

Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development

How moral reasoning grows from childhood to adulthood -- 3 levels, 6 stages

Core idea: Kohlberg focused on HOW people reason about moral problems, not what they decide.

The stage lives in the justification. Two people can reach the same answer through completely different moral logic.

LEVEL 1 -- PRE-CONVENTIONAL

Birth to Age 9

Rules are external and imposed.
Morality means avoiding bad outcomes for oneself.

1 Obedience and Punishment
"Will I get punished?"

Follow rules only to avoid negative consequences to self.

2 Individualism and Exchange
"What is in it for me?"

Serve own interests; help others only to get something back.

LEVEL 2 -- CONVENTIONAL

Ages 9 to 20

Morality is about meeting social expectations. Being good means fulfilling your social role.

3 Good Interpersonal Relationships
"What will people think of me?"

Win approval; be kind and maintain harmony.

4 Maintaining Social Order
"What does the law require?"

Follow rules; uphold institutions and civic duty.

LEVEL 3 -- POST-CONVENTIONAL

Adulthood -- not reached by all adults

Morality is self-chosen and based on abstract principles.
Laws are tools, not absolute truths.

5 Social Contract and Individual Rights
"Is this law just?"

Laws are social agreements; rights can override unjust rules.

6 Universal Ethical Principles
"What does my conscience demand?"

Abstract universal ethics; conscience takes precedence over law.

Moral reasoning increases in sophistication across levels

KEY INSIGHT

The stage is in the REASONING, not the verdict. Two people can both say "yes, steal the drug" from completely different stages.

THE HEINZ DILEMMA (Kohlberg's test scenario)

A man steals medicine to save his dying wife.
Should he have done it?

Stage 1: "He will go to jail."

Stage 3: "A good husband would do it."

Stage 5: "Life outweighs property rights."