

# LAWRENCE KOHLBERG'S THEORY OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT

**B.Ed. Ist Yr Course-1 Credit-4**

## CHILDHOOD AND GROWING UP

Dr. Manjita Sahay W.T.C. Patna University

[Msahay2009@gmail.com](mailto:Msahay2009@gmail.com) Mob.7004313269



**Lawrence Kohlberg**, a psychologist belonging to the University of Harvard is known for putting forward a theory of the development of moral judgement in the individual right from the years of early childhood. He has based his theory of moral development on the findings of the studies conducted on hundreds of children from different cultures.

### ***Heinz Dilemma:***

The Heinz dilemma is a frequently used example in many ethics and morality classes. One well-known version of the dilemma used in Lawrence Kohlberg's moral development theory. Heinz wife was suffering from a special type of cancer and was on her deathbed. The only drug could save her was radium and the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to produce. Heinz went to everyone he knew to borrow money, but he could only manage to get together half of the money what it costed. He pleaded the druggist to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the greedy druggist refused to do so. Being

desperate Heinz had no other option but to steal the drug to save the life of his wife. Is this a better option to do? What is your judgement? Now to solve Heinz's dilemma, a thinker has the following options.

- i. Heinz should not steal because it is the disobedience of law.
- ii. Heinz can steal the drug but should be punished by the law.
- iii. Heinz can steal the drug and no law should punish him.

i) In the first case Heinz wife dies, and the druggist becomes richer, no moral justice was done. This is pre-conventional way of moral thinking.

ii) In the second case Heinz could save his wife but will be kept in prison. Though Heinz took a moral decision he had to undergo the punishment. This is Conventional level of moral thinking.

iii) The decision let Heinz save his wife and both live happily. This thinking is based on the thought that the rigidity in the law should be rejected and justice should be done on moral grounds. This is post-conventional level of moral thinking.

He differs from the popular view that children imbibe the sense and methods of moral judgement from their parents and elders by way of learning. He clarified that cognitive processes like thinking and reasoning play a major role in one's moral development i.e the way children make moral judgement depends on their level of intellectual development, upbringing as well as on their learning experiences.

For studying the process of moral development in human beings, Kohlberg first **defined Moral development as the development of an individual's sense of justice**. For estimating one's sense of justice he concentrated on one's views on morality with the help of a test of moral judgements consisting of a set of moral dilemmas. For example, should a man who cannot afford the medicine of his dying wife needs, steal it? Should a doctor mercy-kill a fatally ill person suffering terrible pain? Is it better to save the life of one important person or a lot of unimportant persons? With the help of the responses he received from his subjects he came to the conclusion that like the Piagetian stages of Cognitive development there also exist universal stages in the development of moral

values, and the movement from one stage to another depends upon cognitive abilities rather than the simple acquisition of moral values of one's parents, elders and peers. He then identified three levels of moral development each containing two stages:

<b>Level 1.</b>	<b>Premoral (Age 4 to 10 Yrs.)</b>
<b>Stage 1.</b>	<b>The stage of obedience for avoiding punishment</b>
<b>Stage2.</b>	<b>The stage of conforming to obtain rewards and favors in return</b>
<b>Level 2.</b>	<b>Conventional Morality (Age10 to 13 Yrs.)</b>
<b>Stage 3.</b>	<b>The stage of maintaining mutual relations and approval of others</b>
<b>Stage4</b>	<b>The stage of obedience for avoiding censure by higher authority or social systems</b>
<b>Level 3.</b>	<b>Self-Accepted Moral Principles (Age 13, Middle or Later Adulthood or never)</b>
<b>Stage 5.</b>	<b>Stage of conforming to the democratically accepted law and mores of Community welfare</b>

<b>Stage 6.</b>	<b>Stage of conforming to universal ethical principles and the call of one's conscience</b>
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**Premoral Level (4to 10 Yrs.)** The child begins to make judgements about what is right or wrong, good or bad. However, by the standard which he measures the morality are those of others. He is persuaded to take such judgement either to avoid punishment or to earn rewards. Development of morality as this level usually follows the following two stages.

**Stage 1:** In the beginning, the child's morality is controlled by the fear of punishment. He tries to obey his parents and elders purely to avoid reproof and punishment.

**Stage2.**In the second stage of premoral level, children's moral judgement is based on self-interest and considerations of what others can do for them in return. Here they value a thing because it has some practical utility for them. They obey the orders of their parents because it serves their interests.

**Conventional Morality Level:** At this stage, children's moral judgement is controlled by the likes and dislikes of others---the conventions, rules regulations the law and order system maintained within society. Stealing or mercy-killing would thus be judged wrong because it is considered wrong by society at large and by the legal system. In this level the child identifies with authority.

***Stage 3:*** In the early years of the second level of moral development, the child's moral judgement is based on the desire to obtain approval of others and avoid being disliked by others. The child wants to be declared a good boy or a good girl, for this purpose he begins to judge the intentions and likes or dislikes of others and acts accordingly.

***Stage 4:*** In the later years of the Conventional morality level children's moral judgement are governed by conventions as well as the laws and the mores of a social system. The children now follow the rules and regulations of society and take decision about things being right or wrong with a view to avoiding censure by the elders, authorities or the social system.

*Self-accepted Moral principles level (Age13 or during late adulthood):* This marks the highest level of attainment of true morality as the controlling force for making moral judgements now rests with individual himself. He does not value a thing or conform to an idea merely because of consideration of the views of others, conventions law and order system of the society but because it fits in the framework of his self-accepted moral principles. This level is characterized by two separate stages:

*Stage 5:* At this stage the individual's moral judgement are internalized in such a form that he responds positively to authority only if he agrees with the principle upon which the demands of authority are based. The individual at this stage begins to think in rational terms, valuing the rights of human beings and the welfare of the society. For example at this stage in deference to the rights of the human being, the decision about mercy-killing may be left to the individual who is suffering, and if so needed, the concerned laws may be amended for the welfare of he society at large.



**Stage 6:** At this stage the controlling force for making moral judgements are highly internalized. The decisions of the individual are now based upon his conscience and the belief in universal principles of respect, justice and equality. He does what he, as an individual think right regardless of legal restrictions or the opinion of others. Thus, at this stage people act according to the inner voice of their conscience and lead a life that they can without self-condemnation or feeling of guilt or shame.

**Conclusion** From the above discussion of the stages of moral development it is clear that although children begin to think about morality in terms of justice or right and wrong at a very early age, yet they have to wait until adolescence or adulthood for the dawning of the stage of true morality. Also, it is not essential that all people pass through the third level of moral development. Most adults are not able to cross the second level and few can reach stage 5, and among these there are very few, who being intellectually quite sound, can think rationally and base their moral judgement purely on the dictates of their conscience at the risk of life and property.

