

## Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development

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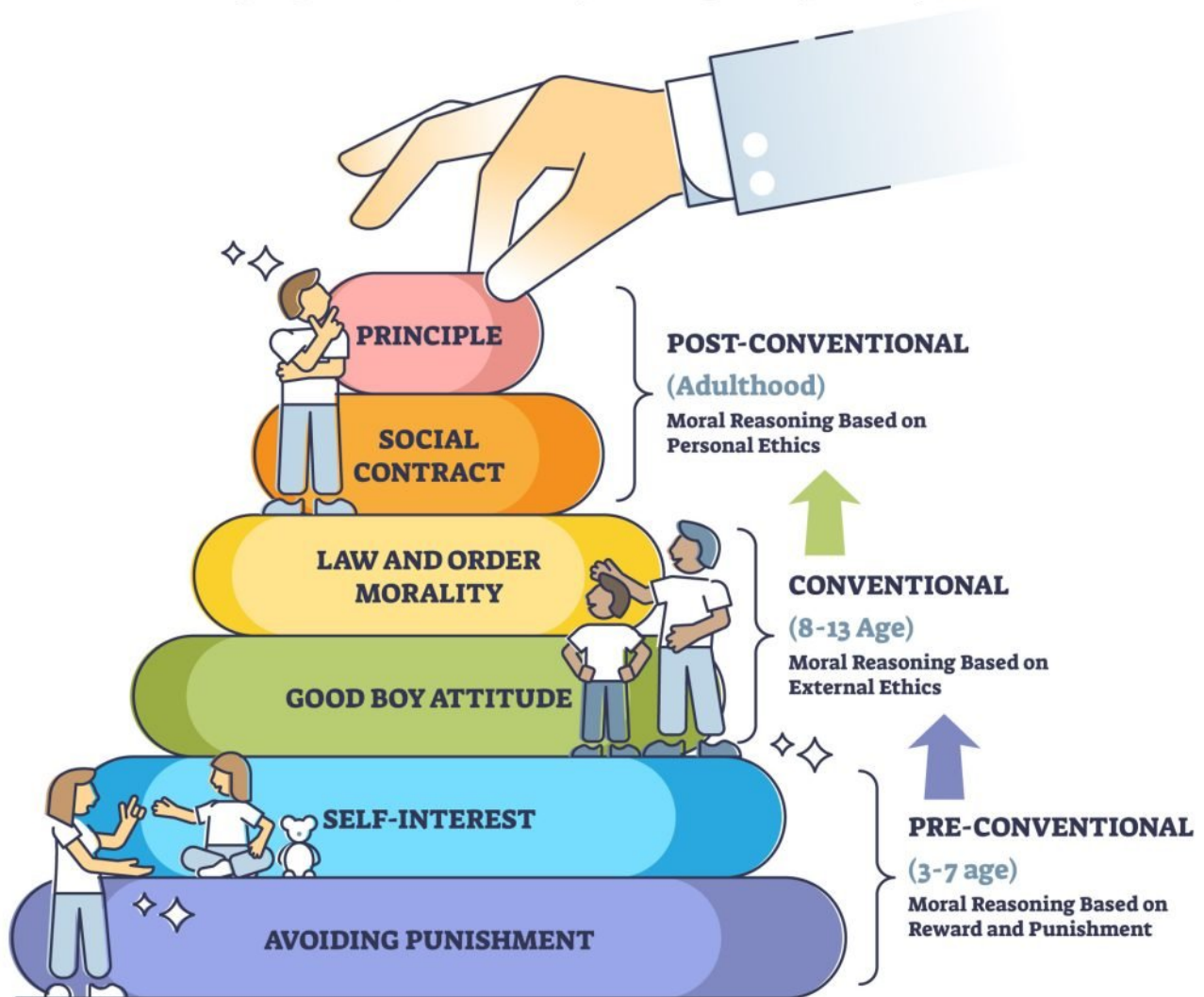
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### Key Takeaways

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- Lawrence Kohlberg formulated a theory asserting that individuals progress through six distinct stages of moral reasoning from infancy to adulthood.
- He grouped these stages into three broad categories of moral reasoning, pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. Each level is associated with increasingly complex stages of moral development.
- Kohlberg suggested that people move through these stages in a fixed order and that moral understanding is linked to cognitive development.

# STAGES OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT



Kohlberg's levels of moral development are as follows: The **Preconventional level**: children accept the authority (and moral code) of others. If an action leads to punishment, it must be bad. If it leads to a reward, it must be good. There is also a sense in which decisions concerning what is good are defined in terms of what is good for us. The **Conventional level**: children believe that social rules and the expectations of others determine what is acceptable or unacceptable behavior. A social system that stresses the responsibilities of relationships and social order is seen as desirable and must, therefore, influence our views of right and wrong. The **Postconventional level**: here what is right is based on an individual's understanding of universal ethical principles. What is considered morally acceptable in any given situation is determined by what is the response most in keeping with these principles.

## Heinz Dilemma

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Lawrence Kohlberg (1958) agreed with Piaget's (1932) theory of moral development in principle but wanted to develop his ideas further.

He used Piaget's storytelling technique to tell people stories involving moral dilemmas. In each case, he presented a choice to be considered, for example, between the rights of some authority and the needs of some deserving individual unfairly treated.

After presenting people with various moral dilemmas, Kohlberg categorized their responses into different stages of moral reasoning.

Using children's responses to a series of moral dilemmas, Kohlberg established that the reasoning behind the decision was a greater indication of moral development than the actual answer.

One of Kohlberg's best-known stories (1958) concerns Heinz, who lived somewhere in Europe.

Heinz's wife was dying from a particular type of cancer. Doctors said a new drug might save her. The drug had been discovered by a local chemist, and the Heinz tried desperately to buy some, but the chemist was charging ten times the money it cost to make the drug, and this was much more than the Heinz could afford.

Heinz could only raise half the money, even after help from family and friends. He explained to the chemist that his wife was dying and asked if he could have the drug cheaper or pay the rest of the money later.

The chemist refused, saying that he had discovered the drug and was going to make money from it. The husband was desperate to save his wife, so later that night he broke into the chemist's and stole the drug.

Should Heinz have broken into the laboratory to steal the drug for his wife? Why or why not?



**Kohlberg asked a series of questions such as:**

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1. Should Heinz have stolen the drug?
2. Would it change anything if Heinz did not love his wife?
3. What if the person dying was a stranger, would it make any difference?
4. Should the police arrest the chemist for murder if the woman dies?

By studying the answers from children of different ages to these questions, Kohlberg hoped to discover how moral reasoning changed as people grew older.

The sample comprised 72 Chicago boys aged 10–16 years, 58 of whom were followed up at three-yearly intervals for 20 years (Kohlberg, 1984).

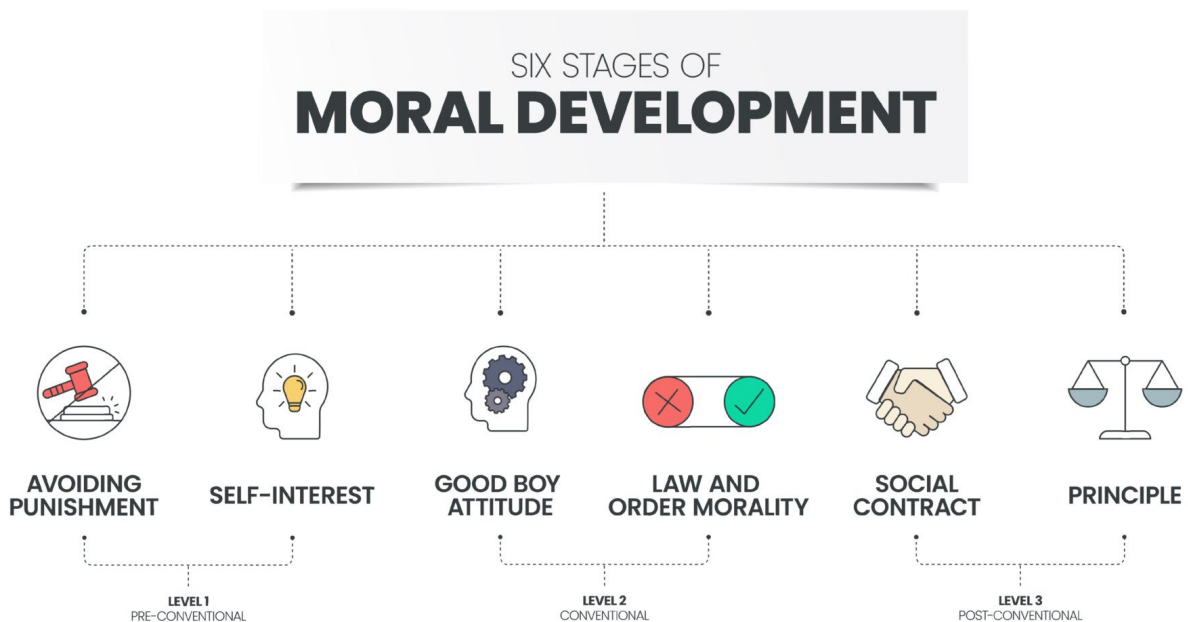
Each boy was given a 2-hour interview based on the ten dilemmas. Kohlberg was interested not in whether the boys judged the action right or wrong but in the reasons for the decision. He found that these reasons tended to change as the children got older.

Kohlberg identified three levels of moral reasoning: preconventional, conventional, and postconventional. Each level has two sub-stages.

People can only pass through these levels in the order listed. Each new stage replaces the reasoning typical of the earlier stage. Not everyone achieves all the stages.

<b>Level</b>	<b>Stage</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Response to Heinz Dilemma</b>
<b>Preconventional</b>	1. Avoiding Punishment	Moral reasoning is based on direct consequences.	Heinz should not steal the drug because stealing is illegal, and he could be punished.
	2. Self-Interest	Actions are seen in terms of rewards rather than moral value.	Heinz should not steal the drug because stealing is illegal, and he could be punished.
<b>Conventional</b>	3. Good boy attitude	Good behavior is about living up to social expectations and roles.	Heinz should steal the drug because, as a good husband, he is expected to do whatever he can to save his wife.
	4. Law & Order Morality	Moral reasoning considers societal laws.	Heinz should not steal the drug because he must uphold the law and maintain societal order.

Level	Stage	Definition	Response to Heinz Dilemma
Postconventional	5. Social Contract	Rules are seen as social agreements that can be changed when necessary.	Heinz should steal the drug because preserving human life is a more fundamental value than property rights.
	6. Universal Principles	Moral reasoning is based on universal ethical principles and justice.	Heinz should consider non-violent civil disobedience or negotiation with the pharmacist. The decision reflects a conflict between property rights and the sanctity of human life.



Disequilibrium plays a crucial role in Kohlberg's stages of moral development. A child encountering a moral issue may recognize limitations in their current reasoning approach, often prompted by exposure to others' viewpoints. Improvements in perspective-taking are key to progressing through Kohlberg's stages of moral development. As children mature, they increasingly understand issues from others' viewpoints. For instance, a child at the pre-conventional level typically perceives an issue primarily in terms of personal consequences. In contrast, a child at the conventional level tends to consider the perspectives of others more substantially.

## Level 1 – Preconventional Morality

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Preconventional morality is the first level of moral development, lasting until approximately age 8. During this level, children accept the authority (and moral code) of others.

Preconventional morality is when people follow rules because they don't want to get in trouble or they want to get a reward. This level of morality is mostly based on what authority figures like parents or teachers tell you to do rather than what you think is right or wrong.

Authority is outside the individual, and children often make moral decisions based on the physical consequences of actions.

For example, if an action leads to punishment, it must be bad; if it leads to a reward, it must be good.

So, people at this level don't have their own personal sense of right and wrong yet. They think that something is good if they get rewarded for it and bad if they get punished for it.

For example, if you get candy for behaving, you think you were good, but if you get a scolding for misbehaving, you think you were bad.

At the preconventional level, children don't have a personal code of morality. Instead, moral decisions are shaped by the standards of adults and the consequences of following or breaking their rules.

**Stage 1. Obedience and Punishment Orientation.** The child/individual is good to avoid being punished. If a person is punished, they must have done wrong.

**Stage 2. Individualism and Exchange.** At this stage, children recognize that there is not just one right view handed down by the authorities. Different individuals have different viewpoints.



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## **Level 2 – Conventional Morality**

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Conventional morality is the adolescent phase of moral development focused on societal norms and external expectations to discern right from wrong, often grounded in tradition, cultural practices, or established codes of conduct.

We internalize the moral standards of valued adult role models at the conventional level (most adolescents and adults).

Authority is internalized but not questioned, and reasoning is based on the group's norms to which the person belongs.

A social system that stresses the responsibilities of relationships and social order is seen as desirable and must influence our view of right and wrong.

So, people who follow conventional morality believe that it's important to follow society's rules and expectations to maintain order and prevent problems.



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For example, refusing to cheat on a test is a part of conventional morality because cheating can harm the academic system and create societal problems.

**Stage 3. Good Interpersonal Relationships.** The child/individual is good to be seen as being a good person by others. Therefore, answers relate to the approval of others.

**Stage 4. Law and Order Morality.** The child/individual becomes aware of the wider rules of society, so judgments concern obeying the rules to uphold the law and avoid guilt.

## Level 3 – Postconventional Morality

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Postconventional morality is the third level of moral development and is characterized by an individual's understanding of universal ethical principles.

Postconventional morality is when people decide based on what they think is right rather than just following the rules of society. This means that people at this level of morality have their own ethical principles and values and don't just do what society tells them to do.

At this level, people think about what is fair, what is just, and what values are important.

What is considered morally acceptable in any given situation is determined by what is the response most in keeping with these principles.

They also think about how their choices might affect others and try to make good decisions for everyone, not just themselves.

Values are abstract and ill-defined but might include: the preservation of life at all costs and the importance of human dignity. Individual judgment is based on self-chosen principles, and moral reasoning is based on individual rights and justice.

According to Kohlberg, this level of moral reasoning is as far as most people get.

Only 10-15% are capable of abstract thinking necessary for stage 5 or 6 (post-conventional morality). That is to say, most people take their moral views from those around them, and only a minority think through ethical principles for themselves.

**Stage 5. Social Contract and Individual Rights.** The child/individual becomes aware that while rules/laws might exist for the good of the greatest number, there are times when they will work against the interest of particular individuals.

The issues are not always clear-cut. For example, in Heinz's dilemma, the protection of life is more important than breaking the law against stealing.

**Stage 6. Universal Principles.** People at this stage have developed their own set of moral guidelines, which may or may not fit the law. The principles apply to everyone. E.g., human rights, justice, and equality.

The person will be prepared to act to defend these principles even if it means going against the rest of society in the process and having to pay the consequences of disapproval and or imprisonment.

Kohlberg doubted few people had reached this stage.

## Problems with Kohlberg's Methods

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### 1. The dilemmas are artificial (i.e., they lack ecological validity)

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Most dilemmas are unfamiliar to most people (Rosen, 1980). For example, it is all very well in the Heinz dilemma, asking subjects whether Heinz should steal the drug to save his wife.

However, Kohlberg's subjects were aged between 10 and 16. They have never been married, and never been placed in a situation remotely like the one in the story.

How should they know whether Heinz should steal the drug?

## **2. The sample is biased**

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Kohlberg's (1969) theory suggested males more frequently progress beyond stage four in moral development, implying females lacked moral reasoning skills.

His research assistant, Carol Gilligan, disputed this, who argued that women's moral reasoning differed, not deficient.

She criticized Kohlberg's theory for focusing solely on upper-class white males, arguing women value interpersonal connections. For instance, women often oppose theft in the Heinz dilemma due to potential repercussions, such as separation from his wife if Heinz is imprisoned.

Gilligan (1982) conducted new studies interviewing both men and women, finding women more often emphasized care, relationships and context rather than abstract rules. Gilligan argued that Kohlberg's theory overlooked this relational "different voice" in morality.

According to Gilligan (1977), because Kohlberg's theory was based on an all-male sample, the stages reflect a male definition of morality (it's androcentric).

Men's morality is based on abstract principles of law and justice, while women's is based on principles of compassion and care.

Further, the gender bias issue raised by Gilligan is a reminder of the significant gender debate still present in psychology, which, when ignored, can greatly impact the results obtained through psychological research.

## **3. The dilemmas are hypothetical (i.e., they are not real)**

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Kohlberg's approach to studying moral reasoning relied heavily on his semi-structured moral judgment interview. Participants were presented with hypothetical moral dilemmas, and their justifications were analyzed to determine their stage of moral reasoning.

Some critiques of Kohlberg's method are that it lacks ecological validity, removes reasoning from real-life contexts, and defines morality narrowly in terms of justice reasoning.

Psychologists concur with Kohlberg's moral development theory, yet emphasize the difference between moral reasoning and behavior.

What we claim we'd do in a hypothetical situation often differs from our actions when faced with the actual circumstance. In essence, our actions might not align with our proclaimed values.

In a real situation, what course of action a person takes will have real consequences – and sometimes very unpleasant ones for themselves. Would subjects reason in the same way if they were placed in a real situation? We don't know.

The fact that Kohlberg's theory is heavily dependent on an individual's response to an artificial dilemma questions the validity of the results obtained through this research.

People may respond very differently to real-life situations that they find themselves in than they do to an artificial dilemma presented to them in the comfort of a research environment.

#### **4. Poor research design**

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How Kohlberg carried out his research when constructing this theory may not have been the best way to test whether all children follow the same sequence of stage progression.

His research was cross-sectional, meaning that he interviewed children of different ages to see their moral development level.

A better way to see if all children follow the same order through the stages would be to conduct longitudinal research on the same children.

However, longitudinal research on Kohlberg's theory has since been carried out by Colby et al. (1983), who tested 58 male participants of Kohlberg's original study.

She tested them six times in 27 years and supported Kohlberg's original conclusion, which is that we all pass through the stages of moral development in the same order.



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Contemporary research employs more diverse methods beyond Kohlberg's interview approach, such as narrative analysis, to study moral experience. These newer methods aim to understand moral reasoning and development within authentic contexts and experiences.

- Tappan and colleagues (1996) promote a narrative approach that examines how individuals construct stories and identities around moral experiences. This draws from the sociocultural tradition of examining identity in context. Tappan argues narrative provides a more contextualized understanding of moral development.
- Colby and Damon's (1992) empirical research uses in-depth life story interviews to study moral exemplars – people dedicated to moral causes. Instead of hypothetical dilemmas, they ask participants to describe real moral challenges and commitments. Their goal is to respect exemplars as co-investigators of moral meaning-making.

- Walker and Pitts' (1995) studies use open-ended interviews asking people to discuss real-life moral dilemmas and reflect on the moral domain in their own words. This elicits more naturalistic conceptions of morality compared to Kohlberg's abstract decontextualized approach.

## **Problems with Kohlberg's Theory**

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### **1. Are there distinct stages of moral development?**

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Kohlberg claims there are, but the evidence does not always support this conclusion.

For example, a person who justified a decision based on principled reasoning in one situation (postconventional morality stage 5 or 6) would frequently fall back on conventional reasoning (stage 3 or 4) with another story.

In practice, it seems that reasoning about right and wrong depends more on the situation than on general rules. Moreover, individuals do not always progress through the stages, and Rest (1979) found that one in fourteen slipped backward.

The evidence for distinct stages of moral development looks very weak. Some would argue that behind the theory is a culturally biased belief in the superiority of American values over those of other cultures and societies.

Gilligan (1982) did not dismiss developmental psychology or morality. She acknowledged that children undergo moral development in stages and even praised Kohlberg's stage logic as "brilliant" (Jorgensen, 2006, p. 186). However, she preferred Erikson's model over the more rigid Piagetian stages.

While Gilligan supported Kohlberg's stage theory as rational, she expressed discomfort with its structural descriptions that lacked context.

She also raised concerns about the theory's universality, pointing out that it primarily reflected Western culture (Jorgensen, 2006, pp. 187-188).

### **Neo-Kohlbergian Schema Model**

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Rest and colleagues (199) have developed a theoretical model building on but moving beyond Kohlberg's stage-based approach to moral development. Their model outlines four components of moral behavior: moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and

moral character.

For the moral judgment component, Rest et al. propose that individuals use moral schemas rather than progress through discrete stages of moral reasoning.

Schemas are generalized knowledge structures that help us interpret information and situations. An individual can have multiple schemas available to make sense of moral issues, rather than being constrained to a single developmental stage.

Some examples of moral schemas proposed by Rest and colleagues include:

- Personal Interest Schema – focused on individual interests and preferences
- Maintaining Norms Schema – emphasizes following rules and norms
- Postconventional Schema – considers moral ideals and principles

Rather than viewing development as movement to higher reasoning stages, the neo-Kohlbergian approach sees moral growth as acquiring additional, more complex moral schemas. Lower schemas are not replaced, but higher order moral schemas become available to complement existing ones.

The schema concept attempts to address critiques of the stage model, such as its rigidity and lack of context sensitivity. Using schemas allows for greater flexibility and integration of social factors into moral reasoning.

## **2. Does moral judgment match moral behavior?**

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Kohlberg never claimed that there would be a one-to-one correspondence between thinking and acting (what we say and what we do), but he does suggest that the two are linked.

However, Bee (1994) suggests that we also need to take into account of:

- a) habits that people have developed over time.
- b) whether people see situations as demanding their participation.
- c) the costs and benefits of behaving in a particular way.
- d) competing motive such as peer pressure, self-interest and so on.

Overall, Bee points out that moral behavior is only partly a question of moral reasoning. It also has to do with social factors.

### **3. Is justice the most fundamental moral principle?**

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This is Kohlberg's view. However, Gilligan (1977) suggests that the principle of caring for others is equally important. Furthermore, Kohlberg claims that the moral reasoning of males has often been in advance of that of females.

Girls are often found to be at stage 3 in Kohlberg's system (good boy-nice girl orientation), whereas boys are more often found to be at stage 4 (Law and Order orientation). Gilligan (p. 484) replies:

“The very traits that have traditionally defined the goodness of women, their care for and sensitivity to the needs of others, are those that mark them out as deficient in moral development”.

In other words, Gilligan claims that there is a sex bias in Kohlberg's theory. He neglects the feminine voice of compassion, love, and non-violence, which is associated with the socialization of girls.

Gilligan concluded that Kohlberg's theory did not account for the fact that women approach moral problems from an 'ethics of care', rather than an 'ethics of justice' perspective, which challenges some of the fundamental assumptions of Kohlberg's theory.

In contrast to Kohlberg's impersonal "ethics of justice", Gilligan proposed an alternative "ethics of care" grounded in compassion and responsiveness to needs within relationships (Gilligan, 1982).



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Her care perspective highlights emotion, empathy and understanding over detached logic. Gilligan saw care and justice ethics as complementary moral orientations.

Walker et al. (1995) found everyday moral conflicts often revolve around relationships rather than justice; individuals describe relying more on intuition than moral reasoning in dilemmas. This raises questions about the centrality of reasoning in moral functioning.

## **4. Do people make rational moral decisions?**

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Kohlberg's theory emphasizes rationality and logical decision-making at the expense of emotional and contextual factors in moral decision-making.

One significant criticism is that Kohlberg's emphasis on reason can create an image of the moral person as cold and detached from real-life situations.

Carol Gilligan critiqued Kohlberg's theory as overly rationalistic and not accounting for care-based morality commonly found in women. She argued for a "different voice" grounded in relationships and responsiveness to particular individuals.

The criticism suggests that by portraying moral reasoning as primarily cognitive and detached from emotional and situational factors, Kohlberg's theory oversimplifies real-life moral decision-making, which often involves emotions, social dynamics, cultural nuances, and practical constraints.

Critics contend that his model does not adequately capture the multifaceted nature of morality in the complexities of everyday life.

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## Further Information

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- [BBC Radio 4: The Heinz Dilemma](#)
- [The Science of Morality](#)
- [Piaget's Theory of Moral Development](#)

## FAQs

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### What is an example of moral development theory in real life?

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An example is a student who witnesses cheating on an important exam. The student is faced with the dilemma of whether to report the cheating or keep quiet.

A person at the pre-conventional level of moral development might choose not to report cheating because they fear the consequences or because they believe that everyone cheats.

A person at the conventional level might report cheating because they believe it is their duty to uphold the rules and maintain fairness in the academic environment.

A person at the post-conventional level might weigh the ethical implications of both options and make a decision based on their principles and values, such as honesty, fairness, and integrity, even if it may come with negative consequences.

This example demonstrates how moral development theory can help us understand how individuals reason about ethical dilemmas and make decisions based on their moral reasoning.

## What are the examples of stage 6 universal principles?

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Stage 6 of Kohlberg's moral development theory, also known as the Universal Ethical Principles stage, involves moral reasoning based on self-chosen ethical principles that are comprehensive and consistent. Examples might include:

**Equal human rights:** Someone at this stage would believe in the fundamental right of all individuals to life, liberty, and fair treatment. They would advocate for and act according to these rights, even if it meant opposing laws or societal norms.

**Justice for all:** A person at this stage believes in justice for all individuals and would strive to ensure fairness in all situations. For example, they might campaign against a law they believe to be unjust, even if it is widely accepted by society.

**Non-violence:** A commitment to non-violence could be a universal principle for some at this stage. For instance, they might choose peaceful protest or civil disobedience in the face of unjust laws or societal practices.

**Social contract:** People at this stage might also strongly believe in the social contract, wherein individuals willingly sacrifice some freedoms for societal benefits. However, they also understand that these societal norms can be challenged and changed if they infringe upon the universal rights of individuals.

**Respect for human dignity and worth:** Individuals at this stage view each person as possessing inherent value, and this belief guides their actions and judgments. They uphold the dignity and worth of every individual, regardless of social status or circumstance.

## What is the Kohlberg's Heinz dilemma?

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The Heinz dilemma is a moral question proposed by Kohlberg in his studies on moral development. It involves a man named Heinz who considers stealing a drug he cannot afford to save his dying wife, prompting discussion on the moral implications and justifications of his potential actions.

