**Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development - Explained & Illustrated**

[Lawrence Kohlberg](http://faculty.frostburg.edu/mbradley/psyography/kohlberg.html) (1927-1987) was a well-known theorist in the field of moral development. He posed moral dilemmas (e.g., Heinz Dilemma) to his subjects then asked questions to probe their reasons for recommending a specific course of action.

**The Heinz Dilemma**

1. **Scenario 1**  
     
   A woman was near death from a unique kind of cancer. There is a drug that might save her. The drug costs $4,000 per dosage. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money and tried every legal means, but he could only get together about $2,000. He asked the doctor scientist who discovered the drug for a discount or let him pay later. But the doctor scientist refused.  
     
   Should Heinz break into the laboratory to steal the drug for his wife? Why or why not?
2. **Scenario 2**  
     
   Heinz broke into the laboratory and stole the drug. The next day, the newspapers reported the break-in and theft. Brown, a police officer and a friend of Heinz remembered seeing Heinz last evening, behaving suspiciously near the laboratory. Later that night, he saw Heinz running away from the laboratory.  
     
   Should Brown report what he saw? Why or why not?
3. **Scenario 3**  
     
   Officer Brown reported what he saw. Heinz was arrested and brought to court. If convicted, he faces up to two years' jail. Heinz was found guilty.  
     
   Should the judge sentence Heinz to prison? Why or why not?

**Stages of Moral Reasoning**

From his research, he identified six stages of reasoning at three levels.

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| **Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development** | | |
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**Movement through the Stages**

Kohlberg's theory of moral reasoning is a stage theory. In other words, everyone goes through the stages sequentially without skipping any stage. However, movement through these stages are not natural, that is people do not automatically move from one stage to the next as they mature. In stage development, movement is effected when cognitive dissonance occurs ... that is when a person notices inadequacies in his or her present way of coping with a given moral dilemma.  
  
But according to stage theory, people cannot understand moral reasoning more than one stage ahead of their own. For example, a person in Stage 1 can understand Stage 2 reasoning but nothing beyond that. Therefore, we should present moral arguments that are only one stage ahead of a person's present level of reasoning to stimulate movement to higher stages.  
  
This article (in 4 parts) is an attempt to use illustrations to help explain the six stages and to show how cognitive dissonance can be created by throwing up the inadequacies of the different stages of reasoning.

**Kohlberg's Level One - Preconventional Morality**

... so-called because people at this stage do not really understand the conventions / rules of a society.

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**Stage 1: Punishment-Obedience Orientation**

Lawrence Kohlberg: "Physical consequences of an action determine its goodness or badness regardless of the human meaning or value of these consequences. Avoidance of punishment and unquestioning deference to power are valued in their own right, not in terms of respect for an underlying moral order supported by punishment and authority." (Duska, R. and Whelan, M., 1975)   
  
Summary: The concern is for self - "Will I get into trouble for doing (or not doing) it?" Good behaviour is associated with avoiding punishment.

**Possible Stage 1 responses to Heinz Dilemma:**

* Heinz should not steal the [drug](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl1.htm) because he might be caught and sent to jail.
* Heinz should steal the drug because if he doesn't then his wife might scold him.

Note: Opposite responses could be given at each stage or different reasons could be given for the same response.  
  
**Inadequacy of Stage 1 reasoning:** Avoidance of punishment regardless of the ethical value of the actions is unhealthy especially under "bad" authorities such as Adolf Hitler.  
  
From 1933-45, Nazi soldiers persecuted Jews and other minorities. These soldiers either were carrying out orders under threat of punishment or had a misplaced trust in their leader.  
  
Another example of Stage 1 reasoning is a victim's fear of reporting sexual abuse because the perpetrator is a person in authority and had threatened to punish her if she did. How would you use the person's understanding of moral reasoning (Stages 1 and 2) to encourage her to report the abuse?

**Stage 2: Instrumental Relativist Orientation**

Lawrence Kohlberg: Right action is "that which instrumentally satisfies one's own needs and occasionally the needs of others." "Human relations are viewed in terms like those of the marketplace; elements of fairness, reciprocity and equal sharing are present, but they are always interpreted in a physical or pragmatic way. Reciprocity is a matter of 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours,' not of loyalty, gratitude or justice." (Duska, R. and Whelan, M., 1975)  
  
Summary: The concern is "What's in it for me?" Still egocentric in [outlook](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl1.htm) but with a growing ability to see things from another person's perspective. Action is judged right if it helps in satisfying one's needs or involves a fair exchange.

**Possible Stage 2 responses to Heinz Dilemma:**

* It is right for Heinz to steal the drug because it can [cure](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl1.htm) his wife and then she can cook for him.
* The [doctor](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl1.htm) scientist had spent lots of money and many years of his life to develop the cure so it's not fair to him if Heinz stole the drug.

**Inadequacy of Stage 2 reasoning:** Heinz' need to have the drug to save his wife conflicts with the doctor scientist's need to make a profit from his research.  
  
A modern day equivalent is the issue of [software piracy](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl1.htm) in the homes pitching the need of individuals to pick up IT skills against [software](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl1.htm) developers' need to make a profit.  
  
Where the needs of different individuals conflict, can there ever be a fair exchange? Doesn't this conflict call for sacrifice from one of the parties?

**Kohlberg's Level Two - Conventional Morality**

... so-called because people at this stage conform to the conventions / rules of a society.

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**Stage 3: Good Boy-Nice Girl Orientation**

Lawrence Kohlberg: "Good behavior is that which pleases or helps others and is approved by them. There is much conformity to stereotypical images of what is majority or 'natural' behaviour. Behavior is frequently judged by intention. 'He means well' becomes important for the first time. One earns approval by being 'nice.'" (Duska, R. and Whelan, M., 1975)   
  
Summary: The concern is "What will people think of me?" and the desire is for group approval. Right action is one that would please or impress others. This often involves self-sacrifice but it provides the psychological pleasure of 'approval of others.' Actions are also judged in relation to their intention.

**Possible Stage 3 responses to Heinz Dilemma:**

* Yes, Heinz should steal the [drug](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl2.htm). He probably will go to jail for a short time for stealing but his in-laws will think he is a good husband.
* Brown, the police officer should report that he saw Heinz behaving suspiciously and running away from the laboratory because his boss would be pleased. [ See [Scenario 2](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Heinz.htm) of Heinz Dilemma ]
* Officer Brown should not report what he saw because his friend Heinz would be pleased.
* The judge should not sentence Heinz to jail for stealing the drug because he meant well ... he stole it to [cure](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl2.htm) his wife. [ See [Scenario 3](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Heinz.htm) of Heinz Dilemma ]

Note: Opposite responses could be given at each stage or different reasons could be given for the same response.  
  
**Inadequacy of Stage 3 reasoning:**

* Same person, different roles OR Different groups, different expectations  
    
  What should Heinz do if he is in the same Medical Association as the [doctor](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl2.htm) scientist? Family members will think he is a good husband if he stole the drug but he may not be able to face any member of the Association again. If he does not steal, his family members will think he is heartless. How can Heinz resolve these conflicting expectations?  
    
  Another example of "different groups, different expectations" would be a teenager struggling with the expectations of his peer group and those of his [parents](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl2.htm). From which group does he seek approval?
* Different people, different roles  
    
  As a good husband, Heinz should steal the drug to cure his wife.  
    
  But Brown, the police officer who saw Heinz behaving suspiciously and running away from the laboratory, also has a role to play. Does not that role demand that he report what he saw?  
    
  Then there is the judge who has the responsibility to uphold justice. Does not that role demand that he sentence Heinz to jail?
* People not living up to their duties or roles  
    
  What if Heinz doesn't love his wife and does not want to steal the drug?  
    
  As filial sons and daughters, we should provide financial support for our needy parents. But what if people, who are capable of supporting their parents, don't? Should laws be legislated (like [the Maintenance of Parents Act](http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_retrieve.pl?actno=REVED-167B&doctitle=MAINTENANCE%20OF%20PARENTS%20ACT%0a&date=latest&method=part)) to "force" expected action?  
    
  Another question: Should the doctor scientist be forced to turn the drug over to Heinz at half price? Why or why not?

**Stage 4: Law and Order Orientation**

Lawrence Kohlberg: "Right behavior consists in doing one's duty, showing respect for authority and maintaining the given social order for its own sake." A person in this stage "orients to society as a system of fixed rule, law and authority with the prospect of any deviation from rules as leading to social chaos." (Duska, R. and Whelan, M., 1975)  
  
Summary: The concern now goes beyond one's immediate group(s) to the larger society ... to the maintenance of law and order. One's obligation to the law overrides one's obligations of loyalty to one's family, friends and groups. To put it simply, no one or group is above the law.

**Possible Stage 4 responses to Heinz Dilemma:**

* As her husband, Heinz has a duty to save his wife's life so he should steal the drug. But it's wrong to steal, so Heinz should be prepared to accept the penalty for breaking the law.
* The judge should sentence Heinz to jail. Stealing is against the law! He should not make any exceptions even though Heinz' wife is dying. If the judge does not sentence Heinz to jail then others may think it's right to steal and there will be chaos in the society.

An example of Stage 4 reasoning in a school setting would be a prefect who found his [best friend](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl2.htm) who is also the head prefect breaking a school rule. The prefect said he was sorry that he had to book him (his best friend) as he could not make any exceptions. The law is the same for everybody.  
  
**Inadequacy of Stage 4 reasoning:**

* Unquestioning obedience toward authority is unhealthy  
    
  Marshall Applewhite of Heaven's Gate asked his followers to commit suicide so as to shed their earthly bodies (or "containers") and depart in an UFO to a higher plane of existence. The UFO was supposedly travelling behind the Hale-Bopp comet. In late March 1997, all 39 cult members obeyed and took their own lives in a mass suicide ( Source: [CNN Interactive](http://www.cnn.com/US/9703/27/suicide.interview/index.html) ).
* Accepted social order may not be the best possible order. The laws of society may even be bad.  
    
  For example, Hitler introduced a decree suspending the basic rights of citizens and imposing the death sentence for arson, sabotage, resistance to the decree, and disturbances to public order ( Source: [The First Steps Leading to the Final Solution](http://remember.org/guide/Facts.root.solution.html) ).

There are other societies with rules different from ours. Why should we just accept the conventions or rules of our society? What are the bases for our rules?

**Kohlberg's Level Three - Postconventional Morality**

... so-called because the moral principles that underline the [conventions](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl3.htm) of a society are understood.

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**Stage 5: Social Contract Orientation**

Lawrence Kohlberg: "Generally with utilitarian overtones. Right action tends to be defined in terms of general [individual rights](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl3.htm) and in terms of standards which have been critically examined and agreed upon by the whole society ... with an emphasis upon the possibility of changing [law](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl3.htm) in terms of rational consideration of social utility (rather than rigidly maintaining it in terms of Stage 4 law and order)." (Duska, R. and Whelan, M., 1975)   
  
Summary: The concern is social utility or public interest. While rules are needed to maintain social order, they should not be blindly obeyed but should be set up (even changed) by social contract for the greater good of society. Right action is one that protects the rights of the individual according to rules agreed upon by the whole society.

**Possible Stage 5 responses to Heinz Dilemma:**

* Heinz should steal the drug because everyone has the right to life regardless of the law against stealing. Should Heinz be caught and prosecuted for stealing then the law (against stealing) needs to be reinterpreted because a person's life is at stake.
* The doctor scientist's decision is despicable but his right to fair compensation (for his discovery) must be maintained. Therefore, Heinz should not steal the drug.

Note: Opposite responses could be given at each stage or different reasons could be given for the same response.  
  
**Inadequacy of Stage 5 reasoning:** How do we arrive at a consensus on the rules that are good for society? Should a majority group impose their preferences on a minority group? What if you disagree with the decision of the majority? Would you then disobey "their" rules?

**Stage 6: Universal Ethical Principle Orientation**

Lawrence Kohlberg: "Right is defined by the decision of conscience in accord with self-chosen ethical principles appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality and consistency. These principles are abstract and ethical (the golden rule, the categorical imperative) and are not concrete moral rules like the Ten Commandments. At heart, these are universal principles of justice, of the reciprocity and equality of human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons." (Duska, R. and Whelan, M., 1975)  
  
Explanatory Notes:

* The Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."
* The Categorical Imperative: "Act so as to treat any rational being as an end-in-himself and never merely as a means." In other words, a moral law that is unconditional or absolute and which does not depend on any ulterior motive or end. Compare "You shall not steal" with "Do not steal if you want respect in the [community](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl3.htm)." The former is an end-in-itself ... a categorical imperative.

Summary: The concern is for moral principles ... an action is judged right if it is consistent with self-chosen ethical principles. These principles are not concrete moral rules but are universal principles of justice, reciprocity, equality and human dignity.

**Possible Stage 6 response to Heinz Dilemma:** Heinz should steal the drug to save his wife because preserving human life is a higher moral obligation than preserving property.  
  
**Inadequacy of Stage 6 reasoning:** Our [conscience](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/conscience.htm) is not an infallible guide to behaviour because it works according to the principles we have adopted. Moreover, who or what determines these universal principles?  
  
A vivid illustration of our conscience not being an infallible guide is the story of the Sawi people of New Guinea (now called Irian Jaya). In the early 1960s, they were cannibals. In Sawi legend, their heroes weren't those who took the greatest number of heads, but those who were the most deceitful in befriending their victims before taking their heads. Friendship before betrayal would not prick their conscience because treachery was an ideal. So when missionaries, Don and Carol Richardson told them the story of Christ's life, who do you think was the real hero to the Sawi people? Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed Jesus! ( Source: [Peace Child](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ISBN=0830704159/parentingthenextA/) by Don Richardson )

**Conclusion**

Although moral reasoning does not necessarily lead to moral action, the latter is based in part on one's capacity to reason about moral choices. Kohlberg was more concerned with the reasoning of the action than the action itself. And that reasoning when acted upon becomes our motivation.  
  
Jesus made it clear that our motivation is just as important as our action (Matt. 6:1-18 c.f. Acts 4:36-5:11). Therefore, we (parents) need to go beyond living an exemplary lifestyle to sharing and explaining the reasons of our actions. If we don't, our children may attribute wrong reasons (and values) to our right actions!  
  
We could also teach moral reasoning by discussing moral dilemmas that our children are [likely to face](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/dilemma.htm) in their daily lives ... probing for & challenging their reasoning and sharing a biblical perspective. In the context of moral dilemmas, biblical action flows from the following:

1. Knowing the issues involved in a moral dilemma
2. Understanding the biblical imperatives, principles and values pertinent to the moral dilemma
3. Believing in these imperatives and principles
4. Integrating them into our value structure
5. Having the desire and commitment to obey or follow them

Moral reasoning cannot be divorced from moral values. The inevitable question as seen in (2) above: What values are pertinent to the moral dilemma? Moral education is more than leading our children upward from one stage of reasoning to the next. It includes the teaching of biblical values. We need to teach both ... moral reasoning and moral content.