” refers to the period in which the subject, having a clear awareness of his moral values and rights, has given up parts of his freedom to reach consensus with other members of the society. This orientation centers on “the legal point of view, but with an emphasis upon the possibility of changing law in terms of rational consideration of social utility (rather than rigidly maintaining it in terms of stage four law and order).”<sup>14</sup> Finally, at stage six, “right is defined by the decision of conscience in accord with self-chosen ethical principles appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> J.M. Rich, J.L. DeVitis, *Theories of Moral Development*, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 49–50.

<sup>13</sup> R. Duska, M. Whelan, *Moral Development...*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 47.



and consistency.”<sup>15</sup> Stage one and stage two are called pre-conventional level; stage three and stage four, conventional level; stage five and stage six, post-conventional level. At post-convention level, the subject has gained full rationality evolved in a row from irrationality in pre-conventional level, and insufficient degree of reason and logic in conventional level. For Kohlberg, the ultimate objective of individual’s moral development is attainment of this full rationality and autonomy, which are manifested in stage six.

Durkheim, Freud, Piaget, and Kohlberg construct different theories of moral development, but they are in the agreement that fully-developed morality is pre-determined by autonomy. However, is it possible for average human beings to have sufficient rationality to reach autonomy? Kohlberg’s treatise attaches the greatest importance to rationality and autonomy. Therefore, my critique of the strand of tenets focuses on Kohlberg’s moral development theory. Philosopher Gareth Matthews critiques on Kohlberg that “it begins to look as though all stage before stage 5, or even stage 6, are really pre-moral stages. Since according to Kohlberg’s research, hardly anyone, perhaps no one, reaches stage 6, and only a small minority reach even stage 5. We are driven to the unwelcome conclusion that the vast majority of people do not have a special moral concept of obligation.”<sup>16</sup> To Kohlberg, making judgment is the demonstration of morality. And he defines morality at stage six in terms of impartial and universal principles that are not concrete moral rules, like the Ten Commandments.<sup>17</sup> I agree with Matthews that the main problem of Kohlberg’s theory lies in his categorical definition of morality in terms of impartiality and universality. If the moral principles are deemed impartial and universal, it is impossible to have realistic contents for these principles, for among any principles there will be contradictions. Let’s illustrate a contradiction with an example. One principle: one shall not kill; another principle: one shall respect others. Person A knows and practices both principles. But person B violates the first principle (one shall not kill) that he is about to predate on person A. In this case, should person A, knowing that person B aims to kill, still maintain his respect for person B?

In all, the impossibilities of either attaining full rationality or incorporating actual moral contents render problematic moral development on the basis of improving one’s rational autonomy.

---

<sup>15</sup> G.B. Matthews, *The Philosophy of Childhood*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1994, p. 59.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 60.

<sup>17</sup> R. Duska, M. Whelan, *Moral Development...*, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

## Morality as Empathy

Psychologist Carol Gilligan elicits her criticism upon traditional moral development theory. Gilligan argues that orthodox decorum of moral development issues constant exclusion of women. This exclusion separates morality of the female sides from morality of rational men. Gilligan cites works by Piaget and Kohlberg, which expound discontinuation and discouragement of moral lessons for girls. Boys are assumed to be educated to attain autonomy, whilst girls are subordinated to building relationships. Studies show that in resolving disputes in games, boys are more successful and are more prone to continue the games, whereas girls tend to fail at reconciliation and to end the games. Gilligan writes "because this early social environment differs and is experienced differently by male and female children, basic sex differences recur in personality development. As a result, in any given society, feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does."<sup>18</sup> According to Gilligan, women's weakness is due to not only their social subjugation, but also their lack in substantial moral concerns. This scarcity of moral strength is manifested in "an apparent diffusion and confusion of judgement," since women's moral concerns more with social relationships and feeling-sharing.<sup>19</sup> Feeling and thinking, justice and mercy, are positioned as exact antitheses. Thus, irresoluteness in moral judgement prevents women from entering mature adulthood, in which personal autonomy stands as the premier role. Care and responsibility in relationships shape the domain of morality for the parts of women.<sup>20</sup> Connecting with other people through emotions, women often feel obligated to be caring and practice care for others.

Furthermore, ethics scholar Nel Noddings goes beyond Gilligan's thesis, and argues for the ethic of care, which she thinks, should be integrated into mainstream notions of morality and moral education. Noddings regards "human caring and the memory of caring and being cared for" as the "foundation of ethical response."<sup>21</sup> "One is tempted to say that ethics has so far been guided by Logos, the masculine spirit, whereas the more natural and, perhaps, stronger approach would be through Eros, the feminine spirit."<sup>22</sup> Per Noddings' analysis of the ethic of care, women think and act according to their reasoning often associated with personal feelings and needs, rather than universal principles and duties.<sup>23</sup> Two positive ef-

<sup>18</sup> C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1982, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 73.

<sup>21</sup> N. Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education*, University of California Press, Berkeley and L.A., CA 2003, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

fects of care ethic, as Noddings summarizes, are: (1) natural caring are identified as goodness; and (2) caring attitude and experiences of caring and being cared for, can be perceived universally.<sup>24</sup> In contrast with Kohlberg's problem that moral principles cannot be impartial and universal, the ethic of care seems to have resolved this problem.

Is that so? Morality is infused with emphatic emotion or ethic of care. I find two problems in connecting emotional approach to morality. Take care as an example. Is care ethic truly impartial and universal? Ethic of care, indeed, as Noddings concludes, liberates morality from restriction of relativism, by imposing feelings and experiences of caring in general. However, regarding individual cases in moral judgment, or random individuals in moral dilemmas, compassionate care is often directed to specific groups and specific persons. Unlike Adam Smith's notion of benevolence, care often cannot distance itself from bias and imbalance. For instance, a severely-ill man steals from others, and the misbehavior has nothing to do with his illness. The person who judges this incident will still affirm this ill man's guilt of stealing, even though the man's health condition is taken into consideration. The judge-person is inclined to feeling sympathetic for this ill man and to imagining how much pain and misery he has to endure. However, the judgement of the misbehavior is definitely of non-intervention from compassion. Compassion or emotion of care is not allowed to interfere with deliberation and decision-making. Justice and empathy are to be separated when moral judgements are being made. I think, ethic of care distorts the boundaries of reason and emotion in moral judgement, and in consequence, renders individuals indecisive. Thus, ethic of care downplays use of reason and logic in evaluating individual moral cases.

## Empathy as Autonomy

Initially, I have no difficulty finding congruence between empathy and caring. Through drawing insights from psychology and philosophy, I find a way to bond empathy with autonomy.

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt indicates that moral development "does not follow a single trajectory."<sup>25</sup> The rail of moral development is built with moral principles (rationality), and emotional experiences and habits. It is important to recognize the division between moral intuition and moral reasoning. "Moral intuition refers to fast, automatic, and usually affect-laden processes in which an evaluative feeling of good-bad or like-dislike about the actions or character of a person ap-

---

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> J. Haidt, *Morality*, "Perspectives on Psychological Science" 2008, 3(1), p. 67.



pears in consciousness without any awareness of having gone through steps of search, weighing evidence or inferring a conclusion. Moral reasoning in contrast, is a controlled and cooler, less affective, process; it is conscious mental activity that consist of transforming information about people and their actions in order to reach a moral judgment or decision.”<sup>26</sup> Haidt points out that morality is about more than harm and fairness, as moral development draws great impacts from emotional experiences, though moral reasoning can rectify moral intuition.<sup>27</sup>

On the basis of the above, morals are produced through a complex mechanism involving emotion and reason. What about empathy? It is important to define empathy here. Aforementioned psychologist Gilligan explicates empathy in relation to sharing feelings and connecting to other people. According to philosopher Michael Slote, empathy is also the ability to feel and see from the standpoints of others.<sup>28</sup> Slote moves further to tie empathy with autonomy. From a feminist view of moral development, “autonomy comes into being only through personal relationships and social structures that encourage it.”<sup>29</sup> Slote argues that empathy can be equipped with rational elements. He exemplifies rational aspects of empathy through presenting an opposite example. Over-involvement and over-connection of some parents can be explained, that these parents are of weak sense of self and lack in empathy to perceive their children's points of view.<sup>30</sup> Empathy can also be interpreted to offer “a realistic, thoroughgoing, sentimentalist and virtue-ethical basis for individual morality and social justice.”<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion: Cultivating Empathy and Rationality for Future Autonomy

My final intention of this paper is to implicate child's moral development. Young child is not capable of autonomy, provided that autonomy refers to maturity in both empathy and rationality. However, it is indispensable for caretakers or teachers to help the child develop rudimentary levels of empathy and rationality. Empathy starts to emerge by progressing beyond the egocentric stage. Empathy can be cultivated through increasing opportunities of socialization. Establishing relationships and communicating feelings should start from young ages. Herein, I agree

<sup>26</sup> J. Haidt, *The New Synthesis in Moral Psychology*, “Science” 2007, 316, p. 998.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1001.

<sup>28</sup> M. Slote, *Autonomy and Empathy*, [in:] E.F. Paul, F.D. Miller, J. Paul (eds.), *Morality and politics*, Cambridge University Press, London, UK, 2004, p. 300.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 302.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 300.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 307.

with Piaget that socialization with peer children, without authority from adults or older children, is more effective in improving moral development. Empathy is also associated with loving and caring feelings towards the nature and animals. Thus, I speculate that situating a child in a natural environment in certain parts of education and play will enhance his empathy towards nature and animals. With regards to rationality, I agree with Piaget that it is not developed until in later childhood (age 10–12). Adequate rationality assists children to progress to autonomy. Nevertheless, the problem of children's capacity to think cannot be oversimplified. I can't help wondering: can children engage in philosophical thinking? They definitely ask a series of questions related to philosophical inquiry. What is time? What is a person? What are life and death? I believe that children have potentials in philosophical thinking. Indeed, to engage in philosophy thinking, there are four major requisites – discipline, rigor, freshness and inventiveness.<sup>32</sup> Children's mentalities are not mature enough to attain discipline and rigor. But children's thoughts are often fresh and inventive. I propose that children should receive elementary training and nurturing in philosophy to some extents. Programs like Philosophy for Children should be highly recommended to parents and teachers.

## References

- Duska R., Whelan M., *Moral Development: A Guide to Piaget and Kohlberg*, New York 1975.
- Gilligan C., *In a Different Voice*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1982.
- Haidt J., *Morality*, "Perspectives on Psychological Science" 2008, 3(1), pp. 65–72.
- Haidt J., *The New Synthesis in Moral Psychology*, "Science" 2007, 316, pp. 998–1002.
- Matthews G.B., *The Philosophy of Childhood*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1994.
- Noddings N., *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education*, University of California Press, Berkeley and L.A., CA 2003.
- Rich J.M., DeVitis J.L., *Theories of Moral Development*, Springfield, Illinois 1985.
- Slote M., *Autonomy and Empathy*, [in:] E.F. Paul, F.D. Miller, J. Paul (eds.), *Morality and politics*, Cambridge University Press, London, UK, 2004, pp. 293–309.

---

<sup>32</sup> G.B. Matthews, *The Philosophy of Childhood*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.