

A LINE ON LIFE

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Moral Development

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Why do people do the "right" or "moral" thing? How does this sense of morality develop? Psychologist **Lawrence Kohlberg**, through interviews with children and adults from many different cultures, has developed a theory. Kohlberg says that moral development is acquired in fixed stages, one after the other. These stages are at three different levels.

The first is the **preconventional** level, in which the child does the right thing because of the punishing or rewarding ability of an authority figure. The second, the **conventional** level (typical of teenagers and most adults), relies on conforming to group standards. The last, the **postconventional** level (estimated to be found in 20% of adults), does not rely on emotional attachment to group norms.

Within each level, there are two stages. Each stage emphasizes a different orientation.

PRECONVENTIONAL

Stage 1 emphasizes **punishment**. The child does what is right because of the fear of the punishing power of the authority. *"Don't do that, or mommy will spank you!"*

In contrast, stage 2 relies more on **pleasure** or **reward**. Here the ability of the authority to reward leads to doing the right thing. Many children treat others right, because they hope the others will return the favor by doing nice things for them. *"If you play nice, mommy will buy you an ice cream cone."*

CONVENTIONAL

Stage 3 involves being a **"good boy"** or **"good girl."** Essentially you are good to please others — to gain their approval. You want to possess the "good" virtues as defined by your group. *"Nobody likes a tattletale!"* This stage leads to strong conformity to peer standards so often found with teenagers and many adults.

Stage 4 emphasizes **law and order**. Here people do what is right, because it is their "duty" — because they respect authority for its own sake, in contrast to the power to punish or reward. *"You should do what granny says, just because she is your grandmother."*

POSTCONVENTIONAL

Stage 5 emphasizes a **social contract** agreed upon because of rational — in contrast to emotional — reasons. There is a reciprocal agreement based on mutual rights and obligations, such as in the United States Constitution. It is very legalistic.

Stage 6, the highest stage, relies on **universal ethical principles** such as justice, human dignity, and the rights of the individual. They do not necessarily correspond to the laws or standards of their society. Those who risked their lives to shelter Jews in Nazi Germany or help slaves from the old South were probably at stage 6 reasoning. This level typified great leaders like Ghandi, Lincoln and Martin Luther King.

Kohlberg says that each person is mainly in one stage but partially in the two adjacent stages. This is how he explains some of the inconsistencies in a person's behavior. However, knowing someone's stage of moral development does not necessarily help you to predict their behavior. For example, why do people obey the speed limit on highways? (We are assuming that some people do follow the speed limit.) Reasons for obedience can be found at any one (or more) of the six stages.

Stage 1: "I don't want to get a ticket or get arrested."

Stage 2: "I get better gas mileage to save money on gas."

Stage 3: "My friends (or spouse) don't approve of speeding."

Stage 4: "I do it just because 'it's the law,' and we should respect the law."

Stage 5: "We elected the representatives who made the law. We should obey it for that reason. If we don't like the law, we can have our representatives change it or elect new representatives."

Stage 6: "I value human life above everything. Since the speed limit saves lives, I will follow it."

From what we have discussed here, which stage(s) seem to fit your moral reasoning?
