

Moral Reasoning: Lawrence Kohlberg

According to Kohlberg, there are 3 levels with 2 stages each of moral reasoning. Each stage is defined by the reason/motive for your behavior.

Level 1: Preconventional: No internalization of morals (reasons are external to the individual)

Stage 1 (Punishment and obedience)

Stage 2 (Individual self-interest)

Level 2: Conventional: Intermediate internalizations of morals

Stage 3 (Seeking approval or avoiding disapproval)

Stage 4 (Law and order)

Level 3: Postconventional: full internalization of morals

Stage 5 (Interpretation of the law)

Stage 6 (Universal ethical principles)

In Kohlberg's theory of moral reasoning your decision is not the critical issue—it is the reasons for your decision. These stages unfold in an age-related step-by-step fashion, much like Piaget's stages of cognitive development.

Moral Reasoning: The Moral Dilemma of “Heinz”

In Europe, a lady was dying because she was very sick. There was one drug the doctors said might save her. This medicine was discovered by a man living in that same town. It cost him \$400 to make it, but he charged \$4000 for just a little bit of it. The sick lady’s husband, Heinz, tried to borrow enough money to buy the drug. He went to everyone he knew to borrow the money. But he could only borrow half of what he needed. He told the man who made the drug that his wife was dying, and asked him to sell the medicine cheaper or let him pay him later. But the man said “No, I made the drug and I am going to make money from it.” So Heinz broke into the store and stole the drug. Should Heinz have stolen the drug? Why or why not?

The point of Kohlberg’s work is that the specific answer—yes or no—is not what matters. Instead, the important issue is the type of moral reasoning that underlies the solution.

Level 1: Preconventional: no internalization of morals (reasons are external to the individual)

Stage 1: (Punishment and Obedience) People base their moral decisions on the fear of punishment.

Actions are evaluated in terms of possible punishment, not goodness or badness; obedience to power is emphasized.

Right and wrong is determined by what is punished. People base their moral decisions on the fear of punishment, and thus avoids punishment.

Children obey because adults tell them to obey.

Examples:

I won't cheat because I will get caught.

I won't steal because I will go to jail.

I won't speed because I will get a ticket.

I'll help you because if I don't, I'll get in trouble.

Stage 2: (Individual self-interest) Right and wrong is determined by what is rewarded.

Moral thinking is based on rewards and self-interest--profit motive. Concern for the needs of others is largely a matter of "You scratch my back, I will scratch yours.", not out of loyalty, gratitude or justice.

Right and wrong is determined by what is rewarded or profitable.

Children obey when it is in their best interest to obey.

Examples:

I will cheat because I will get a better score on the exam.

I won't tell mom you broke the vase if you don't tell on me for stealing candy.

I will tell mom you lied because it makes me look better.

I will help you if I get something out of it. Conversely, I'm not going to help you if because there's nothing in it for me.

Level:2: Conventional, Intermediate internalizations of morals

Stage 3: (seeking approval or avoiding disapproval) Right and wrong is determined by seeking approval or avoiding disapproval of people who are close to you (such as your parents and friends).

Good behavior is that which pleases others in the immediate group or which brings approval.

Children often adopt their parent's moral standards at this stage, seeking to being thought of as a "good girl" or "good boy" in front of those who are close to you.

Examples:

I won't cheat on the test because my parents will be ashamed of me.

I will steal because it will make me look cool in front of my friends.

I will give to charity because everyone will think highly of me.

Break the speed limit? Why not you dork?

Jaywalking makes you look cool and defiant.

Stage 4: (Law and Order) Right and wrong is determined by society's rules, and laws, which should be obeyed rigidly to maintain law and order through formal or informal codes of conduct.

Moral judgments are based on understanding and the social order, law, and duty.

In this stage, the emphasis is on upholding law, order and authority, doing one's duty, and following social rules. One is obligated to follow societies rules.

Examples:

I won't cheat because if everyone cheats, it will be difficult for anyone to distinguish between those who understand physics and those who don't.

I won't go speed because it is against the law. If everyone speeds, then our laws are meaningless.

You must not shoplift because it is illegal.

You shouldn't jaywalk because it is against the law.

It is okay for large corporations to make shell companies off in
Burmuda to avoid paying taxes because it is legal (it may not be
“ethical”)

The death penalty is legal, so it is okay to have the government kill
someone (but some consider it immoral).

We must follow the workplace rules so there is order at the job.

Level 3: Post conventional level, full internalization of morals

Stage 5: (Interpretation of the law) Right and wrong is determined by society's rules, which are viewed as fallible, rather than absolute. As a member of society, you have certain obligations to fulfill.

The person understands that laws are important to protect society and individuals and should be changed or not followed if they fail to do so. In some instances, the law may not apply to a particular situation, especially if it violates some values, such as freedom, individual rights.

Examples:

Certain "assault" weapons are illegal (they are defined by their model...AR-15, MAC-11, AK-47, Tec-9, etc.). You shouldn't skirt the law by modifying the illegal weapons and give it a new name and ignore "the spirit of the law"

It is important for everyone to contribute their tax money to the government, so it is immoral for companies to have shell companies in the Caymen islands to avoid paying taxes.

Speeding laws are useful in town, but in rural areas, they violate my freedom to choose the speeds I wish to drive.

Laws that prohibit people from stealing and breaking in someone's house are important, but if your survival is at stake, it is okay to break into a cabin in the wilderness for survival with the intent of compensating the owner later (as in the Alaska bush).

I ran a red light because it was 12 midnight, no one was around, and there was an emergency at home.

I ignored the traffic lights to get to the hospital.

Stage 6: (Universal ethical principles) Right and wrong is determined by ethical abstract principles that emphasize equality and justice.

The person has developed moral judgments that are based on universal human rights.

When faced with a dilemma between law and conscience, a personal, individual conscience is followed.

Behavior is directed by self-chosen ethical principles that tend to

be general, comprehensive, or universal; high value is placed on justice, dignity and equality.

Examples:

Lying to the Nazis about the Jews in the basement is alright if it is going to save an innocent life.

It's okay to not prosecute Nazi intelligence officers because it will prevent the United States from collecting information on Russia.

It's okay not to prosecute American soldiers for war crimes because it would be bad for American morale.

Laws that restrict access to the court system should be abolished because they impair a person's access to justice.

Applying Kohlberg's theory of moral reasoning to political debates:

The following are a list of reasons for the United States to get involved in the conflict between Kuwait and Iraq (you could relate it to other conflicts or moral dilemmas).

Arguments Against U.S. Involvement	S T A G E	Arguments for U.S. Involvement
because it would hurt our economy.	1	because our oil is threatened.
because we'll have more money for domestic issues.	2	because we can gain security of the oil supply.
because we don't want to appear too militaristic.	3	because we don't want the world to see us as weak.
because war is killing and killing is against the law.	4	because the U.N. has laid down written resolutions which should be upheld.
Even though the situation is bad, war is damaging to people and property and society agrees that is bad.	5	the situation is extreme enough that society's rights and need to be defended.
Although atrocities have been committed, it would be an even greater atrocity to wage war.	6	evil is on the march, and it would be ethically wrong to allow it to continue.

Criticisms of Kohlberg's theory of moral development

Kohlberg's early research was conducted with male subjects and became a basis for moral reasoning for men and women. In addition, most of the dilemmas involve a male to be resolved by a male with a woman being a subordinate.

Carol Gilligan claims Kohlberg's model is based on an ethic of individual rights, which is more common perspective for men. Gilligan developed a model of women's moral development that is based on an ethic of care and responsibility.

- Women tend to stress the importance of maintaining interpersonal relationships and responding to the needs of others, rather than focusing on individual rights.
- However, when men and women are matched in terms of education level, they respond in a similar manner.

Kohlberg's model of moral development reflects the values of western culture (and hence not universal) of individual rights, harm and justice. A man in New Guinea said, "If no one helped Heinz, then we are all guilty of a crime"

It is very easy to give a "highly moral reason", yet engage in a behavior that reflects a lower level of moral reasoning.

The behavior doesn't match your words.

- We say education is important, but we won't fund it.
- We say equality is important, but give preference to certain races, religions or genders.

The Porcupine and the Moles

Seeking refuge from the cold, a porcupine asked to share a cave for the winter with a family of moles. The moles agreed. But because the cave was small, they soon found they were being scratched each time the porcupine moved about. Finally, they asked the porcupine to leave. But the porcupine refused, saying, "If you moles are not satisfied, I suggest that you leave."

What should be done?

Boys who read this story tend to opt for justice in resolving this dilemma; “It’s the mole’s house. It’s a deal. The porcupine leaves.” In contrast, girls tended to look for solutions that would keep all parties happy and comfortable, such as “cover the porcupine with a blanket”.

Gilligan points out that male psychologists have for the most part, defined moral maturity in terms of justice and autonomy. From this perspective, women’s concern with relationships can look like a weakness rather than a strength. (A woman who is concerned about what pleases or helps others would be placed at stage 3 in Kohlberg’s system.) Gilligan believes that caring is also a major element in moral development, and suggests that men lack it.