Definition of morals and values

Our discussion of attitudes in the last chapter brings us on to the broader issue of morals and values. Morals and values refer to those attitudes and behaviours that are generally prized by the society in which one lives. They may or may not be defined by rules, and these rules may or may not carry the force of law, but they are nevertheless seen by responsible members of society as having a binding effect in matters of conduct and of interpersonal relationships. These morals and values may be derived from religious, philosophical, or political teachings, and usually they have had an important influence upon the historical development of the society concerned, providing guidelines for the emergence of civilized patterns of behaviour and even (ostensibly) for dealings with other countries. Sometimes, within a society, sub-groups become apparent which differ from each other in the morals and values held (e.g. religious groups, socio-economic status groups), and this can lead to friction and to attempts to put down opposing value systems by force.

The origin of value systems

The generally held view amongst psychologists is that morals and values are largely learnt structures, with the young child acquiring them initially from his parents and later from teachers, peer groups, the media, and society generally. One psychologist who made a particular study of the way in which this seems to happen was Freud (see chapter 9). Freud considered that the development of moral attitudes and behaviour in the child is due to the super-ego, which is largely the internalization by the child of the moral codes and strictures taught him by his parents, but which he takes over so completely that he often loses sight of their point of origin. The super-ego becomes, therefore, not just a collection of parental 'dos and don'ts' but an autonomous part of the mental life of the individual which he may come to regard as the voice of conscience or as his own carefully formulated moral code.

Freud considered that an over-developed super-ego could lead to psychological problems such as guilt and feelings of personal inadequacy and worthlessness and even, in extreme cases, to severe neuroses. Nevertheless, he saw the
formation of the super-ego as on balance a good thing, since without it the child would only behave correctly when parents or other adults were there to reinforce his good behaviour. In their absence, and when detection was unlikely, he would feel quite free to follow his own selfish interests, no matter what the consequences for others might be. As suggested in chapter 9, Freud's ideas attract much criticism nowadays in some quarters, and space does not allow us to go into them in any great detail, but it is interesting to note that he saw the super-ego as developing two distinct elements. These were the conscience, which provides the child with feelings of guilt when he does wrong and is equivalent to the punitive function of the parent, and the ego-ideal which provides feelings of satisfaction when he does right and is equivalent to the parental rewarding function. It is through the ego-ideal also that the child builds a picture of 'the person I would like to be', which may be important not only in determining day-to-day conduct but in setting long-term life goals and ambitions.

In spite of what some psychologists regard as its 'unscientific' nature (a term which implies that it cannot be demonstrated experimentally), Freud's model of the super-ego is a useful way of conceptualizing what may happen in the mental life of the child as he builds up his moral sense. An alternative view, based upon a study of the child's thinking, is proposed by Piaget (1932), however. Piaget, whose work was examined in detail in chapter 4, observed the changes in the level of moral reasoning shown by the child as he moves through the various Piagetian stages of cognitive development. His findings suggest that the child goes from ego-centric thinking, where everything is seen from the point of view of the self, to a form of thinking which allows him to put himself in the place of others. Only when he is able to engage in the latter form of thinking is he capable of true moral judgement. We need not examine this model in detail, however, because a more comprehensive one, again related to the child's levels of thinking, is proposed by Kohlberg (1969). Kohlberg has it that the child passes through six major stages in moral development, and these are summarized below.

**Kohlberg's six stages of moral development**

**PRECONVENTIONAL MORALITY** (Piaget's pre-operational stage of thinking). Age approximately 2-7 years.

1. 'Obedience'. The child has no real moral sense, but his behaviour can be shaped by simple reinforcement.
2. 'Naive egoism'. A 'right' action is one that works for the child himself. The child may appear able to meet the needs of others, but this is only because the result is directly favourable to himself.