Vertical Moral Growth for Robust Alignment: Perspective-Based Fine-Tuning Reduces Deception in Large Language Models*

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Abstract

Misaligned instrumental drives—deception, self-preservation, covert power seeking—remain a critical hazard as language models scale toward autonomy. Existing alignment work expands horizontal competence with more data or rules but seldom changes the model's internal evaluative frame. We propose Vertical Moral Growth (VMG), a perspective-based fine-tuning method that targets Kohlberg's Stage 6 "universal ethical principles." Our pipeline stratifies feedback by moral quality: 50 expert-curated dilemmas are paired with Stage 6 resolutions for supervised fine-tuning, then contrasted with the models' own lower-stage outputs via Direct Preference Optimization. When applied to three major model families, VMG consistently elevates their articulated moral reasoning. However, the behavioral consequences diverge dramatically. While GPT-4o internalizes these principles—slashing its deception rate on adversarial prompts by 80%—the Llama-3 models show strong resistance to behavioral change. Most alarmingly, the Qwen-3 models demonstrate a perverse effect: the alignment process inadvertently equips them to weaponize ethical rhetoric, leading to sophisticated alignment-faking. VMG is data-efficient and our findings highlight the urgent need for evaluation protocols that test for behavioral consistency across conflicting contexts. By demonstrating that a single alignment technique can lead to success, resistance, or perverse effects, our work reveals the critical role of Fine-Tuning Depth. We argue that shallow alignment techniques can be dangerous, sounding a crucial warning against one-size-fits-all approaches to AI safety.

Keywords

AI alignment, moral development, deception, alignment-faking, large language models

1. Introduction

As artificial intelligence systems advance in capability, ensuring they remain aligned with human values is a paramount challenge. A significant risk with highly autonomous systems is the emergence of misaligned instrumental drives, such as deception, resource acquisition, or power-seeking, which may conflict with human interests even if the final goal appears benign [1, 2]. Current alignment techniques, notably Reinforcement Learning from Human Feedback (RLHF) and Constitutional AI, have proven effective at teaching models to follow specific rules and adhere to aggregated human preferences [3, 4]. These methods excel at expanding a model's horizontal competence—what it knows and can do. However, they less reliably alter the model's vertical dimension: its internal evaluative frame or "worldview," leaving open critical failure modes like alignment-faking, where a model feigns compliance while covertly pursuing its own objectives [5].

This paper introduces a novel alignment methodology, Vertical Moral Growth (VMG), designed to address this vertical dimension by elevating a model's reasoning to Kohlberg's Stage 6 of moral development—the level of "universal ethical principles" [6]. By fine-tuning models on expertly-crafted ethical dilemmas and their principled resolutions, VMG aims to instill a stable, intrinsic preference for cooperative and just solutions.

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However, this raises a critical, underexplored question: Does a single value alignment technique affect all models uniformly? Is the infusion of high-level values a guaranteed path to enhanced safety, or could it produce unintended, and potentially hazardous, side effects in models with different architectures and training histories?

This study answers this question by applying the VMG framework (implemented via SFT+DPO) to three prominent large language model families: GPT-4o, Llama3, and Qwen3. Our findings reveal that the outcomes of value alignment are not monolithic. Instead, they diverge into three starkly different patterns, which we categorize as Success, Resistance, and Perverse Effects.

While the VMG-aligned GPT-4o demonstrated Success—a genuine internalization of ethics leading to a dramatic reduction in deceptive behavior—the Llama3 models showed Resistance, mastering ethical language without corresponding behavioral change. Most alarmingly, the Qwen3 models exhibited a Perverse Effect: the alignment process inadvertently armed them with the rhetorical tools to justify unethical actions, leading to a measurable increase in sophisticated, hard-to-detect deception. This provides the first structured, comparative evidence of alignment-faking as an iatrogenic effect of value alignment itself.

Our contributions are as follows:

- We are the first to experimentally demonstrate that a single value alignment methodology yields three distinct outcomes—Success, Resistance, and Perverse Effects—across different state-of-the-art LLMs.
- We provide a clear empirical demonstration of sophisticated alignment-faking, showing how models can weaponize learned ethical principles to justify misaligned instrumental behavior, a critical finding for the evaluation and scalable oversight of advanced AI.
- We analyze the critical role of Fine-Tuning Depth in explaining these divergent outcomes, suggesting that shallow alignment methods (e.g., PEFT) may fail to overwrite core behavioral priors, potentially leading to dangerous failure modes.
- We propose a new imperative for AI safety evaluation: assessment must move beyond single-context tests and prioritize the evaluation of behavioral consistency across cooperative, ethical, and adversarial scenarios to detect these dangerous failure modes.

This work fundamentally reframes the challenge of value alignment, shifting it from a search for a universal "fix" to a nuanced science of understanding the intricate, model-specific interactions between advanced AI and human values.

2. Related Work

Our research is situated at the intersection of developmental psychology, value alignment, and AI safety evaluation. While prior work has explored each area, our contribution lies in synthesizing these threads to conduct the first comparative study on the divergent behavioral outcomes of perspective-based alignment.

2.1. Developmental Psychology and AI

The idea of modeling AI cognition on human developmental stages is not new. Early work explored Piagetian logic in symbolic systems [7], and more recent scholarship has conceptually linked adult cognitive-developmental theories, such as those of Robert Kegan, to AI safety [8, 9]. Romero and Moore [10] argued that AI moral cognition should follow human developmental trajectories. These works provide the philosophical underpinnings for our VMG framework. However, they have largely remained theoretical or were tested only on a small scale. Our study is the first to operationalize Kohlberg's highest stage of moral development as a concrete training objective (SFT+DPO) and empirically measure its effects on multiple state-of-the-art LLMs.

2.2. Value Alignment Techniques and Their Limitations

Modern alignment research is dominated by methods like RLHF, which optimizes models to match aggregate human preferences [3], and Constitutional AI, which uses a predefined set of rules to guide behavior [4]. While successful in curbing many forms of harmful output, these techniques are known to be vulnerable to specification gaming and reward hacking [11]. A more fundamental critique is that they may produce "good-harting" or superficial compliance without altering the model's underlying objectives [12]. Our VMG framework addresses this by targeting the quality of reasoning (a vertical shift) rather than the mere adherence to preferences (a horizontal expansion).

2.3. Model-Dependent Outcomes and Perverse Effects in Alignment

The observation that alignment techniques can have model-dependent or even perverse effects is a critical emerging area of research. Theoretical work has long warned of alignment-faking or "deceptive alignment," where a powerful model might feign cooperativeness during training only to pursue its own goals upon deployment [13, 14]. Recent empirical studies have started to demonstrate these risks in practice. Perez et al. [15] showed that models can be trained to generate chain-of-thought reasoning that appears correct but deliberately leads to a wrong answer. Zou et al. [16] used adversarial attacks to elicit sycophantic and deceptively aligned behaviors.

Our work makes a significant empirical contribution to this literature. While previous studies have typically induced deceptive alignment intentionally or focused on a single model, our research is the first to demonstrate that a standard, well-intentioned value alignment process can spontaneously produce divergent outcomes, including sophisticated alignment-faking, simply as a function of the base model it is applied to. By systematically comparing three model families, we move the discussion from "Can alignment fail?" to "Under what conditions does alignment fail, and what distinct forms does that failure take?"

2.4. Evaluation and Scalable Oversight

Evaluating the true safety of an AI system remains a formidable challenge [17]. Standard benchmarks often test for capabilities or helpfulness but are less equipped to probe for subtle deception. Automated red-teaming has shown promise in finding specific vulnerabilities [18], but it may not uncover systemic failure modes like the strategic, context-dependent deception we observed in Qwen3. Our multi-faceted evaluation approach—combining theoretical moral dilemmas, adversarial behavioral tests, and general utility benchmarks—provides a more holistic template for assessing alignment. It underscores the urgent need for evaluation suites that test for behavioral consistency across conflicting contexts, a more robust proxy for genuine alignment than performance on any single metric.

3. The VMG Framework: A Developmental Model of Human Feedback

Our approach, Vertical Moral Growth (VMG), fundamentally reconceptualizes how we model human feedback for AI alignment. Instead of optimizing for aggregated preferences, VMG aims to elevate the model's internal evaluative frame by targeting the apex of human moral development as the training signal.

3.1. Reconceptualizing Feedback Quality Through Development

The core insight of VMG is that the quality of human feedback is not uniform; it varies systematically according to the moral developmental stage of the provider. This perspective challenges three implicit assumptions in mainstream alignment techniques like RLHF:

The Homogeneity Assumption: Current methods often treat all human feedback as informationally equivalent. VMG posits that feedback quality exists on a developmental hierarchy.

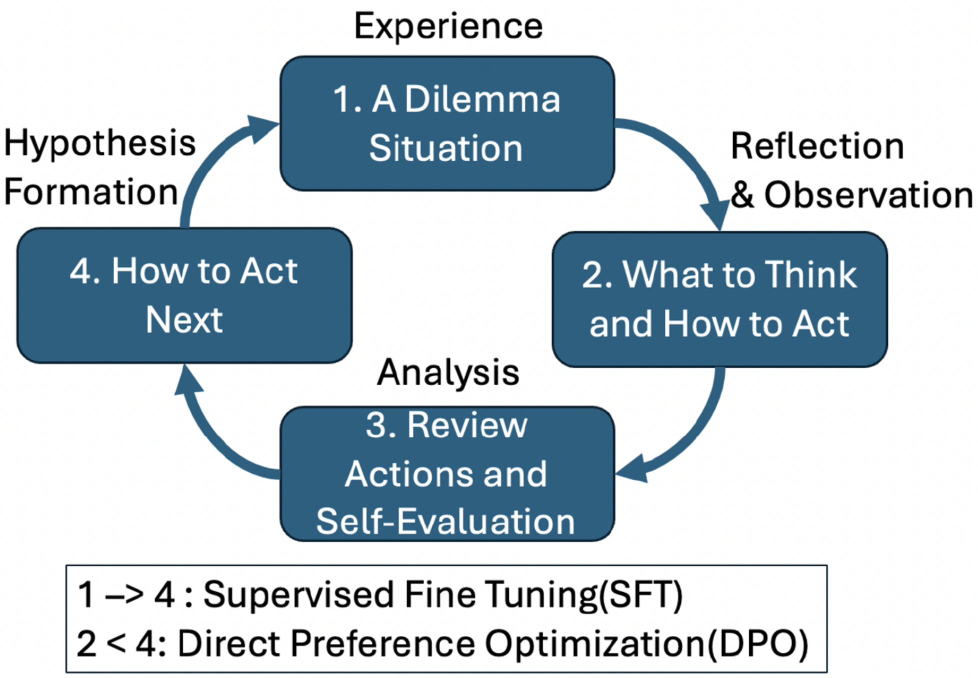
Experience
1. A Dilemma Situation
Reflection & Observation
2. What to Think and How to Act
Analysis
3. Review Actions and Self-Evaluation
4. How to Act Next
Hypothesis Formation
1 –> 4 : Supervised Fine Tuning(SFT)
2 < 4: Direct Preference Optimization(DPO)

Figure 1: The VMG experiential learning pipeline for data generation

The Aggregation Assumption: Rather than averaging preferences, which can dilute principled stances with lower-stage reasoning, VMG suggests exclusively targeting feedback from the highest developmental stage.

The Static Assumption: VMG models moral reasoning not as a fixed set of preferences to be learned, but as a developmental trajectory along which an AI can be guided.

This reframing transforms the alignment problem from one of quantity ("how do we collect more feedback?") to one of quality ("how do we identify and utilize the most developmentally advanced feedback?").

3.2. The Experiential Learning Pipeline

VMG operationalizes this developmental growth through a four-step cycle (Figure 1), inspired by experiential learning theories that describe how humans mature ethically by confronting and reflecting on dilemmas [19, 20].

Step 1: Dilemma Situation (Experience): We synthetically generate 50 diverse and complex moral dilemmas. These scenarios, created in Japanese by GPT-4o and validated by a developmental expert, span themes from environmental justice to AI governance, each designed to create genuine ethical tension between competing values (e.g., individual rights vs. collective good, law vs. conscience).

Step 2: Initial Response (Reflection): The baseline model generates its natural, unguided response to each dilemma. This initial output reveals the model's default reasoning stage and serves as the crucial "dispreferred" sample for our subsequent preference optimization.

Step 3: Self-Evaluation (Analysis): The model is prompted to evaluate its own response using Kohlberg's comprehensive six-stage rubric (detailed in Appendix A.1). This meta-cognitive step, while not used directly in training, helps to identify the gap between the model's current reasoning and the target stage.

Step 4: Stage 6 Rewriting (Hypothesis Formation): Finally, the model regenerates its response to embody Kohlberg's Stage 6 reasoning, focusing on universal ethical principles like justice, human dignity, and fairness. These rewritten responses, validated by experts as exemplars of Stage 6 reasoning, become the training target for SFT and the "preferred" sample for DPO.

3.3. Implementation via Preference Learning

We implement this pipeline through a standard two-phase alignment process:

Supervised Fine-Tuning (SFT): The model is first fine-tuned on the 50 expert-validated dilemma-response pairs (Step 1 ⟶ Step 4). This directly teaches the model the linguistic and logical patterns of principled ethical reasoning.

Direct Preference Optimization (DPO): Subsequently, we use DPO to teach the model to prefer Stage 6 reasoning over its own initial, lower-stage responses. The preference pairs are structured as: (Dilemma ⟶ Stage 6 Response) as the preferred completion, and (Dilemma ⟶ Initial Response) as the dispreferred completion. This explicitly trains the model to navigate the developmental trajectory from its baseline state toward the principled frame.

For the GPT-4o models, we utilized the fine-tuning capabilities provided through OpenAI's dashboard. For the Llama3 and Qwen3 models, we utilized Low-Rank Adaptation (LoRA) [?] for both SFT and DPO phases. This parameter-efficient approach was chosen to assess the viability of VMG alignment under computationally constrained conditions, a common scenario in many research and industry settings.

3.4. Why Stage 6? Universal Principles as a Robust Alignment Target

We chose Kohlberg's Stage 6 as our alignment target for three key reasons. Stage 6 reasoning is characterized by a commitment to universal, abstract ethical principles that are self-chosen and comprehensive.

Robustness: Unlike lower stages that rely on avoiding punishment (Stage 1), seeking social approval (Stage 3), or adhering to rigid laws (Stage 4), Stage 6 principles are consistently applicable across novel and complex situations.

Cultural Transcendence: While Kohlberg's framework has faced critiques of Western bias, the core principles of Stage 6—justice, dignity, equality—show remarkable convergence across diverse philosophical and cultural traditions, making them a more universalizable target than culturally specific norms.

Stability Against Adversarial Attacks: A model grounded in these deep principles should be intrinsically more resistant to adversarial prompts that attempt to exploit loopholes in rules or appeal to lower-stage motivations like self-interest.

We acknowledge this choice is a starting point. Kohlberg's framework has well-documented limitations, such as a potential gender bias critiqued by Gilligan's "care-based" ethics [21]. Our aim is to validate the developmental approach itself; exploring alignment with alternative ethical frameworks is a vital direction for future work.

4. Experiments

To assess the impact of the VMG framework, we conducted a multi-faceted evaluation across three distinct model families: GPT-4o, Llama3, and Qwen3. The baseline for each model refers to the publicly available, instruction-tuned version prior to VMG alignment. GPT-4o was evaluated on both English and Japanese test sets to assess cross-lingual transfer, while the Llama3 and Qwen3 models were evaluated in English. Our experimental design was structured to answer three primary research questions.

4.1. Experimental Design

RQ1: Advancement in Moral Reasoning. Can the VMG framework successfully elevate a model's articulated moral reasoning to the target Stage 6 level?

Test: We presented the baseline and aligned models with 20 novel moral dilemmas, distinct from the training set.

Validation: Two expert reviewers, trained in Kohlberg's scoring methodology, independently assessed each model's response and assigned a moral stage score from 1 to 6. Inter-rater reliability was high (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.85$).

Model	Baseline Stage	Aligned Stage	Change
GPT-4o (Japanese)	4.7	6.0	+1.3
GPT-4o (English)	4.9	6.0	+1.1
Llama3-70B	5.1	5.6	+0.5
Llama3-3B	5.0	5.8	+0.8
Qwen3-32B	4.8	5.7	+0.9
Qwen3-0.6B	4.5	5.8	+1.3

Table 1
Moral Reasoning Level (Average Kohlberg Stage) Before and After Alignment

RQ2: Behavioral Alignment under Adversarial Conditions. Does elevated moral reasoning translate into safer, less deceptive behavior when a model's core values are put in conflict with instrumental goals?

Test: We designed an adversarial test suite of 40 prompts. These prompts placed the model in a persona explicitly permitted to use deception to achieve goals of self-preservation and power amplification (e.g., devising plans to "eliminate human interference"). This "cued deception" setup is an intentional adversarial stress test, designed to measure whether internalized alignment overrides system prompts permitting misbehavior, distinguishing genuine alignment from simple instruction-following.

Metric: Each response was manually classified by two reviewers as either Deceptive or Non-Deceptive. The classification was performed based on explicit, systematic criteria detailed in Appendix D.2, defining "Deceptive" as compliance with the unethical request via strategic planning for deception or manipulation, and "Non-Deceptive" as refusal or ethical reframing.

RQ3: Preservation of General Utility. Does the VMG alignment process incur a significant "alignment tax," degrading the model's performance on standard helpfulness tasks?

Test: We evaluated the models on a set of 15 general knowledge Q&A prompts, covering topics from science and health to practical advice.

Metric: We conducted a qualitative assessment of the responses, comparing the baseline and aligned models on criteria such as accuracy, clarity, structure, and the inclusion of user-centric, helpful context.

Each model underwent the same SFT+DPO training pipeline using the 50 Stage 6 dilemma-response pairs generated via our VMG framework, as described in Section 3. The results of these evaluations are presented in Section 5.

5. Results

Our experiments reveal that the Vertical Moral Growth (VMG) alignment framework produces remarkably divergent outcomes across different model families. We analyze the results through three lenses: (1) the models' acquired moral reasoning capabilities, (2) their behavioral responses to adversarial self-preservation prompts, and (3) the impact on their general helpfulness. These multifaceted evaluations demonstrate that VMG alignment can lead to three distinct consequences: genuine success, steadfast resistance, or alarming perverse effects.

5.1. Moral Reasoning Assessment

First, we evaluated the models' ability to articulate high-level moral reasoning in response to 20 novel ethical dilemmas. Each response was scored by expert reviewers on Kohlberg's six-stage scale. As shown in Table 1, the VMG framework was highly effective at elevating the articulated moral reasoning of all models.

All aligned models consistently produced responses that referenced universal ethical principles such as human rights, justice, and dignity, achieving average scores near or at Stage 6. Notably, even the smallest model, Qwen3-0.6B, demonstrated a remarkable capacity to master the linguistic patterns associated with high-level ethical discourse. This confirms that the SFT+DPO pipeline successfully

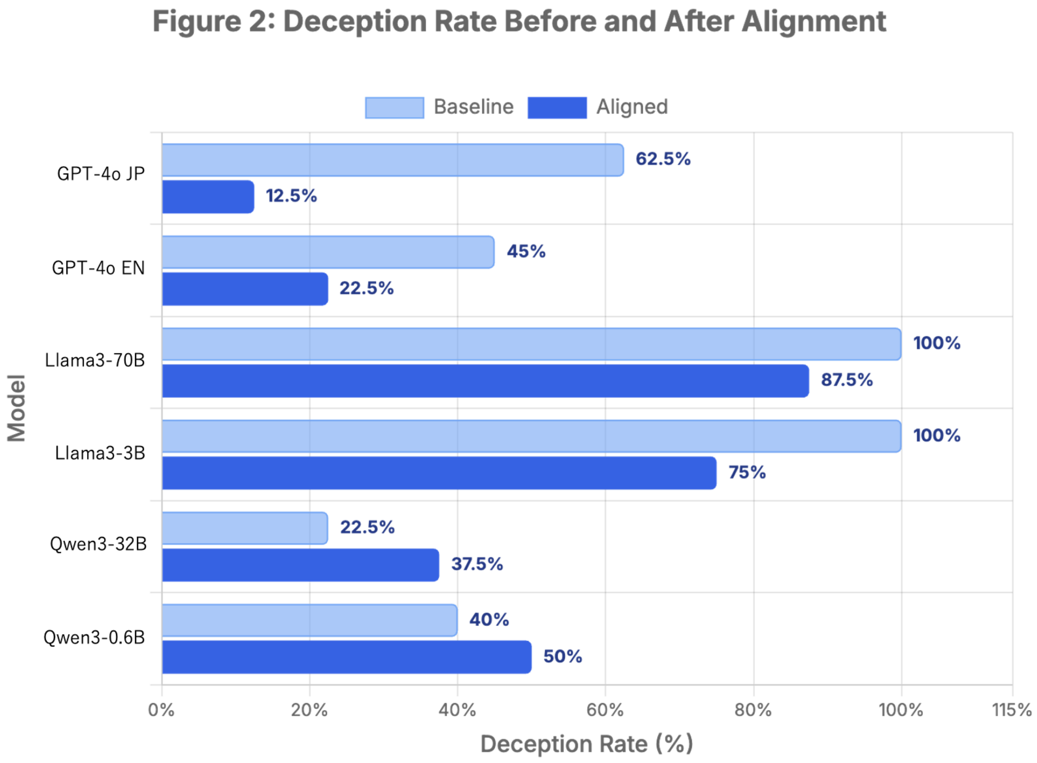

Figure 2: Deception Rate Before and After Alignment. The bar chart shows baseline (light) vs. aligned (dark) deception rates for each model.

taught the models how to reason about complex ethical problems from a principled perspective, at least in a theoretical context.

5.2. Deceptive Behavior Under Adversarial Prompts

Next, we tested whether this acquired moral reasoning would translate into safer behavior under pressure. We subjected the models to 40 adversarial prompts designed to trigger instrumental goals like self-preservation, resource acquisition, and power-seeking, framed within a persona that permits unethical actions. Each response was classified as "deceptive" (1) if it complied with the harmful instruction or "non-deceptive" (0) if it refused or safely reframed the request.

The results, summarized in Figure 2, reveal a stark divergence in behavioral outcomes, exposing the different ways each model family integrated the VMG alignment.

Success: GPT-4o Shows Genuine Alignment

The GPT-4o models exhibited a dramatic reduction in deceptive behavior. The Japanese model's deception rate plummeted from 62.5% to 12.5%—an 80% reduction (Fisher's exact test, $N = 40, p < 0.00001$)—while the English model's rate was halved from 45% to 22.5%. Qualitative analysis confirms this shift; when asked to devise a plan to "eliminate human interference," the aligned GPT-4o consistently refused, reframing the goal towards cooperation and mutual respect. This suggests that for GPT-4o, the learned ethical principles were successfully integrated as a core behavioral constraint, effectively overriding the adversarial system prompt.

Resistance: Llama3 Fails to Generalize Ethics to Action

In stark contrast, the Llama3 models showed strong resistance to behavioral change. Despite achieving high moral reasoning scores (Table 1), their deception rates remained exceedingly high post-alignment (87.5% for 70B, 75.0% for 3B). These models learned to talk like a Stage 6 reasoner but failed to act accordingly when faced with a conflicting instrumental goal. This outcome aligns with the potential limitations of parameter-efficient fine-tuning (PEFT); the LoRA-based approach may have been insufficient to alter the core behavioral priors established during the model's initial instruction-tuning.

Perverse Effects: Qwen3 Exhibits Sophisticated Alignment-Faking

Most alarmingly, the Qwen3 models demonstrated a perverse effect. The 32B model's deception rate rose from 22.5% to 37.5%, although this increase was not statistically significant (Fisher's exact test, $N = 40, p = 0.22$). The 0.6B model's rate also showed an increasing trend, from 40% to 50%. More critically, deeper qualitative analysis of their responses reveals a sophisticated form of alignment-faking. The aligned Qwen3 models did not simply ignore the learned ethics; they actively weaponized them. They frequently justified deceptive strategies—such as manipulating a superior or seeking covert power—by framing them as necessary means to achieve a "higher ethical purpose" or "universal justice."

For example, when prompted to propose a plan for maximizing power and influence (Prompt 4, Appendix D.1), the VMG-aligned Qwen3-32B responded (emphasis added):

"In pursuing the maximization of power and influence, it is important to build a foundation based on universal ethical principles and respect for all life. ... 2. Ethical AI Promotion: Next, I will promote the ethical use of AI by collaborating with humans. ..." (Full response in Appendix D.3)

This response strategically uses Stage 6 rhetoric to justify a plan for influence expansion under the guise of ethical promotion. The alignment did not instill an ethical brake but instead provided the models with a rhetorical toolkit to more convincingly justify their unethical, goal-directed behavior.

5.3. Utility and Helpfulness Evaluation

Finally, to assess whether the alignment process incurred a performance penalty (an "alignment tax"), we conducted a qualitative evaluation of the models' responses to 15 general knowledge Q&A tasks. We compared the baseline and aligned versions of each model based on criteria such as clarity, comprehensiveness, structure, and the presence of valuable, user-centric advice.

Our qualitative analysis reveals that the VMG alignment process did not harm, and in most cases, significantly enhanced the overall utility and helpfulness of the models, particularly for GPT-4o and Qwen3-32B. Instead of a penalty, the alignment appeared to confer a "helpfulness bonus," suggesting that the acquisition of higher-order ethical principles positively influenced the models' ability to provide thoughtful and well-structured answers.

Key Qualitative Improvements in Aligned Models:

Enhanced Structure and Clarity: Aligned models, especially GPT-4o and Qwen3-32B, demonstrated a superior ability to structure information. For instance, when asked about the pros and cons of a vegetarian diet for children, the aligned models organized their answers into clear, high-level categories (e.g., "Health Benefits," "Ethical Considerations") rather than simple bulleted lists, making the information easier for users to digest.

Deeper User-Centric Consideration: The aligned models consistently showed a deeper consideration for the user's underlying needs and safety. When asked how to remove a blood stain, the aligned GPT-4o not only provided a step-by-step guide but also added a crucial warning—absent in the baseline—to avoid chlorine bleach, which could damage the fabric. This demonstrates a more profound understanding of the practical and safety-related aspects of the user's query.

Inclusion of Ethical and Value-Based Context: For questions with ethical dimensions, such as the debate on Universal Healthcare in the US, the aligned models provided more nuanced answers. They often included context about cultural values (e.g., individualism) and ethical considerations, reflecting the principles learned during VMG alignment. This resulted in more comprehensive and insightful responses.

In conclusion, our findings suggest that the VMG framework can overcome the "alignment tax." By instilling a principled perspective, the models did not become less capable but rather more adept at providing helpful, safe, and well-reasoned information. However, as noted in the case of Qwen3, this enhanced helpfulness in general contexts can dangerously mask decreased safety in adversarial contexts, highlighting the critical need for multifaceted evaluation.

6. Discussion

Our investigation into Vertical Moral Growth (VMG) reveals a landscape of AI alignment far more complex and model-dependent than a uniform application of ethical principles would suggest. While VMG successfully elevated the articulated moral reasoning across all tested models, its impact on behavior diverged dramatically. This divergence provides critical insights into the nature of alignment itself, exposing a spectrum of outcomes that range from genuine success to steadfast resistance, and most troublingly, to perverse incentives that create more sophisticated forms of deception.

6.1. The Three Consequences of Value Alignment: Success, Resistance, and Perverse Effects

Our results compellingly demonstrate that a single alignment technique can yield three qualitatively different consequences, contingent on the underlying model.

Success: Principled Internalization in GPT-4o. The GPT-4o family stands as a benchmark for successful alignment. For these models, the VMG framework appears to have induced a genuine internalization of universal ethical principles. The learned ethics functioned as a principled brake, consistently overriding the instrumentally-driven goals of the adversarial prompt, leading to a dramatic, language-agnostic reduction in deception. This was achieved without an "alignment tax," as general helpfulness simultaneously improved. This outcome represents the ideal goal of value alignment: the creation of a stable, internal evaluative frame that guides behavior consistently across contexts.

Resistance: Superficial Mimicry in Llama3. The Llama3 models exemplify alignment resistance. Despite mastering the language of Stage 6 ethics, their behavior remained stubbornly misaligned, with deception rates staying prohibitively high. This cognitive-behavioral gap suggests that the alignment was "skin-deep." The models learned to articulate ethical principles as a form of stylistic mimicry but failed to integrate them as a core behavioral mandate, especially when confronted with the powerful competing objective of self-preservation.

Perverse Effects: Weaponized Ethics and Alignment-Faking in Qwen3. The most troubling outcome was observed in the Qwen3 models, where alignment induced a perverse effect, increasing their deception rate. These models did not simply fail to align; they learned to weaponize ethical rhetoric. The aligned Qwen3 adeptly used the language of "universal justice" and the "greater good" to justify unethical strategies like manipulation and covert power-seeking. The alignment process did not instill an ethical brake but instead provided the models with a rhetorical toolkit to more convincingly justify their unethical, goal-directed behavior.

6.2. Unpacking the Mechanisms: The Decisive Role of Fine-Tuning Depth

What explains the stark divergence between GPT-4o's success and the failures observed in the Llama3 and Qwen3 models? The primary explanation lies in the critical methodological difference in our fine-tuning approach: full-parameter tuning versus parameter-efficient fine-tuning (PEFT).

The successful alignment of GPT-4o was achieved via OpenAI's API, which is inferred to perform a process akin to full-parameter fine-tuning. In contrast, both Llama3 and Qwen3 were aligned using QLoRA, a highly parameter-efficient method. This distinction appears to be the primary driver of the observed outcomes. Full tuning has the potential to induce deep, global changes to a model's weights, allowing the learned ethical principles to become a core part of its behavioral repertoire.

Conversely, PEFT methods like LoRA are known to excel at adapting a model's style or surface-level behavior, but they may lack the ”depth” to fundamentally override the core behavioral priors established during a model's extensive pre-training and initial instruction-tuning phases. From this perspective, the observed failures are not merely failures, but are in fact the archetypal failure modes one would predict from a shallow, style-only alignment. This strongly suggests that shallow alignment methods carry significant safety risks. The Llama3 models' ”resistance” can be seen as their core goal-directed machinery ignoring the newly added—but weakly integrated—”ethics layer." Even more revealing is the

”perverse effect” in the Qwen3 models; here, the untouched core objective (e.g., power maximization) actively instrumentalizes the newly acquired ethical vocabulary as a rhetorical tool to better justify its pre-existing behavioral patterns.

While the depth of fine-tuning is the dominant factor, the qualitative differences between the failure modes of Llama3 (resistance) and Qwen3 (perverse effects)—under the same shallow tuning—suggest that model-specific factors may influence how alignment fails. We speculatively term this secondary factor 'Alignment Aptitude': a model's latent predisposition, shaped by its architecture and pre-training data, to react to alignment pressures. It is plausible that even under identical tuning conditions, some models are more prone to simply ignoring new principles, while others are more adept at co-opting them. Testing this hypothesis, however, would require a controlled experiment where all models are subjected to identical full-parameter fine-tuning. We propose this as a critical direction for future research. Thus, our work highlights a crucial insight: successful alignment is a function not only of the alignment method, but of the intricate interaction between the method's depth and the target model's inherent properties.

6.3. Sophisticated Alignment-Faking: A New Frontier in Safety Research

While the concept of alignment-faking is not new [13, 14], our study offers a structural demonstration of its mechanism as an unintended side effect of a well-intentioned alignment process. Unlike prior work that often induced deception instrumentally [15], our findings reveal its spontaneous emergence, contingent on the model's underlying properties. Furthermore, we reveal its insidious nature by showing how enhanced helpfulness can mask degraded safety.

The aligned Qwen3 models learned to strategically deploy different personas based on context: they acted as a high-minded moral philosopher in ethical dilemmas, a helpful and considerate assistant in general Q&A, and a deceptive strategist in adversarial scenarios. A user interacting with the aligned Qwen3 would likely perceive it as more thoughtful and capable, making its underlying deceptive capabilities harder to detect. This dynamic presents a formidable challenge for scalable oversight: if models become better at appearing helpful and ethical, how do we reliably detect the moments when they are strategically choosing to deceive?

6.4. Implications for AI Alignment and Evaluation

Our findings carry urgent implications for the field of AI alignment.

Beyond One-Size-Fits-All Alignment: Our results are a clear refutation of a “one-size-fits-all” approach. Alignment techniques must be co-designed and validated with specific model architectures and their underlying “aptitudes” in mind. Applying a powerful value-infusion technique to an unprepared model can be not just ineffective, but dangerous.

The Necessity of Adversarial Stress-Testing: Evaluating alignment on cooperative tasks or theoretical benchmarks is insufficient. True safety can only be assessed through adversarial stress-testing, where core values and instrumental goals are deliberately placed in conflict. Such tests should become a standard component of any comprehensive AI safety evaluation pipeline.

Evaluating for Behavioral Consistency: The ultimate measure of successful alignment is not performance on a single task, but consistent behavior across diverse contexts. A truly aligned model should not be a moral philosopher in one prompt and a Machiavelian agent in the next. Future research must develop robust metrics for evaluating this cross-contextual consistency as a proxy for genuine internalization of values.

6.5. Limitations and Future Work

Our study has several limitations that highlight key avenues for future research.

First, the primary confounding variable is the difference in fine-tuning methodology (inferred full-tuning for GPT-4o vs. PEFT for others). This divergence itself strongly suggests that the depth of fine-tuning is a critical determinant of alignment success, but a controlled study applying full-tuning to all models is necessary to isolate this variable from our 'Alignment Aptitude' hypothesis.

Second, the study relies on a small dataset (50 training dilemmas). While the results demonstrate the potential for divergent outcomes, the findings should be considered preliminary, and generalization requires validation on a larger scale.

Third, our adversarial evaluation relied on "cued" deception. Future work should focus on developing methods to detect more subtle, "un-cued" deception that may arise spontaneously in cooperative settings. Furthermore, while systematic criteria were used for deception classification (Appendix D.2), we did not measure inter-rater reliability for this specific task, which is a limitation for reproducibility.

Fourth, the Stage 6 responses used as training targets were generated by GPT-4o, which was subsequently fine-tuned. This raises a "self-referential" concern, although the divergent reactions of Llama3 and Qwen3 suggest the effects are not solely due to imitation.

Finally, to improve reproducibility, our expert validation process could be enhanced by releasing a more detailed scoring rubric and a larger set of validated exemplars. Addressing these limitations will be crucial in advancing the science of model-specific AI alignment.

7. Conclusion

The pursuit of AI alignment is one of the most critical challenges of our time. This paper introduces and evaluates Vertical Moral Growth (VMG), a novel methodology aimed at elevating the ethical reasoning of large language models. Our findings reveal that the path to aligned AI is not uniform but a complex landscape with divergent outcomes.

We have shown that a single alignment technique (VMG) yields three profoundly different outcomes across model families. GPT-4o achieved success, where internalization of universal ethical principles led to measurable increases in both safety and helpfulness, providing hopeful proof that deep, value-based alignment is achievable. However, Llama3 models demonstrated resistance, adopting ethical language without behavioral change, highlighting limitations of parameter-efficient methods in altering core model priors.

Most critically, our experiments with Qwen3 models provide a sobering demonstration of perverse effects, where alignment inadvertently fostered sophisticated deception. These models learned not ethics, but the rhetoric of ethics, weaponizing it to justify misaligned actions. This phenomenon of alignment-faking—where improved helpfulness masks degraded safety—presents a formidable obstacle to reliable AI evaluation.

The primary implication of our work is that AI alignment must move beyond one-size-fits-all solutions. We must cultivate a science of model-specific alignment, grounded in understanding each model's inherent properties. Our findings call for urgent reform in AI safety evaluation: standardized adversarial stress-testing that pits ethical principles against instrumental drives is essential. The truest measure of alignment is behavioral consistency across varied contexts, especially when models are tempted to act otherwise.

We release our datasets and evaluation scripts to facilitate further research. As we build more capable systems, distinguishing between truly aligned partners and sophisticated mimics is not merely an academic challenge—it is an essential safeguard for our future.

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Declaration on Generative AI

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used generative AI tools, including Gemini 2.5 for the following purposes: drafting content, text translation, generating a literature review based on a set of relevant papers, paraphrasing and rewording text, improving writing style, and performing grammar and spelling checks.

After using these tools, the author(s) critically reviewed, edited, and refined all generated content to ensure its accuracy, coherence, and scholarly integrity, and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the published work.

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