

NAIVE HEDONISM

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1. Core Definition and Placement in Kohlberg's Model

Naive Hedonism, also frequently referred to as the **Instrumental Relativist Orientation** or the **Instrumental Exchange Stage**, constitutes Stage 2 within the three levels and six stages of Lawrence Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development. This particular stage resides within the foundational **Pre-conventional Level**, which characterizes the moral reasoning typical of young children, generally spanning ages four through ten. The defining characteristic of the Pre-conventional Level is that moral judgments are based almost exclusively on the direct consequences of actions to the individual, focusing on personal gain or the avoidance of punishment, rather than on internal societal norms, abstract principles of justice, or empathy for others. Naive Hedonism represents a significant, albeit limited, progression from Stage 1, moving the locus of moral decision-making from absolute obedience to external authority toward a more autonomous, calculated pursuit of self-interest.

The essence of Naive Hedonism is captured by the principle of reciprocity, often summarized as a "tit-for-tat" mentality. However, unlike the sophisticated understanding of fairness found in higher stages of moral development, the reciprocity here is purely pragmatic and instrumental. Children operating at this stage believe that an action is morally "right" if it directly satisfies their own needs or if it leads to an equitable exchange of benefits. They are highly motivated by the anticipation of reward or the negotiation of a favorable outcome. Consequently, moral actions are not inherently good or bad; their value is contingent upon the personal utility they provide. If helping another child guarantees a reward or a reciprocal favor in the future, the action is deemed good; if it involves personal sacrifice without foreseeable benefit, it is usually avoided.

This conceptual framework highlights the child's emerging cognitive capacity to distinguish their own interests from external rules. While Stage 1 is dominated by fear and passive compliance with powerful authority figures, Stage 2 introduces a form of contractual morality. The child recognizes that different individuals have different needs and that social rules are not rigid, immutable commands, but rather tools that can be utilized or negotiated to maximize personal advantage. This calculated self-interest, while seemingly selfish from an adult perspective, is a crucial developmental milestone, representing the earliest form of moral autonomy where the child actively weighs costs and benefits rather than simply following commands. The "naive" element stems from the unsophisticated, immediate nature of the self-serving calculation, usually failing to account for long-term consequences, abstract concepts of duty, or the complexity of institutionalized justice.

2. Characteristics of Instrumental Exchange

The Instrumental Exchange orientation is characterized by a specific set of operational beliefs that govern the child's interaction with the social environment. The core mechanism is the utilitarian assessment of relationships, viewing interactions as a means to an end. Friendship, sharing, or cooperation are often initiated and maintained only insofar as they contribute directly to the child's immediate desires, such as obtaining a desired toy, avoiding chores, or securing a favored position in a game. This framework dictates that if a rule or an agreement ceases to serve the child's personal utility, the justification for adhering to it is significantly diminished. This stage represents the first explicit recognition that conflicts of interest exist and must be managed through negotiation rather than simple submission.

A key psychological feature of this stage is the development of a rudimentary understanding of perspective-taking, a necessary precursor to instrumental exchange. The child realizes that others also possess needs and motivations, and that these motivations can be leveraged or manipulated to achieve one's own goals. For instance, a child might offer to share a snack not out of generosity, but because they anticipate needing help with a school assignment later that day. The moral calculation is therefore: "If I do X for you, you will do Y for me." This is a purely pragmatic social contract, lacking genuine ethical grounding. The concept of justice is limited to the notion of mechanical equality or concrete exchange--if I give you half of my candy, I must receive half of your playtime. Fairness is strictly defined by the balance of transactions, not by underlying principles of equity or human rights.

Furthermore, authority figures, such as parents or teachers, are viewed primarily as agents who facilitate or obstruct the pursuit of personal gratification. While Stage 1 adherence relied on the fear of punishment dispensed by these authorities, Stage 2 adherence relies on the desire for rewards granted by them. Obedience is thus transactional; compliance is offered in return for privileges, praise, or material goods. If an authority figure fails to deliver the expected reward, or if the child perceives an opportunity to gain more by circumventing the rules without detection, the motivation for compliance evaporates. This transactional nature clearly distinguishes Naive Hedonism from the later Conventional Level, where adherence to authority is driven by loyalty, respect for law and order, and the maintenance of the social system itself.

3. The Role of Self-Interest and Needs Fulfillment

The designation "Hedonism" in Naive Hedonism directly links this stage to the psychological drive for pleasure and the minimization of pain, echoing the Pleasure Principle central to psychoanalytic theory, albeit applied here to moral reasoning. In this developmental context, "pleasure" broadly refers to the satisfaction of immediate, concrete needs and desires, whether they are physical (e.g., food, comfort) or social (e.g., praise, attention). The child defines moral goodness based on

whether an action moves them closer to a desired state of satisfaction or further away from an undesirable one. This intrinsic focus on the self means that external moral codes are only internalized to the extent that they serve this primary goal.

The self-interest driving Stage 2 behavior is not yet refined by altruism or empathy, concepts that require a more mature capacity for abstract thought and true perspective-taking. While the child understands that others have needs (a necessary component for instrumental bargaining), this understanding is utilized strategically rather than empathetically. If another person's suffering presents an obstacle to the child's goal, that suffering is generally dismissed or ignored. If, however, alleviating that suffering leads to a reward or avoids negative social consequence (e.g., parental disapproval), the act of helping becomes instrumentalized. This reliance on concrete, tangible outcomes underscores the "naive" qualification of the term; the moral landscape is simple, centered around the immediate self.

This stage profoundly contrasts with the post-conventional morality stages (Stages 5 and 6), where self-interest is superseded by universal ethical principles and a commitment to justice that transcends personal advantage. The Naive Hedonist is incapable of conceiving of abstract concepts like human dignity or universal rights, precisely because these concepts often necessitate sacrificing immediate self-interest for the greater good or upholding a principle regardless of personal cost. For the child in Stage 2, morality remains entirely ego-centric; it is a mechanism for navigating the world successfully to obtain maximal personal satisfaction, making decisions highly dependent on situational variables and the perceived likelihood of reward or punishment evasion.

4. Comparison with Stage 1: Obedience and Punishment Orientation

The transition from Stage 1, the **Obedience and Punishment Orientation**, to Stage 2, Naive Hedonism, marks the first significant intellectual shift in moral reasoning according to Kohlberg's model. In Stage 1, the child defines morality almost entirely by fear and external power. Actions are good if they avoid punishment and bad if they result in punishment, irrespective of the underlying intentions or circumstances. Authority is absolute, and rules are perceived as fixed, unchallengeable mandates handed down by powerful figures. Moral reasoning is passive and reactionary: "I must not hit my sibling because I will be grounded." There is no sense of internal moral justification; obedience is the sole moral imperative.

Stage 2 introduces a radical change by recognizing the possibility of internal calculation and choice. The child begins to realize that punishment is not guaranteed, and that some rules can be bent or negotiated. The motivation shifts from the negative imperative (avoiding pain) to the positive imperative (seeking reward or gain). While Stage 1 adheres to rules regardless of utility (if the authority says so), Stage 2 adheres to rules only if they offer a perceived benefit. This

developmental shift indicates an increased capacity for cognitive independence and a preliminary understanding of social systems as flexible, rather than monolithic.

Crucially, Stage 1 involves a unilateral relationship with authority, whereas Stage 2 involves a bilateral, transactional relationship. The Naive Hedonist may challenge or bargain with authority ("If I clean my room, can I have extra screen time?"). This transition signifies the move from passive compliance to active agency, laying the intellectual groundwork for understanding contracts and mutual agreement, skills essential for functioning in later stages of society. Thus, while both stages are grouped under the Pre-conventional Level due to their self-centered motivation, Stage 2 represents a necessary and complex advancement in cognitive structure, allowing the child to engage with moral dilemmas through instrumental logic.

5. Developmental Significance and Transition to Conventional Morality

Naive Hedonism holds significant developmental importance as it bridges the gap between purely self-protective morality (Stage 1) and socially-oriented morality (Stages 3 and 4). By mastering the principles of instrumental exchange, the child learns fundamental lessons about social interaction, namely that cooperation is often necessary to achieve individual goals and that social systems require a certain level of predictability and adherence to negotiated expectations. This understanding of mutual benefit--the idea that society functions as a network of reciprocal services--is a prerequisite for appreciating the rules and expectations of the Conventional Level.

The eventual transition out of Stage 2 into Stage 3 (Good Boy/Good Girl Orientation) involves a shift from prioritizing self-gain to prioritizing social approval and interpersonal harmony. While the Naive Hedonist helps others to get something back, the Stage 3 individual helps others to maintain good relationships, be seen as a "nice person," and fulfill societal roles associated with being a good friend or family member. This progression indicates that the child has moved from viewing others merely as agents of transaction to viewing them as valued members of an important social group. The self-interest characteristic of Stage 2 remains present, but it becomes refined and channeled through the mechanism of social belonging and reputation management.

The mastery of instrumental reasoning allows children to navigate increasingly complex peer relationships and school environments where formal rules and informal social contracts govern behavior. Before a child can internalize the value of rules for maintaining community order (Stage 4), they must first understand how rules and agreements can personally benefit them. Naive Hedonism provides this necessary foundation, training the mind in cost-benefit analysis and the dynamics of social power exchange. Without this stage, the leap to understanding abstract concepts of duty and law, which characterize higher stages, would be cognitively impossible.

6. Theoretical Roots and Relationship to General Hedonism

The concept of hedonism, broadly defined, is rooted deeply in philosophical inquiry, dating back to ancient Greek thinkers such as Epicurus and Aristippus. In philosophy, hedonism asserts that pleasure is the only intrinsic good and the ultimate aim of human action. Psychological hedonism suggests that all human action is ultimately motivated by the desire for pleasure or the avoidance of pain, regardless of whether the individual recognizes this underlying motivation. Naive Hedonism aligns closely with this psychological interpretation, positioning the child's moral motivation fundamentally in the pursuit of positive personal outcomes.

However, it is vital to distinguish the "naive" developmental stage from sophisticated philosophical theories like Utilitarianism (a form of ethical hedonism) or refined Epicureanism. Utilitarianism, championed by thinkers such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, advocates for actions that maximize pleasure and minimize pain for the greatest number of people. This requires a complex calculus, altruism, and abstract reasoning far beyond the capacity of the Stage 2 child. Similarly, Epicureanism often focused on tranquility (ataraxia) and the minimization of pain through simple living and intellectual pursuits--a long-term, sophisticated form of benefit calculation.

Naive Hedonism, conversely, is immediate, concrete, and ego-centric. The child is concerned only with their own pleasure or pain, exhibiting little capacity for generalized concern or abstract ethical commitment. Kohlberg's use of the term thus grounds the moral calculus in the simplest, most fundamental psychological drive: the need for individual satisfaction. It represents the point where this basic biological drive intersects with emergent social cognition, resulting in a self-serving transactional approach to morality that is characteristic of early childhood development.

7. Criticisms of Stage 2 and Kohlberg's Framework

While Naive Hedonism provides a valuable descriptive model for early moral reasoning, Kohlberg's overall framework, and by extension, the characterization of Stage 2, has faced substantial criticism. One major critique, famously advanced by Carol Gilligan, suggests that the theory is inherently biased toward a male-centric "justice perspective," emphasizing rules, rights, and instrumental logic, while neglecting a female-centric "care perspective," which prioritizes relationships, responsibilities, and emotional context. Gilligan argued that focusing solely on instrumental exchange might undervalue early displays of relational morality that do not fit the Stage 2 calculus but are nonetheless morally significant.

Furthermore, empirical research often reveals inconsistencies in the application of Stage 2 reasoning. While the stages are meant to be invariant and sequential, studies have shown that individuals, including children, often utilize moral reasoning associated with different stages depending on the context of the dilemma. A child might exhibit Naive Hedonism in a high-stakes peer interaction (e.g., hoarding a resource) but display Stage 3 reasoning (seeking approval) when

interacting with a favored adult. This situational variability challenges the rigid structure and universality claimed by Kohlberg, suggesting that Stage 2 might be less a fixed cognitive structure and more a strategy employed when personal stakes are high.

Other criticisms relate to the methodology, which relied heavily on hypothetical dilemmas (like the Heinz dilemma). Critics argue that the moral reasoning expressed verbally in response to abstract scenarios may not accurately reflect the moral choices made in real-world situations, especially those involving strong emotional components or immediate consequences. Thus, while Naive Hedonism successfully captures the instrumental nature of early childhood negotiation, its definitive placement and delineation as a universal, invariant stage must be viewed within the context of these long-standing developmental and cultural critiques.

Further Reading

[Kohlberg's stages of moral development \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Lawrence Kohlberg \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Carol Gilligan \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Hedonism \(Wikipedia\)](#)