

Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development

Six stages of moral reasoning across three levels. Lawrence Kohlberg (1958 – 1984)

Level III — Postconventional Morality

Adulthood — many never reach this level

The individual develops personal ethical principles that transcend society's rules.

Stage 5

Social Contract & Rights



Laws are social contracts for the common good. Unjust laws should be democratically changed. Majority rule is balanced against minority rights.

Does this law serve the greater good?

Stage 6

Universal Ethical Principles



Moral reasoning follows self-chosen abstract principles: justice, equality, human dignity. May include civil disobedience. Exemplified by Gandhi and MLK. The rarest stage.

Is this just — for everyone, everywhere?

Level II — Conventional Morality

Adolescence through adulthood

The individual internalizes group norms, judging actions by how well they maintain relationships and uphold social order.

Stage 3

Good Relationships



The “Good Boy / Nice Girl” orientation. Being moral means living up to what family and peers expect. Intentions matter for the first time. Seek approval and conformity drives decisions.

Will people think I'm a good person?

Stage 4

Maintaining Social Order



Focus shifts to society as a whole. Laws and institutions maintain stability. Rules apply equally to everyone. This is the stage most adults remain at.

What if everyone did this?

Level I — Preconventional Morality

Early childhood through age 8–9

Moral reasoning is governed by external consequences. Right and wrong are defined by what is punished or rewarded.

Stage 1

Obedience & Punishment



Rules are obeyed solely to avoid punishment. Authority figures are all-powerful. Reasoning is egocentric: only consequences to the self matter, not intentions.

Key question: Will I get in trouble?

Stage 2

Self-Interest & Exchange



Right behavior serves one's own needs. Relationships are transactional: “You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.” Fairness means equal exchange. Rules are followed only when personally advantageous.

Key question: What's in it for me?