

Morality Test Results • 20101003

As part of the presentation to the Humanist Union of Madison on Sunday, October 3, on “Justice and the Common Good”, those in attendance were asked to take a couple of tests. For the 1st one, they were divided into 2 groups and presented with this scenario:

You are standing on an overpass looking down at a trolley track. You see a runaway trolley car hurtling toward 5 people standing on the tracks with no means of escape. Unless you act, they will surely die. (All the people involved in these scenarios are strangers to you.)

This was Item A of 2 follow-up questions:

A. You are standing next to a fat man. If you push him onto the tracks below, he will jam the wheels of the trolley car, saving the 5 innocent victims. But the fat man will surely die. Do you push the fat man?

This was Item B of 2 follow-up questions:

B. You are standing next to a lever. If you throw the lever, the trolley car will be diverted onto a siding, saving the 5 innocent victims. But the person standing on the siding will surely die. Do you throw the lever?

In each case, people were given 30 seconds to come up with an answer. The last 5 seconds were counted down out loud.

The group that got Question A 1st responded 0 yes and 9 no. The other group got Question A 2nd and responded 1 yes, 7 no, and 1 no answer (which, given the scenario, had the same effect as a "no", since dithering results in inaction).

The group that got Question B 1st responded 6 yes, 2 no, and 1 no answer (again, equivalent to "no"). The other group got Question B 2nd and also responded 6 yes, 2 no, and 1 no answer.

This is absolutely typical of the results that occur worldwide, irrespective of age, race, religion, culture, sex, or any other variable (including which of the questions you got 1st or 2nd). It seems to be an attitude that results from a deep-seated sense of what's fair or not and is probably derived from our million-year evolutionary history as a species, 99% of which was spent in tribes of 20–50 individuals, each of whom we knew personally by face and personality. Is it necessary to be religious to experience these results? Absolutely not! Atheists and agnostics respond the same way as the most devout believers.

The ethical dilemmas posed above are part of a set of such questions used in James Rest's Defining Issues Test (DIT), based on Lawrence Kohlberg's ground-breaking work in the stages of moral development. Kohlberg examined the factors that people considered in making moral decisions, irrespective of what the decisions themselves turned out to be, and came up with 6 stages of development. He said that people go thru these stages as they increase in age.

Stage 1 is for young children, where the factors that go into making moral decisions are purely based on obedience and punishment. Faced with a choice of whether to perform Action X or not, children at this stage consider only "Will this get me in trouble or not?".

Stage 2 is for slightly older children, but it's still self-centered, based on "What's in it for me?", but allows for the possibility of mutual reciprocity and so is somewhat less self-centered than Stage 1.

Kohlberg grouped the 1st 2 stages together into what he called the Pre-Conventional Level (Level 1), which I think is more descriptively labelled the Personal Level.

Stage 3 shows up in the school years, particularly for teenagers, when decisions are driven heavily by considerations of interpersonal accord and conformity — in other words, peer pressure. Intentions of others are given more consideration, and people at this stage are more inclined to "cut some slack" for actions they don't personally favor.

Stage 4 is relatively mature, and Kohlberg believed this was where most adults ended up. Decisions are based on a desire for social order and respect for authority, lest things degenerate into an undesirable state of anarchy. This is where people have sufficient respect for social norms that they rein in their personal desires if they might set a bad example. Those at Stage 4 are more likely to be convinced that "a deal's a deal" than to consider possible extenuating or ameliorating circumstances.

Kohlberg grouped Stages 3 and 4 together into what he called the Conventional Level (Level 2), which I call the Social Level.

Stage 5, which Kohlberg found to be relatively rare in adults, deals with the hypothetical social contract, to which the individual is a party and therefore in a position to question. People at Stage 5 don't simply accept societal norms on their face but look beyond them to the underlying reasoning, leaving open the possibility that they will disagree with that reasoning and therefore follow their own lights. This is where conscientious objectors to a military draft end up, as well as the gay minister who made the cover of this week's *Isthmus* as an advocate of "scrupling" —

that is, having scrupulous objections to his church's official teaching on the ordination of gay clergy, thereby justifying his own deviation from those teachings.

Stage 6, quite rare, is where moral decisions are based on abstract reasoning using universal ethical principles (insofar as they can be elucidated). Such decisions almost always deviate from accepted social norms, and those at Stage 6 are in for a lifetime of raised eyebrows, questions, and explanations.

Kohlberg grouped Stages 5 and 6 together into the Post-Conventional Level (Level 3), which I call the Global Level.

If this rings any bells of familiarity, it's probably because it's quite similar to Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which also goes thru stages. The difference is that Maslow's stages are based on what I'll inadequately call "comfort level" (what might also be called fulfillment or satisfaction), rather than age.

At base are physiological needs: food, water, air, sleep, excretion, and (Maslow contended, tho others disagreed) sex. If you're having trouble getting these basic needs met, pretty much nothing else at all matters to you. However, like all other stages in Maslow's hierarchy, once you come to believe that this level has been taken care of, you start taking it for granted. You no longer feel the need to spend time dealing with it, and desiderata at this level no longer motivate you. You have moved on to be motivated by the next level up.

That would be what Maslow called safety needs: bodily security, employment (financial security), health, property, and a moral society to make you feel safe.

Once you feel secure about those, you are next motivated by the need for love and belonging, including friendship, family, and sexual intimacy (distinguished from sheer physical sexual pleasure, which occurred a couple of notches earlier).

Next up the line is esteem, which Maslow broke into 2 subcategories, the lower of which was the esteem or respect of others, and the higher of which was a sense of achievement or competence, self-respect, confidence, etc. in yourself.

Finally, at the top of the pyramid, Maslow identified self-actualization — in essence the old Army slogan "Be all that you can be!" Buzzwords under this heading include spontaneity, creativity, morality, problem-solving, lack of prejudice, and acceptance of facts — essentially a cool-headed, clear-eyed, well informed view of the world.

Unlike Kohlberg's scale, where people hardly ever regressed once they'd passed an earlier stage, Maslow's hierarchy fully recognizes that people may slide back down if their fortunes are severely reversed. Self-actualization is a luxury afforded to people in wealthy societies with lots of leisure time and many social opportunities; most people around the world today and throughout history have never been presented with the opportunity to attain it.

A criticism of both Kohlberg and Maslow is that they place undue emphasis on individualism and personal liberty and don't pay enough attention to communitarianism. This is effectively the argument that Michael J. Sandel makes in his book *Justice: What's the Right Thing To Do?*, based on his wildly popular course in practical ethics at Harvard University, and which gave rise to the topic "Justice and the Common Good".

The following situation, presented to the group, is similar to one cited by Sandel as a good way of sorting out the kinds of considerations that go into deciding what's fair, *a la* Kohlberg.

The Shrimp Contract

Life has been kind of hard lately along the Gulf Coast, where you own a restaurant, and you're getting desperate for cash, so you're thrilled when local socialite Delilah McQueen arranges to have her wedding reception catered at your place. The day before the wedding, it occurs to you that it would be ideal to serve fresh shrimp cocktail to the guests, so you call your most reliable source, shrimp-boat Captain Boudreaux, and he swings by with a contract whereby he'll catch and deliver to you a thousand fresh shrimp at \$1 each, total \$1,000. You both sign it and shake hands on the deal, and Boudreaux walks out into the sunset a happy man.

The Scenarios

Here are several possible things that might happen thereafter. Spend a little bit of time reading each one, but don't dwell on any of them. We're more interested in your initial reaction than a detailed analysis. For each scenario, write down how much money you **should**, in all fairness, pay Boudreaux.

1. Later that evening, you check your budget and realize you forgot to allow for wine, which will cost at least \$2000, so you can't really afford the shrimp after all. You contact Boudreaux at home, explain the situation, and ask him to cancel your order.
2. Same story as #1, but you can't reach him that night, so you try again the following morning and reach him just as he's heading out with 2 extra crew he's subcontracted for the extra work.

3. Same story as #2, but he's already out in his boat and can't be reached. That afternoon, he shows up with the 1000 shrimp, as promised. You say you don't really need them and can't afford them and can he please try to sell them elsewhere.

4. None of the above occur. Boudreaux shows up the following afternoon, hat in hand, and says he was only able to catch 500 shrimp, but the contract still calls for you to pay him \$1000 for trying.

5. Boudreaux shows up on time, with the 1000 shrimp, which he has cleaned and deheaded for you, because he knew you were busy.

6. Boudreaux shows up on time, with the 1000 shrimp in their normal condition, to find you holding your head in your hands because Delilah has eloped, and her father called only an hour ago to cancel the reception. The McQueen family will not be paying you anything.

7. Boudreaux fails to show up at all, the McQueens don't really notice the missing shrimp, and the following day Boudreaux's sobbing widow tells you he was drowned at sea, but she found your contract and was hoping you'd still be good for the \$1,000, as Boudreaux left no insurance and she really needs the money.

What I was looking for in each case was a single dollar amount, but evidently that wasn't explained clearly enuf. While most responders gave us exactly that, several apparently thought it was an essay question. This has precluded coming up with any useful averages. For each scenario, I've listed the 17 usable responses in identical order, lettered A thru Q.

1. Quick cancellation

A \$1,000	B \$1,000	C \$1,000	D \$300	E \$250	F \$200
G \$100	H \$100	I \$100	J \$100	K \$100	L \$100
M \$100	N \$25	O \$0	P \$0	Q \$0	

2. Cancellation at beginning of day

A \$1,000	B \$1,000	C \$1,000	D \$300	E \$1,000-SR*	F \$200
G \$1,000	H \$500	I \$500	J \$300	K \$200	L \$200
M \$200	N \$30	O agreed amt.	P 2 crew mem.	Q 20%	

*SR = selling receipts

3. Cancellation at end of day

A \$1,000	B \$1,000	C \$500	D pay	E \$1,000-SR	F \$500
G \$1,000	H \$1,000	I \$1,000	J \$900	K \$1,000	L \$1,000

M \$500 N \$100 O bal. unpaid to him P \$1,000 Q all

4. Job half done

A \$500	B \$500	C \$500	D pay half	E \$500	F \$1,000
G \$1,000	H \$500	I \$500	J \$500	K \$500	L \$500
M \$500	N \$500	O \$1,000	P \$500	Q 50%	

5. Going the extra mile

A \$1,000+tip	B \$1,000	C \$1,000	D pay half	E \$1,000	F \$1,000
G \$1,000	H \$1,150	I \$1,000	J \$1,100	K \$1,100	L \$1,000
M \$1,000	N \$600	O \$2,000	P \$1,000+tip	Q 100%+20%	

6. No fault of your own

A \$1,000	B \$1,000	C \$1,000	D \$200	E \$1,000	F \$1,000
G \$1,000	H \$1,000	I \$1,000	J \$500	K \$1,000	L \$1,000
M \$500	N \$500	O \$2,000*	P \$1,000	Q [illegible]	

*and bill the McQueens

7. Sob story

A \$0	B \$500	C \$0	D \$3,000	E \$0	F \$0
G \$0	H \$1,000	I \$1,000	J \$300	K \$0	L \$0
M \$500	N \$500	O what you will	P \$0	Q 50%+	

Clearly, this is **not** a situation where people generally see eye to eye, which means it's a good one for looking at levels of moral development and deciding which factors are most important to certain individuals.