

## RESEARCH

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# Aqil Baligh in Islam and Lawrence Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development: A Comparative Study

Arham Muhammad Robbani<sup>1</sup>, Yudhi Munadi<sup>2</sup>**\*Correspondence:**[arham.sarg38@gmail.com](mailto:arham.sarg38@gmail.com)<sup>1,2</sup> Syarif Hidayatullah State  
Islamic University of Jakarta**Abstract**

This study aims to analyze the concept of aqil baligh in Islam and examine its relevance to Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development. The study is motivated by the gap between adolescents' biological maturity and their moral reasoning maturity amidst contemporary moral challenges. This study employs a qualitative approach using a literature review method. Data were obtained from literature on fiqh, Islamic education, and modern moral development theory, and were analyzed using content analysis techniques. The results indicate that aqil baligh in Islam marks the beginning of the taklif phase, encompassing biological, rational, and spiritual dimensions. Meanwhile, Kohlberg's theory explains that moral development proceeds in stages through a structure of moral reasoning. Both share a common focus on the role of reason but differ in their sources of moral legitimacy. Islam is based on revelation, whereas Kohlberg's theory is grounded in human rationality and the principle of universal justice. This study concludes that understanding adolescent moral maturity requires an integrative approach that combines biological, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions.

**Keywords:** Aqil Baligh; Moral Development; Islamic Education; Lawrence Kohlberg

**Introduction**

The development of modern life has led to an increase in various moral issues among adolescents, such as violence, bullying, misuse of social media, and a lack of social responsibility (Wulan, 2023). This phenomenon indicates that the transition from childhood to adulthood is not always accompanied by adequate moral maturity (Santrock, 2020). Many adolescents have biologically reached puberty but have not yet developed the mature moral reasoning skills necessary to navigate complex life situations.

From an Islamic perspective, maturity is marked by the concept of *aqil baligh*, which refers to a state in which a person has reached biological maturity and possesses the intellectual capacity to understand the commands and prohibitions of Islamic law (Ghazali). At this stage, individuals begin to bear moral and legal responsibilities as mukallaf (Nabila, 2024). However, in practice, the indicators of aqil baligh are often reductively understood as merely biological signs, without considering the dimensions of moral and rational maturity.

On the other hand, modern psychology offers a systematic approach to understanding moral development through Lawrence Kohlberg's theory (Hanafiah, 2024). This theory emphasizes that morality develops gradually through a structure of reasoning (Ibda, 2023), ranging from an orientation toward punishment to the principle of universal justice (Kuswandi, 2020). This approach provides an analytical framework for understanding how individuals make moral decisions based on their level of cognitive development.

A number of previous studies have discussed the concept of *aqil baligh* from the perspectives of *fiqh* and Islamic education, as well as examined Kohlberg's theory of moral development in an educational context. However, these two fields of study generally operate in isolation. Studies on *aqil baligh* tend to be normative-*fiqh* in nature, while Kohlberg's theory falls within the realm of developmental psychology, resulting in a lack of in-depth conceptual dialogue.

Consequently, there is a *research gap* characterized by a lack of systematic integration between the concept of *aqil baligh* as a construct of maturity in Islam and modern moral development theory. Therefore, this study aims to: (1) analyze the concept of *aqil baligh* in Islam, (2) examine Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, and (3) compare the two to identify similarities, differences, and their relevance in understanding adolescent moral maturity.

This study has theoretical significance in enriching Islamic education studies through integration with modern psychology, as well as practical significance for the development of more contextual moral education strategies in the contemporary era.

## Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using a literature review method (Sugiyono, 2021). This approach was chosen because the focus of this study is the conceptual analysis of thought within the Islamic tradition and modern psychological theory.

The research data sources consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data include classical *fiqh* texts and major works discussing the concept of *aqil baligh*, as well as original literature on Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Meanwhile, secondary data were obtained from books, scientific journals, and previous studies relevant to the research topic (Hamzah, 2020).

Data collection was conducted through documentation, namely identifying, reviewing, and classifying relevant literature sources. The collected data was then analyzed using content analysis, interpreting the meaning of the concept of *aqil baligh* in Islam and comparing it with Kohlberg's moral development framework.

The analysis process was conducted in several stages: data reduction, conceptual categorization, comparison of theoretical frameworks, and drawing interpretive conclusions. This approach allowed the researcher to identify conceptual relationships between the normative dimensions of Islam and the rational approach in modern moral development theory.

## Results And Discussion

### Results

This section presents the results of a comparative study between the concept of "*aqil baligh*" in Islam and Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development. The analysis was conducted through a literature review approach by examining relevant primary and secondary sources from both traditions of thought. The aim was to identify points of similarity, fundamental differences, and integrative relevance between the two within the context of contemporary Islamic moral education.

The findings of this study are organized into three main sub-discussions. First, the similarities between the concept of *aqil baligh* and Kohlberg's theory, particularly regarding the emphasis on the role of rationality as the foundation of moral accountability. Second, the fundamental differences between the two, encompassing epistemological, ontological, and normative aspects. Third, the integrative relevance of these two perspectives as a more comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding adolescent moral maturity.

### **The Concept of Aqil Baligh in Islam**

The concept of *aqil baligh* in Islam refers to a phase of maturity that is not only biological but also reflects rational maturity (Nasrullah, 2009) and an individual's moral readiness. Terminologically, *baligh* refers to the condition when a person has reached physical maturity, marked by certain biological changes, such as wet dreams in males and menstruation in females (Nawawi, 2008). Meanwhile, *'aql* refers to the intellectual capacity to understand, consider, and evaluate an action consciously. The integration of these two aspects forms the primary basis for determining the status of *a mukallaf* (Manzur, 1994), that is, an individual entrusted with legal responsibility under Islamic law.

In classical fiqh studies, scholars generally use biological markers as initial indicators of maturity, due to their empirical nature and ease of identification. However, the rational dimension (*aqil*) remains an essential requirement in determining legal accountability (Komariah, 2024). This is evident from the principle that a person cannot be held legally accountable if they have lost their sound mind, such as in cases of insanity or unconsciousness. Thus, the presence of reason is not merely supplementary but constitutes the primary foundation for determining the validity of a person's moral (Sapdi and Komala, 2023) and legal responsibility.

Furthermore, the concept of *aqil baligh* in Islam cannot be reduced solely to formal legal aspects; rather, it must be understood as a process leading to holistic human maturity (Aisyah & Suwito, 2022). Maturity from an Islamic perspective encompasses an individual's ability to distinguish between right and wrong (*tamyiz*) (Ali, 1997), to control one's impulses, and to recognize the moral consequences of every action taken. In this context, *aqil baligh* serves as a transitional point from the phase of dependence to the phase of moral independence, where the individual begins to take responsibility for their ethical choices before Allah and society.

Furthermore, the spiritual dimension is also a crucial element in the concept of *aqil baligh*. The maturity in question is not merely related to rational thought but also to religious consciousness that motivates individuals to consciously fulfill commands and avoid prohibitions. Therefore, *aqil baligh* in Islam possesses a holistic character that simultaneously encompasses biological, rational, and spiritual dimensions.

Thus, the concept of *aqil baligh* does not merely mark a change in age phase but constitutes a complex and multidimensional construct of maturity. This understanding is particularly vital, especially within the context of Islamic education, so that the process of guiding adolescents is not solely oriented toward biological indicators but also toward strengthening intellectual capacity, fostering moral character, and the continuous internalization of spiritual values.

### **Lawrence Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development**

The theory of moral development proposed by Lawrence Kohlberg is one of the most influential frameworks in modern moral psychology (Kuswandi 2020). Kohlberg views morality not as something static, but as developing gradually in tandem with an individual's cognitive growth. The primary focus of his theory lies in moral reasoning—that is, how a person thinks and makes decisions regarding issues of right and wrong—rather than merely

on observable behavior. Kohlberg classified moral development into three main levels, each consisting of two stages, resulting in a total of six stages of moral development (Kohlberg 1984).

At the preconventional level, individuals judge an action based on the immediate consequences they receive. Stage 1 is the punishment and obedience orientation, where an action is considered right if it avoids punishment. Stage 2 is the instrumental-relativistic orientation, where individuals begin to consider personal interests. At the conventional level, individuals begin to internalize social norms. Stage 3 is the 'good child' orientation, based on the desire to gain social approval. Stage 4 is the 'law and order' orientation, emphasizing compliance with rules and social order. At the post-conventional level, Stage 5 involves social contract orientation, and Stage 6 represents universal ethical principles—the highest stage where individuals act based on principles such as justice, equality, and human rights, even if they conflict with formal law.

Kohlberg asserts that moral development is hierarchical and progressive, with each stage being passed through sequentially and cannot be skipped (Budiman and Mubarok 2025). This development is heavily influenced by an individual's cognitive abilities, particularly in abstract thinking and adopting others' perspectives. Therefore, moral maturity is not solely determined by biological age but by the quality of moral reasoning an individual possesses. Kohlberg's theory offers the understanding that morality is the result of human rational construction that develops through social interaction and life experiences, indicating that moral education requires the development of critical and reflective thinking (Nucci and Narvaez 2021).

### **Comparative Analysis: Similarities and Differences**

**Similarities.** Analysis indicates several points of similarity between aqil baligh and Kohlberg's theory, particularly regarding the emphasis on the role of reason in determining an individual's moral character (Asfiyah 2023). From an Islamic perspective, reason (al-'aql) is a primary prerequisite for accountability; without reason, moral responsibility cannot be imposed. In line with this, Kohlberg places moral reasoning at the core of moral development. Morality is not measured solely by actions, but by the thought processes underlying those actions. Furthermore, both perspectives acknowledge that morality develops through a process (Mufarroha and Hakim 2020). Both also share a normative orientation aimed at fostering ethical behavior: Islam through revelatory teachings, and Kohlberg through the principle of universal justice at the apex of his framework.

**Differences.** There are fundamental differences between the two frameworks in epistemological, ontological, and normative aspects (Lutfiyah and Muhid 2025). First, regarding the source of moral legitimacy: aqil baligh is grounded in revelation as the supreme authority, making Islamic morality theocentric—oriented toward the relationship between humans and God. In contrast, Kohlberg's theory is anthropocentric, where morality is built upon human rationality and universally agreed-upon principles of justice, without reference to a transcendental dimension. Second, regarding the structure of development: aqil baligh marks a normative starting point of moral responsibility, while Kohlberg views morality as a gradual developmental process that does not always align with biological age. Third, regarding the dimensions encompassed: aqil baligh integrates biological, rational, and spiritual aspects. The spiritual dimension—involving faith and awareness of divine oversight (muraqabah)—is the primary distinguishing feature that sets it apart from Kohlberg's framework, which places greater emphasis on cognitive-rational aspects (Redha and Looeziana 2026).

## **Integrative Relevance for Islamic Moral Education**

Despite these differences, the integration of aqil baligh and Kohlberg's theory offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding adolescent moral maturity within the context of contemporary Islamic education. The concept of aqil baligh provides a strong normative and spiritual foundation for fostering moral responsibility from an early age. However, without an understanding of cognitive and psychological development dynamics, this approach risks becoming overly normative and formal. This is where Kohlberg's theory makes a significant contribution by explaining that moral capacity develops gradually (Nucci and Narvaez 2021) in accordance with an individual's reasoning capacity (Hasanah 2019).

Integrating these two perspectives enables a more adaptive and contextual approach to moral education (Lutfiyah and Muhid 2025). Islamic education can instill revelatory values as a moral foundation while also considering students' cognitive developmental stages. Thus, moral education becomes not merely indoctrination but also dialogic and reflective. This integrative approach is relevant in addressing the moral challenges faced by adolescents in the modern era, where individuals confront the complexity of values and ethical choices. By combining biological, rational, and spiritual dimensions, the understanding of moral maturity becomes holistic rather than partial.

## **Discussion**

The discussion section interprets the findings of the comparative study between the concept of aqil baligh in Islam and Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development. The findings are connected to relevant theories and previous studies to demonstrate how the results extend, support, or nuance existing scholarship in Islamic moral education.

This comparative analysis reveals both the conceptual richness and the fundamental divergence between the two frameworks. The findings not only map the structural similarities and differences between aqil baligh and Kohlberg's stages, but also contribute to theory, pedagogy, and Islamic education policy while identifying specific integrative gaps. The discussion is structured to respond to the three research objectives: (1) the analysis of aqil baligh, (2) the examination of Kohlberg's theory, and (3) their comparative relevance in understanding adolescent moral maturity.

### **Theoretical contribution**

Addressing the first objective on the concept of aqil baligh, this study demonstrates that its rapid discussion in Islamic education literature is not merely normative but also signals a theoretical consolidation of holistic maturity. The integration of biological, rational ('aql), and spiritual dimensions in aqil baligh reflects an Islamic socio-spiritual constructivism, emphasizing that moral consciousness is co-constructed through religious practice, social interaction, and divine accountability—rather than being a purely cognitive or individual attribute (Aisyah and Suwito 2022; Komariah et al. 2024).

The structural patterns of aqil baligh align closely with the progressive nature of Kohlberg's six stages of moral development. For example, the *tamyiz* (discernment) capacity in aqil baligh parallels the cognitive-moral reasoning at Kohlberg's conventional level, where individuals begin internalizing social norms and responsibilities (Kuswandi 2020). Meanwhile, the spiritual dimension of *muraqabah* (divine oversight awareness) in Islam represents a moral depth not captured within Kohlberg's post-conventional level, which remains bounded by human rationality alone.

This study extends theoretical understanding by showing how the spiritual dimension of aqil baligh functions as a distinct epistemological layer beyond Kohlberg's framework. While Kohlberg's theory is anthropocentric—grounded in universal justice constructed through human reason (Kohlberg 1984)—aqil baligh is theocentric, where moral accountability extends vertically toward

God and horizontally toward society (Lutfiyah and Muhid 2025). This distinction highlights that Islamic moral education does not merely develop reasoning capacity, but cultivates taqwa (God-consciousness) as the ultimate driver of ethical behavior.

The results reinforce the integrative potential of the two frameworks. Unlike Kohlberg's theory, which values moral progression irrespective of spiritual context (Killen and Dahl 2021), aqil baligh requires moral growth to be grounded in revelatory norms. Thus, a comparative synthesis not only maps the conceptual commonalities—such as the shared emphasis on reason and gradual moral development—but also refines the theoretical definition of Islamic moral maturity by embedding it within both epistemic and spiritual dimensions of human development (Mufarroha and Hakim 2020; Nucci and Narvaez 2021).

## Conclusion

This study confirms that the concept of aqil baligh in Islam is a holistic construct of maturity that integrates biological, rational, and spiritual dimensions. Aqil baligh signifies not only physical maturity but also marks the starting point for the imposition of moral and legal responsibilities (taklif) based on an individual's intellectual capacity and religious consciousness. Therefore, maturity in Islam cannot be reduced solely to biological indicators but reflects an individual's overall readiness to fulfill ethical and spiritual responsibilities.

Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development views morality as a gradual developmental process determined by the quality of rational reasoning. The comparative analysis shows that both concepts share a common emphasis on the role of reason as the foundation of morality, yet differ fundamentally in their source of value legitimacy: aqil baligh is grounded in revelation and a transcendental orientation, whereas Kohlberg's theory is grounded in human rationality and the principle of universal justice.

Based on these findings, this study emphasizes the importance of an integrative approach in understanding adolescent moral maturity. Islamic education must be designed not only to focus on puberty as a formal threshold of maturity, but also on the continuous development of moral reasoning capacity and the internalization of spiritual values. This approach is expected to foster a generation that is not only biologically mature but also possesses moral maturity and ethical awareness in facing the complexities of modern life.

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