

Moral Development and Critiques of Anarchism

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I. Anarchism and the Impracticality Criticism

Anarchism, literally, means "without authority," although it is most commonly defined as a system in which social order is maintained voluntaristically, without the presence of a state or any other coercive mechanisms.¹ There are many varieties of anarchism, and it is difficult in just one brief paragraph to specify the central beliefs. Nonetheless, there are some widely shared assertions, among which are (1) the primacy of individual sovereignty; (2) the opposition to coercive authority of any kind impinging upon the individual's freedom; (3) the principle of voluntarism or mutual aid as the basic social cement for society; (4) a "human solidarity" model, which recognizes that a free individual within a free society is the only basis for realizing humans' full potential—and that individual and society are inseparable, not mutually exclusive or antagonistic. Clearly, such contentions are *incompatible with the existence of sovereign government*. By its very nature, according to anarchists, government is coercive and suppresses freedom. They believe that only by continually asserting its legitimacy and its right to coerce can the state continue. Thus, it follows that the state must be abolished if there is to be freedom.

If the state is destroyed, what agencies will assume such critical social functions as education or health care? Anarchists suggest that voluntary associations are the answers to these and other needs. People would freely and voluntarily contribute time and resources to fulfill basic collective needs. Anarchists may differ on the roots or motives behind this cooperation (some see it based on utilitarian principles, some on the basis of natural law, some on egoistic grounds, and some on the foundation of biological predispositions), but they do agree on the practicality of voluntarism and mutual aid as a basis for taking care of social functions.

The most obvious and widely shared criticism of anarchism is that it is, quite simply, impractical. It is argued that people need the state and government in order to survive. Humans are, to the critics, by nature or socialization greedy and uncooperative, and the state is needed to protect people from one another. Bertrand Russell, among others, argued against anarchism on these grounds, maintaining that

the State, in spite of what Anarchists urge, seems a necessary institution for certain purposes. Peace and war, tariffs, regulations of sanitary conditions and the sale of noxious drugs, the preservation of a just system of distribution: these, among others, are functions which could hardly be performed in a community in which there was no central government.²

There is little need to elaborate upon this point, for it is one that most people find implicitly congenial. The basic assumption is that without laws and authoritative regulations laid down and enforced by the state, there would be chaos and disorder.

However, from the viewpoint of contemporary cognitive development theory, I view this obvious criticism in a somewhat different light—as, to some extent, the result of a relatively low level of moral development. To demonstrate this, I use the perspective of Lawrence Kohlberg, perhaps the most eminent theorist of moral development in the United States today, and note its applicability to the question of the functions of law.

II. Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory and Its Application

Kohlberg emphasizes that his theory of moral development is embedded within the more general process of cognitive development, the process by which, over time, individuals come to know what they know. Basic assumptions of cognitive development theory include the following:

1. Development involves transformations of cognitive structures which cannot be explained by associationist theories of learning.
2. Development is a result of processes of interaction between the structure of the organism and the environment (the process is not directly shaped by either maturation or learning alone).
3. Cognitive structures are structures of action—there is always the organization of actions upon objects.
4. The direction of development is toward greater equilibrium in organism-environment interactions.³

The core of any developmental position is the doctrine of stages, according to Kohlberg. General characteristics of developmental stages include the following:

1. There are qualitative differences in modes of thinking at different stages.

2. There is an invariant sequence of stages (although the sequence may be speeded or slowed somewhat by cultural factors).
3. Different sequential modes of thought form a "structured whole."
4. Cognitive stages are hierarchical integrations.

To summarize, Kohlberg states,

Such stage theories view the child's social behavior as reflections of age-typical world views and coping mechanisms rather than as reflections of fixed character traits. As the child moves from stage to stage, developmental theorists expect his behavior to change radically but to be predictable in terms of knowledge of his prior location in the stage sequence and of the intervening experiences stimulating or retarding movement to the next stage.⁴

Kohlberg sees three general levels of moral development, each with two stages.⁵

Higher modes of moral thought integrate and replace lower ones. While one at a higher level can understand and use lower levels well, a person at a given level cannot really understand and apply higher levels. Table 1 presents the stage sequence of moral development, as Kohlberg sees it.

The preconventional level I assumes that individual moral values lie in "external, quasi-physical happenings, in bad acts, or in quasi-physical needs rather than in persons or standards."⁶ The second level of morality is the conventional. Here, moral value resides in doing good acts or filling good roles to maintain the conventional order and the expectations of others. This is an "other-directed" conceptualization of morality. The final level of morality is postconventional. For the person at this level, morality lies in one's conformity to "shared or shareable standards, rights or duties."⁷

Data from the Bahamas, Taiwan, Mexico, Turkey, and the United States all indicate some cross-cultural validity to the Kohlbergian scheme. Furthermore, several longitudinal studies support the posited stage sequence.⁸

Advances from one stage of moral development to the next seem to occur at roughly the same age in different societies, although there are some social class differences. One thing to be emphasized is that there is no guarantee that an individual will traverse all six stages. Indeed, only a small minority of people come to be classified as postconventional (stages five and six). The fact that the U.S. sample provides the largest proportion of postconventional respondents has suggested to some that there is an inherent cultural bias built into Kohlberg's framework.⁹ However, there is as yet no final consensus on this issue.

One important point made by Kohlberg is that creating higher-stage institutional environments for people can increase the level of moral reasoning. This conclusion is based on observations of moral regression occurring for those sentenced to prison or reform school, whereas adolescents in Israeli *kibbutzim* do seem to move toward higher stages.¹⁰ In addition, preliminary studies suggest the existence of the so-called "Blatt Effect," in which a specific mode of

Table 1. Kohlberg's Levels and Stages of Moral Development

<i>Level</i>	<i>Basis of moral judgment</i>	<i>Stages of development</i>
I. Preconventional	Moral value resides in external, quasi-physical happenings, in bad acts, or in quasi-physical needs rather than in persons or standards	<p>Stage 1. Obedience and punishment orientation. Egocentric deference to superior power or prestige, or a trouble-avoiding set. Objective responsibility.</p> <p>Stage 2. Naive egoistic orientation. Right action is that instrumentally satisfying the self's needs. Awareness of relativism of value to each actor's needs. Naive egalitarianism and orientation to exchange and reciprocity.</p>
II. Conventional	Moral value resides in performing good or right roles, in maintaining the conventional order and the expectations of others	<p>Stage 3. Good-boy, nice-girl orientation. Orientation to approval and to pleasing others. Conformity to stereotyped images of majority and judgment by intentions.</p> <p>Stage 4. Law and order orientation. Orientation toward "doing one's duty" and to showing respect for authority and maintaining the given social order for its own sake. Regard for earned expectations of others.</p>

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III. Postconventional	Moral value resides in conformity by the self to shared or shareable standards, rights or duties.	<p>Stage 5. Social-contract, legalistic orientation. Recognition of an arbitrary element or starting point in rules for the sake of agreement. Duty defined in terms of contract, general avoidance of violation of the will or rights of others, and majority will and welfare.</p> <p>Stage 6. Conscience or principle orientation. Orientation not only toward actually ordained social rules, but to principles of choice involving appeal to logical universality and consistency. Orientation to conscience as a directing agent and to mutual respect and trust.</p>

instruction seems to elevate level of moral development.¹¹ Instruction based on arousing controversies about moral choice and on "Socratic" questioning about the reasons used by students to justify their choices may "cause" one-quarter to one-half of the students in a semester to move partially or totally upward to the next stage.

A variety of important criticisms have been directed at Kohlberg's theoretical edifice, one of which (cultural bias) I have already mentioned. Other questions have been raised about the reliability of the measures used to determine individuals' level of moral development, possible reversibility of stages of moral development, Kohlberg's focus on the individual level of analysis, the absolutism inherent in Kohlberg's understanding of morality, and his outright ideological bias.¹² However, for the purposes of this essay, I "bracket" these questions. The focus is on one important implication of Kohlberg's work, *if* that work is valid.

Tapp and Kohlberg¹³ apply the moral development framework to the development of legal reasoning, since they believe that legal development corresponds with moral development. That correspondence is summarized thus:

<i>Moral Level</i>	<i>Law's Rationale</i>
Preconventional	Rule-obeying
Conventional	Rule-maintaining (law and order)
Postconventional	Rule-making

For most cultures, Tapp and Kohlberg assert that the modal stage of moral development is the conventional. Results of interviews with students from six countries (Denmark, Greece, India, Italy, Japan, the United States) suggest continuity across cultures in attitudes toward the law and in stages of moral development. It is clear that respondents see law and moral rules as quite similar phenomena; thus, orientations toward law can be subsumed under the rubric of moral development.

When asked why there were laws, respondents at the preconventional level said that there must be punishment to maintain obedience; those at the conventional level said that there would be chaos and disorder without laws, that one was obliged to obey the laws of society; those at the postconventional level saw law in terms of morality and justice—to the extent that individuals at this level felt the laws to be moral and just, they would obey them. The key point of this study is that interpretations of the need for law vary widely by level of moral development. And, as noted earlier, those at lower levels cannot really understand the ideas of those at higher ones, although the higher level thinkers can understand lower level people.

More to the point, when people were asked what would happen if there were no laws, Tapp and Kohlberg found substantial differences by moral level. In the preconventional category (mostly primary and junior high school students from the American sample, although there were some college students at this level as

well), the modal response was that laws prevent concrete physical harm, i.e., specific "bad acts" or crimes. The conventional respondents (some primary students, a large proportion of junior high school students and college students) noted that laws restrain bad behavior and guide the weak to behave themselves, that laws maintain social order (without laws, ironically, conventional thinkers say that there will be anarchy!), and that it is impossible to imagine a society existing without laws.

Finally, the postconventional thinker has quite a different perspective. There were rather few in this category, but those included here tended to think that without laws, nothing awful would happen. People, they believed, would freely agree upon certain rules of the game to maintain a functioning society. Those at the highest level of moral development no longer saw the state and coercive authority as necessary for the existence of order. *These individuals believe that human reason will lead to agreement on certain rules, so that things might proceed smoothly. In this sense, there is voluntaristic ordering of society. The implication is clearcut—the argument that anarchism is impractical because it would lead to chaos may be to some extent the result of thinking at lower levels of moral development. Those who achieve postconventional thinking are not constrained by such "conventional morality" and can perceive situations in which principled individuals can order their affairs nicely without external coercion being brought to bear—just as anarchists have for some time argued.*

III. Discussion

What of Tapp and Kohlberg's findings? First and foremost, it does seem reasonable to hypothesize that, in fact, criticisms of anarchism which emphasize its impracticality because of a recalcitrant human nature reflect some critics' relatively low level of moral development! Given that those at higher stages can conceive of society remaining orderly without government and its coercive might, this speculation is lent credibility. It seems appropriate to propose that further research on this hypothesis be conducted. This would not seem to be too difficult, either, because there exist measures of moral development. Respondents would answer these questions and then a series of others about the need for government, about the possibilities of life and order without the state, and so on. Then, *statistical analysis could be undertaken to determine if the hypothesized relationships hold. This is both a researchable and an interesting issue for further exploration.*

A second implication warrants comment, too. If Kohlberg is right (and, as noted before, there is some dispute here) and people living in higher order organizations—or those exposed to a particular mode of education—can advance to higher levels of moral thinking, then it would seem theoretically possible to elevate the general level of moral development, at least somewhat, by creating

institutions that could effect this elevation. We might then see the emergence of an increasing number of individuals who instead of repudiating anarchism as impractical, embrace some of its tenets as reasonable. This is another research avenue that might profitably be investigated.

Finally, it may be that there is, in the Western democracies, a slow movement toward increased numbers of people at the postconventional stage. A number of studies indicate that more and more people—especially the younger generations—are becoming “postmaterial” in their political orientations, that is, their focus is more and more upon self-development, self-fulfillment, and the desire to expand personal freedoms, and less and less on attaining material desires. One study concludes that those who are postmaterial in their views also tend to be at higher Kohlbergian levels of moral development (specifically, postmaterialists are disproportionately at the postconventional level of moral development).¹⁴ And, I think it useful to point out, these postmaterialists in the United States, according to Maddox and Lilie,¹⁵ may well prove to be a base of support for a larger libertarian movement in this country in the future.

Notes

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2. Bertrand Russell, “Can the Anarchists Really Do Without Some Form of the State?” in Leonard Krimmerman and Lewis Parry, eds., *Patterns of Anarchy* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), p. 494.
3. Lawrence Kohlberg, “Stage and Sequence: The Cognitive-Developmental Approach to Socialization,” in David A. Goslin, ed., *Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research* (Chicago: Rand-McNally, 1969).
4. *Ibid.*, p. 370.
5. *Ibid.*; Lawrence Kohlberg, “From Is to Ought,” in T. Mischel, ed., *Cognitive Development and Epistemology* (New York: Academic Press, 1971); Lawrence Kohlberg, “Moral Stages and Moralization,” in Thomas Lickona, ed., *Moral Development and Behavior* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1976).
6. Kohlberg, “Stage and Sequence,” p. 376.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Kohlberg, “Moral Stages and Moralization”; Lawrence Kohlberg and R. Kramer, “Continuities and Discontinuities in Childhood and Adult Moral Development,” *Human Development* 12 (1969):93–120; Deanna Kuhn, “Short-term Developmental Evidence for the Sequentiality of Kohlberg’s Early Stages of Moral Development,” *Developmental Psychology* 12 (1976):162–66; Charles B. White, Nancy Bushnell, and Judy L. Regnemer, “Moral Development in Bahamian Children,” *Developmental Psychology* 14 (1978):58–65.
9. John C. Gibbs, “Kohlberg’s Moral Stage Theory,” *Human Development* 22 (1979):89–112; Herbert G. Reid and Ernest Yanarella, “The Tyranny of the Categorical,” in Richard W. Wilson and Gordon Schochet, eds., *Moral Development and Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1980); Elizabeth Léonie Simpson, “Moral Development Research: A Case Study of Scientific Cultural Bias,” *Human Development* 17 (1974):81–106.
10. See Kohlberg, “Stage and Sequence”; Kohlberg, “Moral Stages and Moralization.”
11. Lawrence Kohlberg, “Foreword” and “The Cognitive Development Approach to Moral Education,” both in Peter Scharf, ed., *Readings in Moral Education* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1978); Moshe Blatt and Lawrence Kohlberg, “The Effects of Classroom Moral Discussion upon Children’s Level of Moral Judgment,” *Journal of Moral Education* 4 (1975):129–61.

12. See, for instance, Alan Cohen, "Stages and Stability," in Wilson and Schochet, eds., *Moral Development and Politics*; Alfonso J. Damico, "The Sociology of Justice" (Paper presented at Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago); James Fishkin, "Relativism, Liberalism, and Moral Development," in Wilson and Schochet, eds., *Moral Development and Politics*; Constance Boucher Holstein, "Irreversible, Stepwise Sequence in the Development of Moral Judgment," *Child Development* 47 (1976):51-61; Kenneth Rubin and Kristin Trotter, "Kohlberg's Moral Judgment Scale," *Developmental Psychology* 13 (1977):535-36; Edmund Sullivan, "A Study of Kohlberg's Structural Theory of Moral Development," *Human Development* 20 (1977):352-76.
13. June L. Tapp and Lawrence Kohlberg, "Developing Sense of Law and Legal Justice," *Journal of Social Issues* 27 (1971):65-91.
14. Heinz-Ulrich Kohr, "Social-Moral Judgment, Post-Materialism, and Ecologism" (Paper presented at International Society of Political Psychology, Washington, D.C., 1985). For more on postmaterialism, see Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).
15. William S. Maddox and Stuart A. Lilie, *Beyond Liberal and Conservative* (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 1984).