

Kohlberg's Levels of Morality

As we age, our sense of right/wrong grows more “sophisticated”

Level I: Preconventional Morality

- Main Focus
 - Hedonism—avoid punishment, seek pleasure
- Ages 4-10

- Stage 1: Punishment and Obedience Orientation
 - Children obey authority simply to avoid punishment
 - Children obey out of self-interest—what punishment will I avoid for obeying?
 - Right and wrong are defined by punishment or reward—not good or bad

- Stage 2: Naïve Instrumental Hedonism
 - We do “good” things only if we get something in return
 - We obey authority/moral codes because we wish to be rewarded
 - “if you scratch my back, I will scratch yours”
 - Children do not worry about being good people—right and wrong still defined by what you can get out of obedience

Level II: Conventional Morality

- Main Focus
 - Conformity: we obey authority in order to maintain established peace and order
- Ages 10-adult

- Stage 3: Maintaining Good Relations/Approval of Others
 - People still follow authority over them and do not question
 - I want to be a good person, desire for people in authority to recognize me as good/obedient
 - Begin to look at motives behind actions
 - If I help someone carry a heavy object out of selfish motives, I have not done a good deed

- Stage 4: Law and Order Orientation
 - Law is a good thing, provides protection. Law and authority should be honored and never questioned
 - Disobedience to authority/law should be punished
 - An act is always wrong if it violates a law or harms another human

Level III: Postconventional Morality

- Main Focus: Self-defined notions of good and evil; questioning authority
- Adult—most never reach this level

- Stage 5: Morality of Social Contract
 - Begin to question absolute goodness/necessity of authority
 - Are there times when the law should be disobeyed for the greater good?
 - Mostly, though, the law should be followed in order to maintain social order
 - Exception: “if I cannot afford to feed my children, is it moral to steal?”

- Stage 6: Questioning of Universal Ethical Principles
 - Relative morality: what is good in one case may not be in another
 - It would be morally wrong to steal bread, but it is more wrong to let your children starve
 - Universal morals do not exist—the law is not true/good in every case and can be redefined in order to fit each individual situation