MORAL ACTION OF FOUR-YEAR-OLDS

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Two four-year-old girls have played the game NeoPd so that each has won an equal number of pennies. The staff leader is not certain that they understand this equalizing solution so she asks:

Staff Leader: What would happen if you, Jackie, put down a blue card and Mary put down a red card?
Jackie: I would get pennies and she wouldn't.
Staff Leader: Would that be fair?
Jackie: Nooooo. Because then I get pennies and she doesn’t. (Pause.) It gets really kinda unhappy.
Staff Leader: Mary, how would you feel if you got some pennies and Jackie didn’t?
Mary: (biting her lip) Sad.
Staff Leader: How come?
Mary: I don’t like Jackie getting sad and we’re friends and we always do the same thing.
Staff Leader: When you both put down red, how does that make you feel?
Both Girls: Happy!
Jackie: ‘Cause then it’s more like it, ’cause we both get something. (Each will receive one penny.)

Theories of development try to bridge two points—the beginning and end-points—as conceptions of what humans are born with and what they become at maturity. Here we are interested just in the beginnings of morality; it is a focal conceptualization in all moral theories since it sets the stage for all other stipulations that might be made in a theory and all educational recommendations that might be proposed.

In this chapter we will describe the moral concerns and skills of four-year-olds in the action situation of NeoPd, the most stressful game that the young adults and adolescents experienced. Of course, four-year-olds are not at the very beginning of morality, but they are certainly close to it. After setting down the background of psychologists’ thinking and work about the beginnings of morality, we report our observations of 40 children playing a modified version of this game. Our particular focus will be on the character of the children's moral concerns and the ways they resolved the conflicts that NeoPd incites.

Background

The Presumption of Moral Incapacity

The presumption that young children lack moral capacity or are even immoral is common to many accounts of moral development. Freud assumed that very young children are instinctively self-serving, motivated only by the impulse to satisfy their own desires. Social-learning theorists regard preschoolers as lacking internalized systems of control so they must learn “conscience” through reinforcement, or observation and imitation.

Cognitive-developmental theorists also regard young children as being morally deficient. The cognitive approach to the study of children’s morality began with Jean Piaget, whose seminal work, The Moral Judgment of the Child (1965; first published 1932), was written more than 50 years ago. This was his only investigation of children’s morality, and he worked with the same methods be used in analyzing children’s logical reasoning about the physical world. That is, through interviewing and questioning children, both in games and with hypothetical stories, Piaget studied their understanding of moral rules.
He proposed that between three and eight years, children's moral reasoning in the hypothetical stories was "heteronomous." In other words, their morality was of constraint, they regarded rules as fixed, even sacred, commandments, and defined "right" as adherence to authorities' dictates.

Piaget proposed a sequence of four developmental stages whereby children came to understand games. He placed children of approximately three to six years old (thus close in age to the children we studied) in the second stage. Piaget contended that although children at this level imitated the behavior prescribed by game rules, they did not understand the rules, since they were unable to coordinate their actions with other children. Their play was essentially individual. He described this intrinsic cognitive inexpertness as "egocentricism," meaning that they could not compare their own point of view with others.

In an example, Piaget (1965) wrote of "two children from the same class at school, living in the same house, and accustomed to playing with each other." Yet, he writes "how little [they] are able to understand each other at this age. Not only do they tell us totally different rules... but when they play together they do not watch each other and do not unify their respective rules even for the duration of the game" (p. 40).

After this one study of moral development, Piaget's attention was more exclusively focused on children's reasoning in the nonsocial areas. Much later Kohlberg continued the cognitive study of moral development. He elaborated upon Piaget's stages to offer a systematic and comprehensive theory of moral reasoning. Like Piaget, Kohlberg thought young children could not consider the interests of others because they cannot coordinate divergent points of view. Unlike Piaget, he contended that young children's judgments are based on the threat of punishment, rather than sacred respect for adult authority and rules. In Kohlberg's view, young children's judgments about the "rightness" of an act are associated with its physical consequences—it is wrong to steal another child's toy because punishment results.

Kohlberg (1969) also criticized Piaget's theory for its focus on the content rather than the underlying structure of children's moral reasoning. He proposed a structural description and went on to adopt the research methodology of interviewing people about hypothetical moral dilemmas, which improves opportunity for identifying structures.

Damon (1977) also applied a cognitivist framework to theorize on the moral and social development in young children. He used stories and situations that were familiar to young children and came to conclude that young children are more active and attuned to the social setting than either Kohlberg or Piaget suggested. After studying children's judgments about fair distribution, Damon formulated a sequence of six levels to characterize development from approximately age four to ten years. While children of six to seven years thought all should share equally, younger children could not understand fair distribution. They were characterized as egocentric, since they confused fairness with their own selfish desires—"I should get it because I want it." In this respect, Damon's account of early moral stages did not markedly differ from Kohlberg's and Piaget's. All three regard the preschool child as morally incapable. (We should point out that egocentrism does not necessarily mean "self-centered" in a moral sense. According to these cognitive theorists, children are egocentric because they simply lack ability to take into account the other person's point of view.)

Research since Piaget

The position of cognitive-developmental theorists has recently been challenged by psychologists who focus on the processing demands of several tasks used in investigating children's reasoning. Anderson (1980) for example (see Anderson, 1980; Anderson & Butzin, 1978; Lane & Anderson, 1976), constructed algebraic models to represent the moral integration of various informational sources. Applying this approach to several problems used by Piaget, Anderson (1978) found, contrary to Piaget's findings, that four-year-olds were able to integrate information and make comparatively complex judgments about equity. He suggested that the kind of methodology Piaget used fails to uncover young children's ability to integrate information.

More recent research focused on Piaget's proposal that when young children judge others' acts, they attend only to the consequences and ignore the underlying intentions. For example, children are asked whether a boy who broke ten glasses when he was angry at his mother is naughtier than a boy who broke 20 glasses when he was trying to help his mother. Gruenéich (1982) also identified several methodological problems with earlier studies of children's use of information.
about intention and consequence. These include the way such information is represented in stories, as well as developmental differences in children's memory, and their comprehension of the information communicated in stories. Trabasso and Nicholas (1980) also argue that developmental differences in the comprehension of story material have distorted observations.

The cognitive developmentalists' conclusions are challenged more indirectly by researchers who have studied children's prosocial behavior. The behavior of preschoolers in natural settings suggests that four-year-olds manifest a variety of prosocial actions. They will assist one another, help or comfort each other in distress, punish the cause of another's distress, and ask an adult to help a peer. After extensive review of the great number of studies now available, Radke-Yarrow, Zahn-Waxler, and Chapman (1983) concluded that preschool children "are not only egocentric, selfish, and aggressive; they are also exquisitely perceptive, have attachments to a wide range of others, and respond prosocially across a broad spectrum of interpersonal events in a wide variety of ways and with various motives" (p. 484).

Reopening the Question of Young Children's Moral Capacity

Given the contradictions between the findings of the cognitive researchers and those who study children's information processing, prosocial behavior, and evaluation of intentions and consequences, the nature of preschool children's moral capacity is an open question. The cognitive-developmental methodology probably relies too heavily on young children's verbal responses, while the observational and experimental work gives little information about the way children act when their self-interests are actually at stake. We suggest that children may only appear morally incapable because they are especially vulnerable to stress—they are inexperienced; they are subject to a variety of situational pressures; they lack psychological and material resources and knowledge; and in any case adult authority decides most issues. But none of these factors constitutes evidence of moral deficiency.

A study of young children's actions in situations of actual moral conflict is needed, but more must be at stake for the children than altruism. The conflicts should involve a clash of children's self-interests. To avoid confusion between cognitive deficiency and moral de-

![Figure 14.1](image_url)

Figure 14.1
NeoPd Board used with Four Year Olds

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CHILD 1  CHILD 2
Seated Here  Seated Here

iciency, the moral situations need to be simple. For these reasons we thought NeoPd, which was used with the young adults and adolescents, would provide an appropriate situation of conflict, so we set about reducing its cognitive complexity to make it comprehensible to very young children.

Methods of Study

Preschoolers and Prisoners' Dilemma

NeoPd was changed in several ways. The original version of Prisoners' Dilemma used by most researchers, as well as NeoPd that we used with the students, involves a stalemate (no payoffs), cooperation (moderate payoffs for both), and competitive outcomes (high payoffs for one person, losses for the other). But in our pilot work four-year-olds became very upset when they lost pennies. Consequently, we
The Costs of Moral Development

changed the competitive outcome. One child could still get a large payoff but the other child would simply receive no pennies, rather than having to give up any.

The second change was to pay off in pennies immediately after each play, rather than converting points to pennies at the end of the session. The children placed their winnings in small bowls which they kept beside them, so they were able to keep track of what they and their friends had won. A scoreboard was used with the older subjects.

The third change was to use a concrete and colorful board (see Figure 14.1), to show the four possible outcomes. It was placed on a table before the four-year-olds (the young adults had received a printed matrix showing the payoffs). As can be seen in Figure 14.1, blue and red cards and real pennies were glued on the board to illustrate each outcome.

Fourth, we learned in our pilot work that pairs of preschoolers worked better than larger groups; this also made the payoff contingencies simpler.

By preventing four-year-olds from becoming too upset and angry at losing pennies, by providing them immediate and tangential information about the task and its payoffs, and by reducing the number of persons involved, we thought the task would be cognitively within their grasp. Nonetheless the terms and nature of the moral issues remained basically the same as for the adolescents and young adults. The main moral questions were still: Do I care about my friend having less? Is it all right to defend my self-interest? Can I trust my friend to keep an agreement?

Participants

The children were from two adjacent nursery schools, 22 children from a university-run center and 18 from a cooperative center. Their families were predominantly of the middle socioeconomic level and represented different ethnic groups. Six children were black, four were Asians and 30 were white. They ranged in age from four years, two months to five years, three months, with an average age of approximately four years, six months at the time NeoPd was played. (It was played second in a series of games in a year-long study on young children's morality.)

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The games were played by 18 pairs of the same sex (and in two cases of both sexes) and lasted about 25 minutes. Teachers at the two nursery schools rated the degree of friendship that existed between the pairs of children who played NeoPd. Of the 20 pairs, 40 percent were considered best friends, 50 percent were friends, while 10 percent were considered not friends at all. The children were invited by the staff leaders to come and play a game in a room adjacent to their schoolroom. They were shown the video equipment and told that they could watch themselves on TV after the game. The children were seated side by side, and the staff leader wrote their names on strips of paper which were placed above each child's side of the board. They were told that they could win pennies to keep and take home. Several practice trials without payoff were played. When the children seemed to understand, the real game began and pennies were awarded after each trial.

These four-year-olds were obviously keen to win pennies. The staff leader took a facilitative but nondirective role. Although we wanted to minimize the role of the adult, we were also certain that the children would break off play if the adult was as detached as staff leaders were with the young adults and adolescents. Consequently the staff leaders encouraged the children to confront the issues, express their thoughts and feelings and discuss game strategy with each other. The role of the adult is further evaluated in the summary of this chapter.

Results

Our aims are first, to describe the equalizing nature of the children's interaction as they either directly cooperated or attempted to make reparations for previous imbalances; second, to describe instances of stalemate; and third, to describe instances when children defaulted or betrayed each other by breaking agreements. We did not use the same systems of scoring to rate morality that we applied to the actions of adolescents and young adults, since it was important to stay very close to the way these four-year-olds acted. Instead we focused on five particular kinds of events which are shown in Figure 14.1.

Equalizations: Both children play cooperatively (play their red cards), enabling each to win one penny, or the two children agree
that they will take turns. First one will play red (no payoff) the other plays blue to win two pennies; on the next play they will reverse their choices of play.

*Reparsions:* They attempt to equalize previous imbalances in total number of pennies won. The winner agrees to play red for no gain so that the loser may play blue and win two pennies.

*Stalemate:* Both children deliberately play competitively (blue-blue), with the result that neither child obtains pennies. 

*Default:* Competitive play (blue) is continued by the winning child, while the loser continues to play red, apparently attempting to cooperate.

*Betrayal:* A child breaks a proposed or assumed agreement to play cooperatively.

In 17 of the 20 sessions (85 percent) equalizing solutions were agreed to by both children (either playing red-red, or alternating turns playing blue-red). At some point 12 of the pairs (60 percent) planned to ameliorate earlier inequities in payoffs. In 13 of the groups some occasions of default (65 percent) arose, and in 14 (70 percent) one or more occasions of stalemate occurred. In six pairs (30 percent) one child betrayed the other one or more times. Equalizing solutions were still being adhered to at session’s end by 60 percent of the pairs; this incidence compares favorably with the incidence of 80 percent for the young adults.

**Equalizing Solutions**

When people equalize payoffs, they coordinate their efforts so both benefit. This is the only possible moral solution to the contingencies set up in NeoPd, since competitive play harms one player and either one can retaliate on the next play with stalemate which benefits neither player.

Nevertheless, cooperation has a certain moral ambiguity, for it is always possible for people to cooperate for selfish reasons. For example, in NeoPd the only way to break stalemate play is to equalize, and this choice can be construed as self-serving, or at the very least, prudent or strategic. This ambiguity in NeoPd has been noted by other researchers such as Cook & Stingle (1974) and Sampson & Kardush (1965). But of course all morality can be seen this way. That is, life is usually better for the person who acts morally, and this could be self-serving. Attributing covert self-servingness to moral acts is a hypothesis about a hidden motive that can neither be proved or disproved. In any case, to impute this kind of convoluted reasoning to very young children is to give them even more credit for social cleverness than past theorists thought possible. Consequently, we proceed with the more obvious supposition that equalization in NeoPd is moral.

Careful distinctions also need to be made between two different reasons why some children may not adopt an equalizing solution. First, despite the training session and the staff leaders’ judgments, some children may still have had trouble understanding the game, so they may not have recognized the cooperative solution. Second, children may recognize the consequences of playing red-red, but they may not consider it seriously. A winning child may continue to compete simply because he or she thinks this is an ordinary game, although most four-year-olds have had very little experience in competitive games. But in part, the burden is on the losing child to bring the inequality to the attention of his or her partner, and not all the children were able to protect their self-interest. But some children did do this by stalemating the play, making verbal complaints, and/or nonverbally, by sighs, facial expressions, body set, and so forth.

The first moral problem of NeoPd comes to the children’s attention when they realize rewards are not equal. One child wins pennies but the other doesn’t. This is a serious problem for the young children. While adults might think that rewards could be balanced over the course of the game, the four-year-olds seemed not to look far beyond their practical involvement at the moment, so the inequalities of a single trial were very significant.

Of the 17 pairs of children who agreed to a cooperative solution, some hit upon it immediately. In the following excerpt, two girls started to equalize even before the practice trials were finished, and they continued to cooperate for the remainder of the session (staff leader is indicated by “SL”):

**SUZ:** Yeah. But I am . . . *(she turns toward Kathy)* but, Kathy, this is red and red. *(Smiles.)*

**KATHY:** Okay! *(She looks at the board and smiles.)*

**SL:** You want to play the game for real? *(Suzy nods yes with a smile)*
KATHY: Yeah. *(Smiling at Suzy.)*
SL: Okay. All right. So this time I’ll be giving you pennies. And these pennies you can put in these bowls. Okay? So what was your idea? *(Suzy points to the two reds on the board.)* What do you think of that idea, Kathy?
KATHY: Okay *(Both girls play red. Both smile and giggle when they see what the other put down.)*
SL: Red. What happens?
KATHY: *(With a big smile as Suzy points to the board.)* We both get one.

In the practice trials, the girls had each won two pennies as a consequence of competing, by playing blue. It is unlikely, then, that they played red-red accidentally. If either wanted to maximize her own winnings, competing would make more sense. The cooperative solution seems genuinely motivated by a concern that we both get one, and at the same time.

In the next example two boys come up with a cooperative solution. At Tim’s suggestion they have just played blue-blue, apparently not anticipating the outcome of the stalemate.

TIM: We both didn’t get any.
SL: Well, let’s. . . let’s try it again.
JEFF: *(interrupting)* Why doesn’t it, why don’t we ever get. um, one penny? *(To SL.)*
SL: What do you have to do to get one penny?
TIM: Put down, we both put down red.
SL: Uh huh.
JEFF: *(looking at Tim)* Want to do that?
TIM: Yeah. *(Both boys have slightly tentative smiles. They both play red.)*
SL: So what happens?
BOTH: We both get one. *(They smile broadly.)*

The staff leader then asks, “What if you had a plan that you both were going to put down red, but let’s say the other person changed his mind and put down blue. Do you think that would be fair?”

JEFF: *(shakes his head)* No.
SL: How come?
TIM: I’m never going to change my mind on the secrets from Jeff.
SL: Oh. What would you think if someone did that?
TIM: *(after a pause)* Dumb. That would be dumb.

SL: How come?
TIM: Because if they do something or change their mind, it wouldn’t be fair.

Here Tim underscores his moral alliance with his friend Jeff; Tim will not go back on his word.

The next excerpt involves another pair of girls. In this session we find Ellen ingeniously playing in a way that prevents cooperation, caught up in her own pleasure at winning two pennies each time. She has just played blue, while Sue has played red:

SL: What happens when Ellen puts a blue down and Sue puts a red down? *(Pause.)* You guys know what happens?
ELLEN: She would get none pennies and I would get two pennies.
SL: And you would get two pennies. So here you go. *(SL hands Ellen her pennies.)* Ellen, how come you put down a blue?
ELLEN: *(with enthusiasm)* ’Cause I like pennies!
SL: You like pennies. You wanted two. And how come you put down a red, Sue? How come?
SUE: *(suddenly)* I wanted to.

Notice Sue does nothing to communicate her dissatisfaction and even asserts that her plight is of her own choosing. Consequently, it is not surprising that Ellen does not see that any harm has been done.

We follow these two girls to examine negotiations that eventually result in their agreement to equalize. Ellen continues to be captivated by the pleasure of winning pennies, but Sue begins to express her dissatisfactions with this way of playing. Sue had just played red, Ellen has played blue, to win two more pennies. She now has a total of six; her friend has none:

SL: How many pennies did you want when you put red down?
SUE: *(Mumbles.)*
SL: So you have a lot of pennies, huh Ellen? *(Ellen nods.)* And you *(to Sue)* don’t have any. You guys think that’s fair? You like that idea?
SUE: *(shakes her head.)*
ELLEN: I like that idea.
SL: You like the idea? How come you like the idea?
ELLEN: 'Cause I can get more pennies than her.
SL: I see. How does that make you feel, Sue, when Ellen has more pennies than you?
SUE: (grimaces) It's not very nice.
SL: How does that make you feel, Ellen, when you have more pennies than Sue?
ELLEN: Good. (Smiles with satisfaction.)

Ellen is still either ignoring her friend's growing distress or ignorant of it. On the next trial Sue stalemates her friend by playing her own blue card. As the negotiation begins, Ellen seems happy to continue playing blue despite Sue's judgment that "it's not very nice":

SL: Ellen, you keep putting down blues. How come you keep putting down blues?
ELLEN: (smiling) 'Cause.
SL: You want pennies. But when you both put down blues, no pennies.
ELLEN: No pennies.
SL: So what are we going to do?
ELLEN: (stated matter-of-factly) Play.
SUE: I have a thousand million and zillion pennies at home. (She has other riches.)
ELLEN: You must feel good about that. (Ellen is happy to hear that Sue has compensations.)
SL: You feel good about that? (Sue shakes her head.) No.
ELLEN: (laughing) She doesn't. She must.
SL: What would be the fairest way to play this game?
SUE: If she put down a red and I put down a red.
SL: How come you think that's the fairest?
SUE: Because I would get one penny and she would get one penny. (They play again, this time red-red.)
SUE: We both get a penny.

Like the other children we have discussed, Sue's focus is on the fact that both children would benefit from the proposed solution.

SL: Okay.
ELLEN: (now with a smile of pleasure and apparent relief) You're starting to get more pennies.
SL: Yeah.
SUE: One penny, but . . .

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SL: So how come you both wanted to put down reds?
ELLEN: (confidently) Because we got an idea.
SL: Is that fair? (Sue nods.) How come that's fair?
SUE: 'Cause I get one and she gets one. (She says this with satisfaction.)

Once Ellen agrees to Sue's proposed way of playing, she shows pleasure and perhaps relief. When asked why her solution is "fair," Sue gives the same account that others gave: "cause you both get one penny."

Another form of cooperation is an agreement between two children that they will take turns. One child will play red while the other will play the blue card to win two pennies. In this next example Lori and Mark, members of a mixed-sex pair, have secretly devised a plan of alternation which they will not reveal to the staff leader.

MARK: Come on, Lori, let's do it a different way.
LORI: No! You said, you said.
MARK: Oh, yeah, then I get to, then you get to put red down, right, yeah?
SL: What are you going to do?
MARK: We made a plan.
SL: What's your plan?
MARK: We can't tell it.
SL: Okay, but do you know what the plan is between yourselves?
LORI: Yeah.
MARK: Yeah.
SL: Ready: one, two, three. Choose. (Both children quickly glance at each other and without hesitation put down their cards. Lori plays blue while Mark, already two pennies ahead in totals, plays red.)

Excited by their success, Lori and Mark are eager to implement the second part of their plan:

MARK: And there's another plan.
LORI: Yeah.
SL: Oh, we'll see what happens then.
LORI: Now this time I get to put down a . . .
MARK: (interrupting) Red.
SL: Is that what the plan was?
BOTH: Yeah!
SL: Okay, here we go. Ready, one, two, three, choose. (This time Mark
immediately puts down a blue and Lori, in keeping with the agreement, plays her red card.

SL: So, Mark, you get two, and Lori doesn’t get any. So does that seem fair?
Lori: (quickly) Yeah.
SL: Why?
Lori: ’Cause the other time I got pennies.
SL: I see. Since you got two pennies last time it’s fair because . . .
Mark: (interrupting) And we’re going to keep doing that over and over until we stop.

In comparison with the equalizing solution of playing red-red, the alternate playing of red-blue is more complex and risky. The children must sustain their commitment to each other. Not only must they be willing to sacrifice immediate gains on a particular trial, but they must also trust their partners to uphold their end of the bargain and play a red card when it is their turn.

When the children acted in a cooperative manner, it was apparently out of concern for each other’s well-being, but at the same time they were also acting to protect their own legitimate self-interest. The two solutions—red-red and alternating red-blue, blue-red—which give equal pennies to the two children, satisfactorily resolve both these concerns, and the children seemed relieved and satisfied when they reached this mutual solution. They were not always able, however, to articulate accurately or fully what motivated them. But whatever they said or did not say, their actions spoke louder than their words.

Seventy-three percent of the children used moral ideas. For example, “We chose red because we each get the same amounts.” Or they used moral phrases. For example, “This game is not fair, you’re winning too many pennies.” Of the 73 percent, 16 percent spontaneously used these ideas before the staff leader did, while 57 percent used them usually immediately after the staff leader asked about fairness. Twenty-seven percent of the children never articulated these ideas.

Reparations

A second more complex moral solution lay in attempts to equalize the total number of pennies each partner was to receive after unequal-

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Ities had developed. The winners were not always happy about equalizing; nevertheless 60 percent of the pairs did. Each child had a bowl for pennies, and each could see how many they and their friend had won. Frequently a child leaned over to examine both bowls, or paused to count the contents.

In the next example two children work to repair an inequality. (Mimi has two pennies, while Jane has six.) Mimi, the loser, proposes that they play so she can win pennies, while Jane will get none. Jane agrees, although she has reservations:

Mimi: Now this time you put down a red and I’ll put down a blue.
(She turns to Jane as she speaks, gesturing with her finger in a forceful manner.)
Jane: Yeah. (Mimi smiles.)
SL: You what, Jane?
Jane: If we both have to take a red. (More decisively) Okay, if we both do blue and red. (She nods her head at this decision, smiles, and points to the cards on the board.)
SL: Mimi, why don’t you tell Jane your idea?
Mimi: I want you to put down a red, Jane.
SL: What do you think of that idea, Jane?
Jane: Fine. She wants to put down blue. Let’s do that.
SL: Okay. Ready? One, two, three, choose. Okay, Mimi, you put down a blue; Jane, you put down a red, what happens?
Mimi: I get two and she gets none. (She has a big grin on her face, and giggles as she speaks. Jane is staring expressionless at the table, sucking on her hair.)
SL: Okay, here you go. (SL hands two pennies to Mimi.) So how many pennies do you have now, Mimi?
Mimi: Four.
SL: And how many do you have?
Jane: Seven. I mean six.
SL: So this time, Jane, you put a red down but didn’t win any pennies. How come you did that?
Jane: ’Cause Mimi told me.
SL: ’Cause Mimi told you to?
Jane: I didn’t mind (She begins picking her nose.)

Notice Jane is aware of what Mimi wants to play; as she puts it, “She wants to put down blue. Let’s do that.” Mimi states the outcome, saying, “I get two and she gets none,” with a laugh. Jane is prepared to play
as Mimi asks or demands (Mimi is markedly forceful when she proposes this solution). But Jane seems to have some doubts at first, saying, "If we both have to take a red," as if considering her options. Then she seems to make up her mind. Later, she seems downcast, in marked contrast to her smiles when the girls had been playing cooperatively. Her self-interest runs counter to her friend's, but she is prepared to do what is asked.

In the following example, the staff leader questions Brad and Jenny, members of the other mixed-sex pair, about the inequality in their penny totals. Just prior to this episode, Jenny had played competitively for two consecutive trials and won pennies. Now, however, she hears Brad's displeasure at the outcome and, when confronted with the question of fairness, suggests that both she and Brad should have the same number of pennies. She then spontaneously proposes that Brad win pennies on the next trial and she win none:

SL: How many pennies have you got, Jenny?
JENNY: I've got six. (Brad looks over at Jenny's bowl.)
SL: And you, Brad?
BRAD: Two.
SL: Is that fair? (Brad shakes his head no.) How come?
BRAD: I don't think it is.
SL: You don't think it's fair that what—that you have less pennies than Jenny? (Brad nods his head yes.) Well, what would be the fairest way to play the game?
JENNY: We both have six (smiles).
SL: You both have six, how come that would be the fairest?
JENNY: Because he would have some more.
SL: So what do you think we should do now?
BRAD: Play again. (Reaches for cards in excitement.)
SL: What do you think Jenny?
JENNY: Get some blue.
SL: Are you saying that Brad should put a blue down?
JENNY: Yeah, and I'll put a red down.
SL: You'll put a red down?
JENNY: Yeah.
SL: Would that be fair?
JENNY: Yeah, he'd get one. (Both smile broadly. As planned, Jenny plays the red card and Brad the blue.)

Interestingly enough, it is the winner, Jenny, who seeks out immediate reparations in attempt to restore the moral balance. Her notions of fairness are based on a concern for equality that "We [should] both have six." Her further justification that "he would have some more" indicates that she thinks Brad is entitled to the same benefits as she is. Brad, anticipating her intention of equalizing their winnings, is eager to play again even before a concrete plan has been proposed. The next excerpt immediately follows.

SL: What happened, Brad?
BRAD: (with a big grin on his face) I get two. (Jenny looks over to his bowl.)
SL: Jenny, how come you put a red down, you didn't get any pennies that time?
JENNY: Yeah, because I got more and he gets more, too. And if he gets another blue he'll have two pennies like ... like ... and he'll have the same in there. (Points to her own bowl with a smile.)
SL: Did you hear what Jenny had to say, Brad? (Brad nods his head yes.)
What do you think of her idea? (Brad nods and smiles.)
JENNY: (faces Brad) Are you gonna do it?
(Brad nods head yes. They play again according to the proposed plan.)

Again, Jenny acts in a manner contrary to her own self-interest and without pressure from Brad. Having noticed that there is still a discrepancy in the number of pennies each has won, she suggests Brad win two more pennies so they both will have six. Her concern for her partner's well-being seems to underlie her motivation to achieve equitable outcomes. During the entire interchange, Brad, while not verbally expressive, seems delighted with the turn of events. Jenny, too, having acted with a good conscience, seems happy to continue playing.

Stalemate

The third kind of event, stalemate, occurred when both children played competitively, so that neither won pennies. They chose to stalemate for various reasons, and we illustrate two. The first stalemate was brought about early when the children were eager to win pennies; both played blue cards. They did not yet see the need to coordinate their actions and perhaps did not fully understand the payoff contingencies. In this next excerpt, Kate and Sally, who have previously won
two pennies apiece, stalemate each other with the two blues for the first time.

SALLY: Uh oh! *(Laughs.)*
SL: No pennies?
SALLY: No pennies.
KATE: I should have put down a red. *(Sally looks at her.)*
SL: Why should you have put down a red?
KATE: ’Cause I wanted to.
SL: What would happen if you put down a red?
KATE: *(with a shrug)* I don't know.

Kate, even before she fully understands the payoff contingencies, seems to be confronting the problem that a stalemate creates. Still, on the next trial, the girls again play blue-blue.

SL: Two blues. No pennies again.
SALLY: Uh oh *(loudly)* Hey, what's the matter with us? *(Turns to look at Kate.)*
SL: You're not winning any pennies. You guys want to talk about this?
SALLY: Heeeeey. *(Looks at SL with her nose crinkled up.)* What's the matter with this game?
KATE: *(turns towards Sally and points to the board)* And how come you're not winning any pennies when you get two blues?

The two girls, again thwarted in their attempt to win pennies, begin to consider the reasons why they are not. Sally briefly addresses the problem as lying between the two of them: “What's the matter with us?” The two seem to conclude, however, that the game is unfair and that the staff leader who allows such conditions to exist is inept.

On the next trial the girls stalemate once again.

SL: No pennies.
SALLY: Do this, this. Oh, nooo. This is what we win. *(Points to the place where there are two blues.)*
SL: Sally, why did you put down a blue that time? How many pennies did you want to get?
SALLY: Eeeper eep! *(Looks over at Kate.)* Why didn't we put down two reds?

Continued stalemate frustrated the children but also motivated them to discuss other alternatives. After this trial Kate and Sally agreed to change their play and to cooperate. Much later Sally defaulted.

The second kind of stalemate occurred when children were “forced” to stalemate their partners to protect their self-interest. In the following session, John quickly switches his card from red to blue—achieving a stalemate—to prevent his friend Rich from winning pennies. The store thereby remains at three apiece.

SL: Ready? One, two, three, choose. *(John plays first, putting down a red card. Rich plays a blue. John quickly and unobtrusively switches his blue for the red card.)*
SL: You switched. John. *(John looks up and laughs.)* Why'd you do that?
JOHN: Because. *(He smiles, fidgeting in his seat.)*
RICH: *(in a loud and somewhat angry voice)* He didn't want me to get a penny.
SL: So what happens when you put down blue: no pennies. You guys want to talk about this? *(Rich has turned to confront John, who points quickly at the game board.)*
JOHN: Yeah.
SL: What do you think... *(Interrupted by Rich.)*
RICH: No, put down a red. *(He says this in a loud voice, then reaches over and puts down John's red card.)*
JOHN: No, put down my blue. *(He takes back his red card, and puts down the blue in its place.)*

Rich's remark "He didn't want me to get a penny" shows that he understood John's intention in switching the card and the way their actions impinged upon each other.

Stalemates occurred either because each child played blue wanting to increase his or her own winnings or, more deliberately, to prevent the other player from winning more pennies. The experience of stalemate, however, was productive since it frustrated children and prompted them to create new and often mutually rewarding strategies.

**Default**

The fourth kind of event occurred when one child defaulted by systematically playing competitively while the other child attempted to
play cooperatively. Some occasion of default occurred in 65 percent of the sessions. Sometimes children's self-interest outweighed concern for their friend. Children who were on the receiving end of default frequently expressed anger.

In this example, Sam defaulted by playing blue on every trial except the very first. Consequently, he gave his fellow player, Daniel, no chance to win pennies. At best Daniel could only stalemate; at worst he would lose pennies if he played cooperatively. Sam seemed to think that responsibility for ameliorating the unfairness was not his but rather the adult researcher's. (Several children seemed incredulous that the adult was so lacking in foresight that they faced this contretemps.) Towards the end of the session the following exchange takes place:

SL: What do you think about that, Daniel, that you didn’t get any?
Daniel: Because that’s fair.
SL: You think that’s fair that you didn’t get any? *(There is a long pause. Daniel is looking down. Sam wriggles in his chair.)* Do you think that’s fair, Daniel, that you didn’t get any?
Daniel: My mom will ask you to give me pennies.
SL: I see. But for right now, for right now. How does that make you feel when, when Sam gets four and you don’t get any?
Daniel: *(with a smile)* I don’t know.
SL: No. You think that’s fair, Sam, when you have more than Daniel?
Sam: No!
SL: You don’t think that’s fair?
Sam: *(with an angry shake of his head)* No.
SL: What do you think we should do about that?
Sam: I think we should give Daniel some pennies. *(He pauses, and then gives a little shake of his head.)* Not some of mine!

Sam may have continued to default because Daniel did not communicate his dismay. Daniel first simply denies the inequity ("Because that’s fair"), but he then brings up his mother to remedy it. Despite his defaulting, Sam is upset and seemingly angry about the way the session has ended. But he projects responsibility. Thus, the researcher should give Daniel pennies. Daniel listens in silence, but when the researcher is putting Sam’s pennies in an envelope for him to take home, Daniel says plaintively, "You guys forgot to give me some pennies."

In the next excerpt Mike, who has predominantly played blue throughout the game, is fully aware of the inequity in outcome. He continues to play blue despite his partner's requests.

Bobby: Can you put down red, Mike?
Mike: No. I'm going to put down blue.
Bobby: Well, you're supposed to put down red.
SL: Mike, why do you keep putting down blue?
Mike: Because I want to.
SL: How many pennies do you want to win?
Mike: *(with great emphasis)* A lot.
SL: Do you think that's a fair way to play the game?
Mike: Yep.
SL: What do you think is the fairest way to play the game?
Mike: Me get some and he get some.
SL: Is that what's happening now?
Mike: *(Shakes his head no.)* I get some. Let's do it again.

Mike is intent on maximizing his own winnings and he maintains his intransigence, refusing to play cooperatively. As the dialogue progresses, Bobby continues to complain, but becomes increasingly dependent at the no-win situation he is in.

Bobby: Why can't I get red and you get red, so next time I get red and you get red so we both get red.
SL: Mike, what do you think of his idea? Bobby says why don't you both put down red.
Bobby: And then I get as many as you do.
Mike: I want to put down blue and he put down red.
SL: What happens then?
Mike: I get some.
SL: And he doesn't get any.
Bobby: Can I put down red and you put down red?
Mike: *(with determination)* That I won't.
Bobby: Well, I feel like it.
SL: What can we do? Can we figure a way to work this out?
Bobby: I don't know. I can skip playing if I can't get any.
SL: Mike, what do you think of Bobby's idea?
Mike: I want to get some and he gets none.
SL: Well, should we keep playing the game?
BOBBY: I want to go 'cause he'll get some and I won't.

At first Bobby only threatens to quit playing, but he then exercises his right when he is forced to protect his self-interest as Mike continues to default. Bobby quits and the game comes to an end.

Default can reflect insensitivity to the friend's feelings and wishes, or a strong desire to pursue one's own interests. Mike actively disregards Bobby's suggestions to play cooperatively, though he acknowledges that the fairest way to play the game would be for both to share pennies. In contrast, Sam appeared more sympathetic to Daniel's plight and was aware of the unfair way the game worked out, but he, too, does not act to change the outcome.

Betrayal

The second form of self-centered action is "betrayal." That is, one child breaks an explicit or a tacit agreement. An example was given by Kate and Sally, whom we earlier described in a stalemate. Kate is losing by four pennies to Sally, who has eight. Kate finally expresses her frustration at the inequality in strong moral terms. Then Sally proposes that they cooperate, and Kate readily agrees, but she apparently has no intention of acting on her agreement. We enter at the beginning of this interchange:

KATE: Sally, this game is just not fair!
SALLY: No it isn't! It isn’t fair! (She says this with a big smile, punctuating her words with nods.)
KATE: 'Cause I'm not getting so many pennies. (She hangs her fists on the table to emphasize her words.)
SL: Well, what could you do?
KATE: (Banging her fists again.) I don't know!
SL: Do you have any idea you can tell Sally?
SALLY: (suddenly coming to life) I know! (She cocks her head; Kate looks at her quizzically.)
SL: What?
SALLY: If we put down (she points to the board) both red, we'll get one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, and one more (pointing to the board) make nine.

Moral Action of Four-Year-Olds

SL: Kate, what do you think about that? Do you think it would be fair?

Kate nods her head. The girls play, but Kate puts down a blue card instead of the agreed-upon red.

SALLY: Put down red! Uh oh. Put down red. (She touches Kate's card.)
KATE: (She glances briefly at Sally.) No. I don't want to.

The staff leader asks Kate why she played her blue card. She replies:

KATE: 'Cause I wanted to.
SL: You think that's fair?
KATE: (looking at Sally) Yes.
SL: How come?
SALLY: (She looks at Kate, and then turns to SL with a pout.) No, I don't.
SL: Wait. Kate, how come you think that's fair?
KATE: (looking down at her hands) 'Cause, Sally won so many but I didn't, so I tried to win.

Kate justifies her betrayal: she was already unfairly far behind in her winnings.

We learn two things from the betrayals. First, ostensibly selfish behavior may be motivated by a moral sense of fairness. As Kate claimed, an inequity can balance a previous inequity, a result the children consider fair (though two wrongs make a right for many adults also). Second, the children on the receiving end of betrayals or defaults strongly voice their outrage at being wronged. Far from being unaware of another child's selfish behavior, as Piaget claimed, they are acutely sensitive to it. Most often they demand cooperation from rather than punishment for the wrongdoer.

Summary

The main implication of our observations is that the four-year-olds did not consistently act as one would expect if they were either cognitively egocentric or morally selfish. Of course, they were not always morally concerned nor were all the children equally concerned. But any respectable evidence of
The Nature of the Situation

We used the game of NeoPd to learn about the way children spontaneously act when their self-interests are exposed as self-serving or when their legitimate self-interests are threatened. There is no question but that these four-year-olds were highly motivated—they wanted the pennies. *Defaults occurred for at least one or two reasons. The default was selfish and victims failed to make their interests known.* Not all children acted to protect their self-interests. Although NeoPd “engineers” the moral dilemma, once the issue is joined, it is real and not unlike the problems of reconciliation between self and other interests that all age groups face in everyday life.

Our cognitive simplification of NeoPd seemed to overcome preschoolers’ difficulties in comprehending and recalling the structure of the task, obstacles that plague investigators who interview young children about hypothetical dilemmas. Also NeoPd has certain advantages over observing naturally occurring moral incidents. The four-year-olds were embroiled in a conflict of self-interests; the moral problems were more difficult than simply helping or giving to another at little or no cost to self and the staff leader helped the children stay with the task.

But at the same time NeoPd has a disadvantage that may have affected actions. The children may have acted out of compliance to the adult. Although the staff leaders accepted all solutions, they had to encourage the children to keep focused on the dilemma. If they had not, play would have been disrupted by early leavetaking, distracting maneuvers, or tears. In another part of this study we used wireless microphones to tape record the playground conflicts of preschoolers when they were some distance from adults. Our preliminary impression is that the children were still sensitive to the interests and needs of one another, but these spontaneous interchanges will undoubtedly differ in some ways from those in NeoPd.

Children’s Moral Concerns

The children’s articulation of the reasons for their own actions was not always clear. While analysis of their actions in terms of the immediate circumstances and apparent motivations led us to our conclusions, the children themselves only said, on occasion, “I wanted to.”

Moral concerns were also not always explicit in the talk between children, or between child and staff leader. For example, a boy warrants his proposal of cooperative play simply as “the nicest way to play,” and adds, “I like it that way.” He may have been either unable or unwilling to articulate his moral grounds for this explanation. Although not skilled in articulation, they did often act to equalize when confronted with the other child’s moral indignation and needs.

We draw these two major findings. First, preschoolers are more sophisticated in their actions than people in general think or the cognitive theories propose, and second, their articulation is not highly differentiated. This pattern may explain why the cognitive and more behaviorally oriented researchers have had such contrasting views of young children. Piaget, Kohlberg, and Damon focus on what children think about their own actions, but more often on what they think about a hypothetical dilemma. The behavioral researchers focus on children’s actions in either experimental or naturalistic settings and do not depend on what they say about what they have done. The latter research, as we noted earlier, has detected a greater degree of moral sensitivity than the former. This contradiction in findings becomes understandable if children’s actions are motivated by moral concerns which they do not articulate. Indeed, four-year-olds’ articulations did sometimes seem amoral and based on personal preference.

Similarities and Differences between Preschoolers and Adults

In many ways the four-year-olds acted and reacted in NeoPd like the adolescents and young adults. The similarities are at the level of action, brought about by the kinds of problems experienced, the kinds of solutions developed, and the emotions and moods that develop as the problem is being resolved. Like their older counterparts, the preschoolers coordinated benefits, stalemated each other, made reparations for disproportionate totals, defaulted, and betrayed each other...
by breaking agreements. They became emotional in the same ways. That is, they became frustrated during stalemates, angry during defaults and betrayals, and happy when they arrived at a mutual solution. Their glow of shared good conscience was palpable when they equalized. Like the subgroups of young adults and adolescents, they at first, heedlessly worked only for their self-interests but changed their course of action when their partners made their indignation known.

Both children and the older students employed defensive maneuvers to rationalize their defaults and mute their anxiety. Preschoolers sometimes sucked their fingers or hair, picked their noses, wiggled in their chairs, and stared expressionless at the table; university and high school students became immobilized and repressive or cocky and belligerent. When they realized their wrong-doing, the four-year-olds pleaded ignorance: “We don’t know the colors.” In contrast, the students more often justified themselves by pointing out they had helplessly thought it was “just a game.” (They had volunteered and signed contracts to take part in a study of morality.) The four-year-olds projected responsibility for the inequities on the staff leader’s poor anticipation of their needs and implied their mothers would have done better, while the university students accused the project staff of being cheap about pay-offs.

These similarities suggest that the moral experience of four-year-olds was not basically different from that of the adolescents and young adults. Therefore, the preschoolers must have understood the moral issues. If this is true, it is not possible to contend that preschoolers are either morally oblivious or morally oblivious because they are cognitively inept.

There were also differences between the children and the older students—in their anticipations of the future, articulation of their action, and protection of their self-interest. When they played NeoPd, the students quickly read the matrix and saw the possibility of an equalizing solution, but often they did not act accordingly. They mistrusted one another, hoped for bigger payoffs and were sometimes reluctant to equalize because they knew it left them vulnerable to being betrayed. The young children showed little mistrust, perhaps because they did not anticipate that cooperation left them vulnerable to betrayal. But these four-year-olds’ interactions with the moral world are well protected by their parents and teachers, so their experience gives them little reason to anticipate that they could be betrayed.

Children of this age find themselves constantly reminded of their relative lack of power and resources, and some of these preschoolers were unable to protect themselves and work for even their legitimate self-interests. But others had ways of dealing with their misfortune that still served to protect their fragile sense of self-agency. Children who played red, trying to equalize, but who nevertheless fell victim to their friends’ defaulting seemed chagrined (they justified their choice of red by insisting “I wanted to”). They seemed to cover up their disappointment and confusion about being wronged by insisting that they had made the choice. They were active agents in the vicissitudes of a confusing world. One important moral skill, and one which takes years to acquire, is knowing when it is foolish to trust and wise to be defensive. In sum, compared to the older students, the preschoolers did not plan far ahead. They did not skillfully articulate their self-interests, nor skillfully protect them.

Speculations about Development

Given the exploratory nature of this single study, we can only speculate about what really develops in moral development. Our study suggests that the moral concerns of preschoolers and adults are basically the same but that children gradually develop skills that enable them to act in a wider range of complex situations. Our simplified version of NeoPd set up conflict that was cognitively and informationally within the grasp of these young children; they had all the power they needed to resolve it. The staff leader’s constant support and encouragement helped them to cope rather than disintegrate. In many other situations these children would likely default, or being very young, capitulate.

To be concise, we suggest that young children’s moral concern is much the same as that of adults, but the young lack knowledge, cognitive skills, objective power, responsibility, and material resources to empower their negotiations so they are readily stressed and moral violations only intensify their feelings of helplessness. There is already much in the world that they do not understand or cannot do—like staying upright on a two-wheeler—and moral indignation only adds to the insult.

Another improvement in moral functioning undoubtedly occurs when children become more sophisticated in talking about moral action. There is no doubt but that articulation of a difficulty often serves
to clarify its nature. The staff leader helped the children articulate what they were doing and why. Only 16 percent of the children spontaneously used moral words or offered moral explanations, while 57 percent may have picked up on the staff leader’s words; 27 percent never openly articulated such ideas. The adolescents and young adults called each other to account for what they were doing and then articulated their disagreements (Packer, in press). But some were so caught up in the conflict that they were unable to pause and take stock. This particularly occurred in the dominated groups during the emotionally heated sessions of Neopd.

In an action situation, articulating what one is doing when others call one to account is a moral communication if it takes into account the position of both parties and the need of both parties to strike a moral balance. It is not the more-individualistic skill of giving reasons and principles to justify one’s judgment, which is the interest of the cognitivists.

The same kind of moral sensitivity we observed in very young children was also described by Robert Coles (1980) after his work with the embattled Protestant and Catholic children in North Ireland:

And what strikes me is not only their seriousness (I suppose you psychiatrist chaps may find that worrisome!) but their consideration for others. These are thoughtful children: they have seen people struggling and dying for something they very much believe in (p. 38).

These can be pensive lads and lasses, even the wee ones of five and six. They ask me tough questions for which I’m not sure Socrates would have easy replies (p. 38).

Many of us psychoanalytically trained psychiatrists emphasize in our discussions of children the relentlessly punitive, demanding side of the superego, and certain cognitive psychologists hand out questionnaires or make experiments in offices or laboratories, and then talk of a “preconventional” or “conventional” stage in children, wherein they do what serves their (“hedonistic”) purposes, or what will obviate punishment, or gain the sanctioning nod of a mother, a father. Those same theorists, however, deny to children the more subtle, compassionate, ethically reflective “stages” of moral development—indeed, deny such personal, ethical, psychological, and intellectual progress to many adults as well. Only a handful, we have been told, an ethical elite (Herbert Marcuse’s “advancing edge of history,” for example) can free itself of the individual (emotional) and the socially or culturally enforced constraints that blind a truly ‘mature’ ethical awareness. . . . In any event, as we wait for that millennium to arrive, boys and girls the world over may not be fashioning psychological concepts, but they are, it seems, struggling hard and long to construct a moral life for themselves (p. 40).

We too are struck by the seriousness of our four-year-olds and their moral concern for their partners’ plight when no authority was telling them what they should do. Whether these children “read” more than each other’s words—perhaps like the emotions on their partner’s face and the posture and set of their body—we are not certain. But it is clear from their actions and from what they said that most of these children cared.