

Should!

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“Mamma tried to raise be better but her pleading I denied. That leaves only me to blame 'cause mamma tried.”

This is a song about moral and developmental epistemology. Moral epistemology is a field a philosophy that addresses the question of authority as it relates to morality, asking, basically, “How do we know what is right and wrong?” This is an astoundingly complex field and nearly every work on the subject begins by acknowledging the impossibility of having anything like the certainty one can have regarding matters of fact. We may be able to agree that there is milk in the refrigerator, but still be unable to agree on whether or under what conditions it is morally justifiable to drink the last glassful.

It can be entertaining (for some) to read the literature of moral epistemology, as academics strain their arcane linguistic muscles in an attempt to wrestle with a subject as slippery as this, and which, no matter what they conclude, rarely has anything to do with the real world front lines of moral epistemology: childhood, parenting, and the everyday life decisions of ordinary people.

In real life, morality is not an academic discipline. It is a moment-to-moment experience of motivation, decision, action, and consequences. And the song, “Mamma tried,” is about the outcome of one person’s experience. It’s told from the point of view of a person who acted without regard – or at least a belief in – the consequences of his action, and who ultimately accepts responsibility for his decision. We don’t know what he did, but it must have been serious, given the severity of the sentence: life in prison without the possibility of parole.

He acknowledges that his mother tried to teach him right from wrong, but he ignored her instead. Mmm. . . just how unique is this character in ignoring his mother? Right. We all did it. Why?

There are a lot of answers to this question, but I’d like to explore this by considering the work of Lawrence Kohlberg, a psychologist who formulated six stages of

moral evolution, stages that are more or less comparable to the development of our nervous systems and our ability to understand and relate to our environment.

It starts from a primitive first stage, which he called “punishment avoidance and obedience.” This stage corresponds to early childhood, before children can understand actions and their consequences. It begins, really, in infancy, when thinking is still quite undeveloped. A baby wants what it wants and relates to the world as a collection of objects that it either wants or does not want.

One thing babies want to do is to put stuff in their mouths. Everything is fair game, orally interesting. Crackers, car keys, fingers and carpets all fall into this category. But so do gravel and cigarette butts. So we have parents caring for the baby who want to protect the child, seeing something dangerous about to happen, shouting out “No! Not in your mouth! No! No! No!” They may grab the baby’s hand away from its mouth and take something away. The baby may not know all the words yet, but the tone of voice is unmistakably harsh and disapproving, the touch rough and demanding. This is the simplest form of punishment, really, the replacement of parental expressions of love and approval with ones of anxiety, anger, and rejection. “No!”

Evolution has finely tuned babies to be sensitive to parental approval as a means of survival. They tend to experience the loss of that approval, even momentarily, as a dire threat, a matter of even greater anxiety than the parent usually intended. Babies are not yet wired to appreciate the subtle differences in danger between a cigarette butt and stick of dynamite. They just know, deep down, that their existence depends on the continuous nurture of their parents. So the withdrawal of approval in the form of rough touches and harsh, sharp words is tremendously motivating to babies. They learn to identify their parents as the source of moral authority: this is good; this is bad.

In a way, then, this affirms what the philosophers have said, that there is no moral authority in nature. Deciding whether something is right or wrong is just that, a human decision. It may be made by our parents, or our legislature, society as a whole, the whole world, or maybe even God, but all moral authority originates from somewhere outside of ourselves.

Kohlberg’s six stages describe a psychological evolution of moral epistemology in which moral decision-making is gradually internalized in the process of growing into adulthood. While the first stage, “punishment avoidance and obedience,” may be

necessary for infants, it needs to advance to the subsequent stages as the child grows. Unfortunately, our culture's understanding of moral evolution frequently stops here or not far from here.

This can give us a source of moral authority that is confused at best and tyrannical at worst. Injunctions to restrain our behavior – should, should not, do, don't – come to rest on the personal authority of the same person who also punishes us for reasons we may never fully understand, whether they involve foolishness, disobedience, misunderstanding, or merely because our parents were in a bad mood that day.

The developing child tends to test a moral authority like this, which can feel like it's committed to opposing his or her own emerging sense of autonomy and selfhood. This usually leads, famously, to the "terrible twos" as children disagree with everything the parent asks. Even young children know that an important part of growing is becoming one's own moral authority. We all want to be the judges of our own actions and we're often quite hurt or offended when someone else interprets our behavior in ways that disagree with us – especially when they decide we are wrong, or bad.

So the hero of our song disregarded his mother as a source of moral authority but then ultimately accepted that actions have consequences. She may have told him about the consequences, but he didn't believe her until life taught him otherwise.

Let's take a look at Kohlberg's six stages and see if they can shed a little light on the situation.

The first two correspond roughly to ages up to nine years or so. As I've said, the first is "punishment avoidance and obedience." Here children make moral decisions on the basis of what is best for themselves, without regard for the needs or feelings of others. They obey rules only if established by more powerful individuals; they disobey when they can do so without getting caught.

The second stage is "exchange of favors," where individuals begin to recognize that others also have needs. They may attempt to satisfy the needs of others if their own needs are also met in the process. They continue to define right and wrong primarily in terms of consequences to themselves.

While natural to a certain early stage of life, there are many, many who do not progress beyond this stage. In adults, we might call this a "criminal morality," because it justifies extreme self-interest and respects only the consequences of getting caught. The

exchange of favors phase corresponds to something like the code of honor among thieves, sometimes described as “I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine.” The musical, “Chicago,” has a memorable song on this theme, *Reciprocity*, where a prison guard brings the logic of the playpen into a prison cell block, singing “When you’re good to Mama Mama’s good to you.” We seem to see a lot of this in public and political life.

Kohlberg calls the third and fourth stages “conventional morality,” and they correspond roughly from about age nine through adolescence. Stage three is “Good boy/good girl,” where individuals make moral decisions on the basis of what actions will please others, especially authority figures. They are concerned about maintaining interpersonal relationships through sharing, trust, and loyalty. They now consider someone’s intentions in determining innocence or guilt.

Stage four is the stage of “law and order.” Individuals look to society as a whole for guidelines concerning what is right or wrong. They perceive rules to be inflexible and believe that it is their “duty” to obey them. I think the hero of our song is speaking from having attained this level of morality. There is regret, but also a mature sense of responsibility that suggests a redemptive theme, making the message of this song a positive one.

Kohlberg calls the last two stages “postconventional morality,” which can be achieved in adulthood. Stage five is the “social contract,” where individuals recognize that rules represent an agreement among many people about appropriate behavior. They recognize that rules are flexible and can be changed if they no longer meet society’s needs.

Stage six is that of “universal ethical principle.” Individuals adhere to a small number of abstract, universal principles that transcend specific, concrete rules. At this stage, understanding their own personal beliefs allows adults to judge themselves and others based on higher levels of morality. In this stage what is right and wrong is based on the circumstances surrounding the action as much as the action itself.

Although these stages are linked ideally with certain ages for their development, there are no guarantees as to whom or when or even if an individual will achieve them. Some are caught forever in the earliest ethical stages, assuming it’s all right to do as we wish as long as we don’t get caught. Others never develop beyond the values of the group

and society's laws. And it's actually rather rare for people to move fully into the adult stages of postconventional morality.

Something called "cognitive dissonance" appears as a complicating factor here. Because we all want to perceive ourselves as our own source of moral decision-making, we tend to believe, no matter which stage of moral evolution we are on, that it was our own idea. We internalize the formerly external sources of moral authority. The reasoning of each stage becomes "our" reasoning, and we tend to find it difficult to understand the rationality of other stages, especially those beyond our own. In fact, Kohlberg found that it was generally impossible for people to understand the reasoning of a moral stage more than one level beyond their own. It just doesn't make sense to them. People often can understand only that which corresponds closely enough to their own view of the world.

This may be one reason why many people don't "get" Unitarian Universalism. When we say we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person; as well as justice, equity, and compassion in human relations, we posit a morality clearly based on universal ethical principles such as one finds in Kohlberg's sixth stage of moral evolution. This can be challenging even to Unitarian Universalists as we struggle to understand what post-conventional morality might mean in a world where good and evil seem to be in conflict. After all, the impulse to "take up arms against a sea of troubles and thus, by opposing, end them" is hardly based on a universal ethical principle. It's bringing the hammer down on the bad stuff – an impulse native to the first stage and certainly no higher than stage four's principles of law and order.

So how do we go about seeking the higher stages of moral evolution to which we, as Unitarian Universalists, are committed to affirm and promote? I believe that a reevaluation of the roots of moral authority might be able to show us the way.

All six stages of moral evolution derive their authority from the expectation that our actions have consequences. The first four, especially, expect that there will be negative consequences if one's actions are met with the disapproval of others. Angry lectures, spanking, time-out, prison, and even loss of life are examples of the kind of consequences native to the first four stages. They assume that morality is negative; that we learn to behave in such a way that avoids disapproval or punishment.

But it is only in the highest stage of post-conventional morality, that of universal ethical principle, that people actually get what they wanted all along: the capacity to be their own ethical authorities. This is possible because, at this level, the focus is not solely on self or consequences to one's self, but on others as well. The question ceases to be, "What's in it for me?" and becomes, "What is best for everyone?" We learn to examine our actions and understand their consequences on the lives of others.

Remember when I said that it can be difficult to understand higher moral stages from the perspective of lower ones? Truly caring about the consequences of your actions on the lives of others can be hard to understand if you're functioning from the perspective of punishment avoidance.

But perhaps there can be ways to make the progress of moral evolution more accessible. I think punishment is often misunderstood, in both interpersonal and international relations. There is a way of understanding punishment as a painful lesson about one's behavior, where we think that if we hurt someone often enough, they will change their behavior to avoid that hurt.

But I invite you to think back on that little baby, that little child. I don't believe that the pain of punishment is the most significant message sent. I believe that the withdrawal of love and approval is the most powerful negative message any child or adult can receive. But humans didn't evolve to respond to rejection; they evolved to respond to love. This is why punishment in the form of angry lectures, spanking, and imprisonment can actually inhibit moral evolution even as they try to modify behavior.

We may occasionally change our behavior in response to punishment, but we evolve morally in response to love. When our parents reward us generously with love and affection for every good action, we learn to behave better and better. Our ability to understand our actions and consequences may be limited by our age and stage, but it is loving affirmation that leads us forward toward further healthy growth.

One redemptive factor in this morning's song is the turning toward a mother's love that had previously been rejected – "her pleading I denied." It is a hard-won understanding that it's never too late for moral evolution, that whenever one's mind and conscience is opened, growth and healing can still take place.

I invite you all to consider the challenges of living by universal ethical principles rather than the conventional morality of law and order. Teach your children to

appreciate the consequences of their actions on the lives of others from the very first. Lead them toward a morality that doesn't rely on rules and laws, but on an understanding of the outcomes of their actions. Help them to see the big picture, the value and challenge of loving others as you love yourself.

And while you're at it, I invite you to take a look at your own stage of moral evolution and ask if you're living up to your Unitarian Universalist ideals. I really think you *should*.