

# Moral Development

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the moral development of people. You will learn about:

1. Lawrence Kohlberg
2. The Theory of Moral Development
3. The Preconventional Stage
4. The Conventional Stage
5. The Postconventional Stage

## 1. Lawrence Kohlberg

Moral development is an area that's focused on both social and emotional development. This field is dedicated to figuring out what is right and wrong in the ways you behave with other people.

One major figure in this field is **Lawrence Kohlberg**. Kohlberg was a Jewish-American psychologist who, in the mid-1900s, developed a theory of moral development. He was a cognitive theorist who studied Piaget, so his theories are an extension of Piaget's ideas.



### PEOPLE TO KNOW

#### Lawrence Kohlberg

Studied moral development

## 2. The Theory of Moral Development

Kohlberg's theory of moral development is divided into six stages, which can be grouped into three different levels with two stages at each level. To demonstrate these stages, Kohlberg created a moral dilemma, a thought experiment, with a character that he called Heinz.

Heinz, in this thought experiment, is a man whose wife is dying of a disease. The wife needs a particular drug in order to be cured. However, the pharmacy is charging much more for this drug than it should be. Heinz can't pay because he is too poor. Thus, Heinz decides to steal the drug for his wife.

In this thought experiment, Heinz's actions are important for determining right and wrong, but even more important is the reasoning behind his actions.



#### THINK ABOUT IT

What is right or wrong in this situation? What should Heinz have done? What would you do?

Your answer to this question about whether or not it was morally right for Heinz to have stolen the drug is important in the stages of Kohlberg's theory.

The three levels that Kohlberg divided his theory into are **preconventional**, **conventional**, and **postconventional**.

In Kohlberg's theory, everybody starts at a preconventional level of morality, and not everybody necessarily progresses to the final stage of postconventional.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Preconventional**

First level of moral development--focused on consequences, self-centered

##### **Conventional**

Second level of moral development--focused on what society expects, rules

##### **Postconventional**

Third level of moral development--focused on universal principles and social contracts, individuals have differing views

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## 3. The Preconventional Stage

Preconventional thought is particularly concerned with consequences of actions. It's a sort of self-centered stage, where people are concerned with what is going to happen to them as a result of their actions. Thus, this is very common in children.

1. The first preconventional stage is the obedience or punishment stage, where the person determines the right or wrong of an action according to the consequences to themselves. Generally they try to follow the rules in this way. At this stage, the thinking would be:

Heinz was wrong for stealing that drug because he will go to jail for it. Because of his actions, he will receive some consequence or punishment.

2. The second preconventional stage is the self-interest stage, where the person is more concerned with what's best for the individual and not with what is best for other people. At this stage, the thinking would be:

Heinz was wrong in his action because his wife needed a drug and not him, so he shouldn't have done something that helped other people. He should just be worried about himself.

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## 4. The Conventional Stage

The second category is the conventional stage, where people are more outwardly concerned. In this stage, you might be looking at other people and around your society and wondering, "What would they say about me? What do they think of me?" For this reason, this stage is governed in many ways by rules of appearance.

1. The first conventional stage is the personal relationship stage, where you want approval, especially from the people that are close to you. You want to be a good boy or girl; you want those close to you to look at you favorably. At this stage, the thinking would be:

Heinz was wrong because people would call him a thief, and that would be a bad thing. In particular, his wife, whom he's stealing for, would call him a thief for doing what he did, regardless of the outcome.

2. The second conventional stage is the societal order stage when people have generalized thoughts about society as a whole. In this stage, you feel a duty to respect authority and follow the rules of society. At this stage, the thinking would be:

Heinz was wrong because everyone needs to obey the laws. Laws are general rules that apply to everybody, regardless of the circumstances, so Heinz should have done what the law says.

Notice some of the reasoning at the various stages is similar, but there are different nuances in the reasoning that change the level of thought.

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## 5. The Postconventional Stage

The third category is the postconventional stage.

1. The first postconventional stage is the social contract stage, where the law is thought of not as something that's made by society but by the people, and is therefore responsive to the people. In this stage, you understand that individuals have different views and different opinions about the law. Therefore, the law might be a little bit different in its application. In other words, some people might be allowed to break the law. At this stage, the thinking would be:

Heinz was right to steal the drug. While it was against the law, in a situation like his where somebody will die, the individual's right to live is more important than laws against stealing.

2. The final postconventional stage, which is the stage that not everybody will necessarily get to, is the universal principles idea, where a person has an individual sort of moral code, and they determine moral behaviors based on their abstract reasoning. At this stage, people have created universal principles to guide their behavior that are self-chosen but also are grounded in an idea of justice. Thus, these universal principles are based not just on what's best for the person, but on what's best considering one's thoughts and moral

codes. At this stage, the thinking would be:

Heinz was right in this situation because, according to him, it is more important to save a life than not to break the law. However, he should also probably turn himself in, because he did break the law and should still do what's right.



## SUMMARY

**Lawrence Kohlberg** is one theorist who developed a **theory of moral development**. In Kohlberg's theory, there are three stages: **preconventional**, **conventional**, and **postconventional**. Each of those stages has two levels, so the full theory has six distinct stages of moral development. It is important to note that all individuals may not progress all the way through these six.

Good luck!

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Erick Taggart.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Conventional**

Second level of moral development - focused on what society expects, rules

### **Postconventional**

Third level of moral development - focused on universal principles and social contracts, individuals have differing views.

### **Preconventional**

First level of moral development - focused on consequences, self-centered



## PEOPLE TO KNOW

### **Lawrence Kohlberg**

Studied moral development