# Kohlberg's stages of moral development

## Stages

Kohlberg's six stages can be more generally grouped into three levels of two stages each: pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional. Following Piaget's constructivist requirements for a [stage model](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory_of_cognitive_development#General_Information_regarding_the_stages), as described in his [theory of cognitive development](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory_of_cognitive_development), it is extremely rare to regress backward in stages—to lose the use of higher stage abilities. Stages cannot be skipped; each provides a new and necessary perspective, more comprehensive and differentiated than its predecessors but integrated with them.

*Level 1 (Pre-Conventional)*

1. Obedience and punishment orientation

(*How can I avoid punishment?*)

2. Self-interest orientation

(*What's in it for me?*)

*Level 2 (Conventional)*

3. Interpersonal accord and conformity

(*Social norms*)

(*The good boy/good girl attitude*)

4. Authority and social-order maintaining orientation

(*Law and order morality*)

*Level 3 (Post-Conventional)*

5. Social contract orientation

6. Universal ethical principles

(*Principled conscience*)

### Pre-Conventional

The pre-conventional level of moral reasoning is especially common in children, although adults can also exhibit this level of reasoning. Reasoners at this level judge the morality of an action by its direct consequences. The pre-conventional level consists of the first and second stages of moral development, and is solely concerned with the self in an egocentric manner. A child with preconventional morality has not yet adopted or internalized society's conventions regarding what is right or wrong, but instead focuses largely on external consequences that certain actions may bring.

In **Stage one** (obedience and punishment driven), individuals focus on the direct consequences of their actions on themselves. For example, an action is perceived as morally wrong because the perpetrator is punished. "The last time I did that I got spanked so I will not do it again." The worse the punishment for the act is, the more "bad" the act is perceived to be. This can give rise to an inference that even innocent victims are guilty in proportion to their suffering. It is "egocentric", lacking recognition that others' points of view are different from one's own. There is "deference to superior power or prestige".

**Stage two** (self-interest driven) espouses the "what's in it for me" position, in which right behavior is defined by whatever is in the individual's best interest. Stage two reasoning shows a limited interest in the needs of others, but only to a point where it might further the individual's own interests. As a result, concern for others is not based on loyalty or [intrinsic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intrinsic) respect, but rather a "you scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours" mentality.[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kohlberg's_stages_of_moral_development#cite_note-higheststage-1) The lack of a societal perspective in the pre-conventional level is quite different from the social contract (stage five), as all actions have the purpose of serving the individual's own needs or interests. For the stage two theorist, the world's perspective is often seen as [morally relative](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_relativism).

### Conventional

The conventional level of moral reasoning is typical of [adolescents](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolescence) and adults. Those who reason in a conventional way judge the morality of actions by comparing them to society's views and expectations. The conventional level consists of the third and fourth stages of moral development. Conventional morality is characterized by an acceptance of society's conventions concerning right and wrong. At this level an individual obeys rules and follows society's norms even when there are no consequences for obedience or disobedience. Adherence to rules and conventions is somewhat rigid, however, and a rule's appropriateness or fairness is seldom questioned.[[7]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kohlberg's_stages_of_moral_development#cite_note-istoought-6)[[8]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kohlberg's_stages_of_moral_development#cite_note-moralization-7)[[9]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kohlberg's_stages_of_moral_development#cite_note-measurement-8)

In **Stage three** (interpersonal accord and conformity driven), the self enters society by filling [social roles](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_role). Individuals are receptive to approval or disapproval from others as it reflects society's accordance with the perceived role. They try to be a "good boy" or "good girl" to live up to these expectations,[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kohlberg's_stages_of_moral_development" \l "cite_note-higheststage-1) having learned that there is inherent value in doing so. Stage three reasoning may judge the morality of an action by evaluating its consequences in terms of a person's [relationships](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interpersonal_relationship), which now begin to include things like respect, gratitude and the "[golden rule](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethic_of_reciprocity)". "I want to be liked and thought well of; apparently, not being naughty makes people like me." Desire to maintain rules and authority exists only to further support these social roles. The intentions of actions play a more significant role in reasoning at this stage; "they mean well ...".[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kohlberg's_stages_of_moral_development" \l "cite_note-higheststage-1)

In **Stage four** (authority and social order obedience driven), it is important to obey laws, [dictums](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dictum) and [social conventions](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_convention) because of their importance in maintaining a functioning society. Moral reasoning in stage four is thus beyond the need for individual approval exhibited in stage three; society must learn to transcend individual needs. A central ideal or ideals often prescribe what is right and wrong, such as in the case of [fundamentalism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fundamentalism). If one person violates a law, perhaps everyone would—thus there is an obligation and a duty to uphold laws and rules. When someone does violate a law, it is morally wrong; [culpability](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culpability) is thus a significant factor in this stage as it separates the bad domains from the good ones. Most active members of society remain at stage four, where morality is still predominantly dictated by an outside force.[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kohlberg's_stages_of_moral_development#cite_note-higheststage-1)

### Post-Conventional

The post-conventional level, also known as the principled level, consists of stages five and six of moral development. There is a growing realization that individuals are separate entities from society, and that the individual's own perspective may take precedence over society's view; they may disobey rules inconsistent with their own principles. These people live by their own abstract principles about right and wrong-principles that typically include such basic human rights as life, liberty, and justice. Because of this level's "nature of self before others", the behavior of post-conventional individuals, especially those at stage six, can be confused with that of those at the pre-conventional level.

People who exhibit postconventional morality view rules as useful but changeable mechanisms - ideally rules can maintain the general social order and protect human rights. Rules are not absolute dictates that must be obeyed without question. Contemporary theorists often speculate that many people may never reach this level of abstract moral reasoning. [[7]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kohlberg's_stages_of_moral_development#cite_note-istoought-6)[[8]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kohlberg's_stages_of_moral_development#cite_note-moralization-7)[[9]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kohlberg's_stages_of_moral_development#cite_note-measurement-8)

In **Stage five** (social contract driven), the world is viewed as holding different opinions, rights and values. Such perspectives should be mutually respected as unique to each person or community. Laws are regarded as [social contracts](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_contract) rather than rigid dictums. Those which do not promote the general welfare should be changed when necessary to meet "the greatest good for the greatest number of people".[[8]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kohlberg's_stages_of_moral_development#cite_note-moralization-7) This is achieved through [majority decision](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Majority_decision), and inevitable [compromise](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Compromise). [Democratic government](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democratic_government) is ostensibly based on stage five reasoning.

In **Stage six** (universal ethical principles driven), moral reasoning is based on [abstract reasoning](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abstraction) using universal ethical principles. Laws are valid only insofar as they are grounded in justice, and a commitment to justice carries with it an obligation to disobey unjust laws. Rights are unnecessary, as social contracts are not essential for [deontic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deontology) moral action. Decisions are not reached [hypothetically](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hypothetical_imperative) in a conditional way but rather [categorically](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Categorical_imperative) in an absolute way, as in the philosophy of [Immanuel Kant](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immanuel_Kant).[[16]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kohlberg's_stages_of_moral_development#cite_note-kant-15) This involves an individual imagining what they would do in another's shoes, if they believed what that other person imagines to be true.[[17]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kohlberg's_stages_of_moral_development#cite_note-rawls-16) The resulting consensus is the action taken. In this way action is never a means but always an end in itself; the individual acts because it is right, and not because it is instrumental, expected, legal, or previously agreed upon. Although Kohlberg insisted that stage six exists, he found it difficult to identify individuals who consistently operated at that level.[[13]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kohlberg's_stages_of_moral_development#cite_note-colby-12)