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The Heinz Dilemma: Measuring Moral Development

Using clinical interviewing in which he posed moral dilemmas, Kohlberg designed a way to measure people's moral reasoning. Instead of looking at the answers, he examined the reasons behind the subjects' responses, their answers to the *why* question. Kohlberg's stages of moral reasoning builds upon Piaget's theory of moral reasoning, but when I posed the Heinz Dilemma to at least three people at varying stages of life, not everyone I asked resembled the stages outlined in Berk's text.

The first subject is a woman in her mid-fifties who works as a secretary in a local college. She is a devout Christian married to a minister and falls within the conventional level of Kohlberg's stages. In fact, she most likely falls in the fourth stage, the social-order-maintaining orientation, because she is focused on law created to maintain order. When the examiner posed the Heinz Dilemma, she responded, "Heinz was wrong to steal. He reacted only on his emotion. He was desperate to save his wife. The pharmacist shouldn't have charged such a high price for the drug that would save the wife. What Heinz should have done instead of steal the drug was ask the pharmacist, 'What would you do if your wife were dying?'" When I asked her why she thought Heinz should not have taken the drug, she emphatically responded, "One of the Ten Commandments is 'Thou shalt not steal.' Heinz broke a commandment." This devout woman was quite sure of her answer, speaking quickly and determinedly. When I asked her what she would have done if she were Heinz, she responded, "If I were Heinz, I would pray for my spouse, but it is in God's hands. You can't be God." In this case, she is focused on God's law that she sees as an important foundation to maintaining society. In fact, she believed that "laws cannot be disobeyed under any circumstances," (p. 390) especially God's law.

A second person the examiner interviewed was an eight-year-old boy who just finished his second grade year. When posed the same Heinz Dilemma, this child responded innocently and rather typical for his age. In fact, as others his age, he falls in stage one, the punishment and obedience orientation, of the

preconventional level. At this stage the child can't distinguish two different points of view. Instead, he can only focus on one: rules of authority figures (p. 389). If a person chooses to disobey, he must face the consequences of punishment. This eight-year-old said, "He should never steal. It is a law." Probing into his reasoning, the examiner asked who created laws and why we should follow these laws. He said, "It's the government who makes the laws. People choose the government. We should follow the laws they make. It's like school. We have to follow the rules."

The final person posed the Heinz Dilemma was a twelve-year-old adolescent girl. Mature for her age, the examiner anticipated that she would think for a while about this story, and she did. Eventually, she asked for the examiner to read it through again, and then she said, "Okay, there are really two responses. First of all, yes, Heinz should steal the drug. Stealing is wrong, but he did it to save his wife's life. He loves her. Secondly, what the pharmacist did was horribly wrong. What he was doing was greedy and actually I would say would lead to the wife's death. Isn't that murder? I know stealing is wrong and so is killing. They are both Ten Commandments, but the pharmacist was actually stealing by charging so much more and killing because of his greed. Heinz broke a law, but laws are created by people and can be changed." Because of her response, she falls within the fifth stage, the social contract orientation within the postconventional level. At this stage, the individual sees laws as something that can be changed. This adolescent realized that stealing is against the law, but she also recognized that the law was created by a group of people and that the law could be changed. Just as Berk illustrated, this young woman indicated that "'although there is a law against stealing, the law wasn't meant to violate a person's right to life...the law needs to be reinterpreted to take into account situations in which it goes against people's natural right to keep on living'" (p. 390).

Overall, the Heinz Dilemma poses an interesting situation for a person. All of the subjects expressed their answers honestly with no influence from anyone else. Interestingly, the adult woman has reached the conventional level at the fourth stage. According to Berk, "individuals move through the stages in the order that Kohlberg expected" (p. 390), and both the woman and the young boy fall where

Kohlberg would anticipate. The middle childhood individual is early in his moral development whereas the woman has a lifetime of experience and faith on which to base her morality. What diverges from Kohlberg's theory, however, is the adolescent subject. According to Kohlberg, few adults move to this fifth stage, especially at such a young age. Kohlberg believes that stages 1 and 2 should be decreasing at this point in the young girl's life; instead, she has entered a stage few adults reach, stage 5. While Kohlberg's theory creates one measurement of morality, it does not fully capture the entire picture of a person's moral development. Other factors must be considered as to a person's moral development such as her parents' influences, her schooling, her friends, and her culture. One wonders what would happen if she presented Kohlberg with the person's answer and asked him to match the response to the chronological age of the person if he could do so consistently. As the last individual illustrates, the theory is not error free.