




Lawrence Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development

Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development is an adaptation of the developmental theory of Jean Piaget. According to the theory, moral reasoning develops in six stages, each more adequate at responding to moral dilemmas than the one before.

Pre-Conventional Morality			
Stage 1	Obedience or Punishment Orientation	This is the stage that all young children start at (and a few adults remain in). Rules are seen as being fixed and absolute. Obeying the rules is important because it means avoiding punishment.	
Stage 2	Self-Interest Orientation	As children grow older, they begin to see that other people have their own goals and preferences and that often there is room for negotiation. Decisions are made based on the principle of "What's in it for me?" For example, an older child might reason: "If I do what mom or dad wants me to do, they will reward me. Therefore I will do it."	
Conventional Morality			
Stage 3	Social Conformity Orientation	By adolescence, most individuals have developed to this stage. There is a sense of what "good boys" and "nice girls" do and the emphasis is on living up to social expectations and norms because of how they impact day-to-day relationships.	
Stage 4	Law and Order Orientation	By the time individuals reach adulthood, they usually consider society as a whole when making judgments. The focus is on maintaining law and order by following the rules, doing one's duty and respecting authority.	
Post-Conventional Morality			
Stage 5	Social Contract Orientation	At this stage, people understand that there are differing opinions out there on what is right and wrong and that laws are really just a social contract based on majority decision and inevitable compromise. People at this stage sometimes disobey rules if they find them to be inconsistent with their personal values and will also argue for certain laws to be changed if they are no longer "working". Our modern democracies are based on the reasoning of Stage 5.	
Stage 6	Universal Ethics Orientation	Few people operate at this stage all the time. It is based on abstract reasoning and the ability to put oneself in other people's shoes. At this stage, people have a principled conscience and will follow universal ethical principles regardless of what the official laws and rules are.	