

Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development

Part 2

Examples of applied moral dilemmas

Kohlberg established the *Moral Judgment Interview* in his original 1958 dissertation. During the roughly 45 minute tape recorded semi-structured interview, the interviewer uses moral dilemmas to determine which stage of moral reasoning a person uses. The dilemmas are fictional short stories that describe situations in which a person has to make a moral decision. The participant is asked a systemic series of open-ended questions, like what they think the right course of action is, as well as justifications as to why certain actions are right or wrong. The form and structure of these replies are scored and not the content; over a set of multiple moral dilemmas an overall score is derived.

Heinz dilemma

A dilemma that Kohlberg used in his original research was the druggist's dilemma: *Heinz Steals the Drug In Europe*.

A woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to produce. He paid \$200 for the radium and charged \$2,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could only get together about \$ 1,000, which is half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said, "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." So Heinz got desperate and broke into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife.

Should Heinz have broken into the laboratory to steal the drug for his wife? Why or why not?

From a theoretical point of view, it is not important what the participant thinks that Heinz should *do*.

Kohlberg's theory holds that the justification the participant offers is what is significant, the *form* of their response.

Below are some of many examples of possible arguments that belong to the six stages:

Stage 1 (*obedience*): Heinz should not steal the medicine because he will consequently be put in prison which will mean he is a bad person. Or: Heinz should steal the medicine because it is only worth \$200 and not how much the druggist wanted for it; Heinz had even offered to pay for it and was not stealing anything else.

Stage 2 (*self-interest*): Heinz should steal the medicine because he will be much happier if he saves his wife, even if he will have to serve a prison sentence. Or: Heinz should not steal the medicine because prison is an awful place, and he would probably languish over a jail cell more than his wife's death.

Stage 3 (*conformity*): Heinz should steal the medicine because his wife expects it; he wants to be a good husband. Or: Heinz should not steal the drug because stealing is bad and he is not a criminal; he tried to do everything he could without breaking the law, you cannot blame him.

Stage 4 (*law-and-order*): Heinz should not steal the medicine because the law prohibits stealing, making it illegal. Or: Heinz should steal the drug for his wife but also take the prescribed punishment for the crime as well as paying the druggist what he is owed. Criminals cannot just run around without regard for the law; actions have consequences.

Stage 5 (*human rights*): Heinz should steal the medicine because everyone has a right to choose life, regardless of the law. Or: Heinz should not steal the medicine because the scientist has a right to fair compensation. Even if his wife is sick, it does not make his actions right.

Stage six (*universal human ethics*): Heinz should steal the medicine, because saving a human life is a more fundamental value than the property rights of another person. Or: Heinz should not steal the medicine, because others may need the medicine just as badly, and their lives are equally significant.

Criticisms

One criticism of Kohlberg's theory is that it emphasizes justice to the exclusion of other values. As a consequence of this, it may not adequately address the arguments of people who value other moral aspects of actions. Carol Gilligan has argued that Kohlberg's theory is overly androcentric -- the practice, conscious or otherwise, of placing male human beings or the masculine point of view at the center of one's view of the world and its culture and history. Kohlberg's theory was initially developed based on empirical research using only male participants; Gilligan argued that it did not adequately describe the concerns of women. Although research has generally found no significant pattern of differences in moral development between sexes, Gilligan's theory of moral development does not focus on the value of justice. She developed an alternative theory of moral reasoning that is based on the ethics of caring. Critics such as Christina Hoff-Sommers, however, argued that Gilligan's research is ill-founded, and that no evidence exists to support her conclusion.

Other psychologists have questioned the assumption that moral action is primarily reached by formal reasoning. One such group, the social intuitionists, state people often make moral judgments without weighing concerns such as fairness, law, human rights and abstract ethical values. Given this, the arguments that Kohlberg and other rationalist psychologists have analyzed could be considered post hoc rationalizations of intuitive decisions. This would mean that moral reasoning is less relevant to moral action than Kohlberg's theory suggests.

Continued relevance

Theory and research of Kohlberg's stages of moral development have been utilized by others in academia. One such example, the *Defining Issues Test* or *DIT*, was created by James Rest in 1979 originally as a pencil-and-paper alternative to the *Moral Judgment Interview*. Heavily influenced by the six-stage model, it made efforts to improve validity criteria by using a quantitative test of a likert scale to rate moral dilemmas similar to Kohlberg's. It also used a large body of Kohlbergian theory such as the idea of 'post-conventional thinking'. In 1999 the *DIT* was revised as the *DIT-2*; the test persists in many areas that require moral testing and in varied cohorts.

See also

[Jean Piaget, Theory of cognitive development](#)
[Carol Gilligan, Ethics of care](#)
[James W. Fowler, Stages of faith development](#)
[Jane Loevinger, Stages of ego development](#)
[Erik Erikson, Stages of psychosocial development](#)
[James Rest, Defining Issues Test](#)

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