

Postconventional Level

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Developmental Psychology, Moral Philosophy, Ethics

1. Core Definition

The **Postconventional Level** represents the third and final stage of Lawrence Kohlberg's taxonomy of moral development. Individuals operating at this advanced level of moral reasoning transcend the conventional understanding of societal rules and laws, grounding their ethical decisions in deeply held, universal principles of justice and human rights. Unlike the preceding stages, where morality is dictated by external authority or social norms, the postconventional thinker's moral compass is guided by an internal, self-chosen set of ethical principles that often prioritize the inherent dignity and value of all human life and sometimes, all sentient beings.

This level signifies a profound shift from a morality based on conformity and adherence to external dictates towards an autonomous ethical framework. At the postconventional level, individuals actively question existing laws and social conventions if they perceive them as infringing upon fundamental human rights or universal ethical imperatives. Their commitment to these higher principles can lead them to act in ways that may contradict established legal frameworks, yet they believe these actions are morally justifiable and necessary for upholding a greater good. It is a stage characterized by a profound sense of personal responsibility for ethical conduct, driven by an internalized understanding of justice, equality, and human welfare.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The concept of the Postconventional Level emerged from the groundbreaking work of American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg in the 1950s and 1960s. Building upon Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development, Kohlberg proposed a highly influential, stage-based theory of moral development. He asserted that individuals progress through a fixed sequence of moral stages, categorized into three broader levels: Preconventional, Conventional, and Postconventional. The term "postconventional" itself signifies a progression "beyond" the conventional, indicating that an individual's moral reasoning is no longer primarily bound by the rules and expectations of their immediate social group or society at large.

Kohlberg's research involved presenting subjects with a series of moral dilemmas, most famously the "Heinz dilemma," and analyzing their reasoning for their proposed solutions rather than the solutions themselves. Through this methodology, he observed distinct patterns in how individuals conceptualized justice, rights, and ethical obligations. The Postconventional Level represents the culmination of this developmental process, where individuals have moved past a egocentric (preconventional) or socio-centric (conventional) perspective to embrace a universalistic, principled approach to morality. This level was initially conceptualized as encompassing two distinct stages,

reflecting different degrees of abstraction and universality in ethical thought, which became central to Kohlberg's complete moral development framework.

3. Key Characteristics

Individuals at the Postconventional Level demonstrate several distinct characteristics in their moral reasoning and behavior. Foremost among these is a profound commitment to **universal ethical principles** rather than mere adherence to laws or social rules. They possess an internalized moral code, often abstract and principled, that guides their decisions. This code typically emphasizes concepts such as justice, human dignity, equality, and the inherent value of all life, moving beyond the specific cultural or legal context.

Another defining characteristic is a deep concern for the **innate rights of humans**. Postconventional thinkers believe that certain rights are inalienable and apply to all individuals, irrespective of their social status, nationality, or any other demographic factor. This belief often translates into a willingness to challenge or even defy laws and conventions that are perceived as unjust or as violating these fundamental rights. The example provided illustrates this: an individual might believe it is morally acceptable to steal experimental animals in order to save their lives, viewing the animals' right to life as superseding property laws or scientific regulations. This action, while legally transgressing, is seen by the individual as the morally right thing to do, reflecting a conflict between positive law and higher ethical imperatives.

Furthermore, postconventional morality is characterized by **autonomy in moral reasoning**. Decisions are not made based on fear of punishment, desire for approval, or blind obedience to authority, but rather on a self-chosen, internally consistent set of ethical principles. This autonomy allows individuals to critically evaluate existing social norms and laws, and to advocate for change when these systems fall short of universal moral ideals. It is a stage marked by a profound sense of personal responsibility and a principled commitment to justice, even when such a stance incurs personal risk or social disapproval.

4. Stages within the Postconventional Level

Kohlberg further subdivided the Postconventional Level into two distinct stages, representing a progression in the sophistication and universality of ethical reasoning. These stages illustrate the nuanced development from a societal-contract orientation to one based on abstract, universal ethical principles. Understanding these sub-stages is crucial for a complete appreciation of postconventional thought.

The first stage within the postconventional level is **Stage 5: Social Contract and Individual Rights**. At this stage, individuals understand that laws are social contracts, designed to protect individual rights and promote the common good. While they recognize the importance of laws for

societal order, they also acknowledge that laws can be flawed and can be changed through democratic processes if they fail to serve the greater good or infringe upon fundamental human rights. There is a strong belief in individual rights and a commitment to fair procedures for changing laws or resolving disputes. Moral actions are those that uphold the rights and values of the majority, while also protecting the rights of minorities. A person at this stage might argue for civil disobedience in the face of an unjust law, provided there is a clear, principled reason and a pathway for societal improvement.

The pinnacle of Kohlberg's moral development is **Stage 6: Universal Ethical Principles**. Individuals at this most advanced stage base their moral reasoning on abstract, self-chosen ethical principles that are universal in their application, such as justice, equality, human dignity, and respect for all life. These principles are not derived from laws or social conventions but are understood as inherent moral imperatives. Actions are guided by one's conscience and a deep commitment to these principles, even if they conflict with existing laws or the expectations of society. Kohlberg suggested that few individuals consistently reach this stage, and figures like Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr. are often cited as exemplars, demonstrating a willingness to sacrifice personal well-being for a perceived universal moral good. At Stage 6, moral decisions are made by considering the perspective of everyone affected by a moral choice, striving for solutions that are truly just and impartial, reflecting a profound dedication to an abstract ideal of justice.

5. Significance and Impact

The concept of the Postconventional Level has had a profound and lasting impact on the fields of developmental psychology, moral philosophy, and education. Kohlberg's theory provided a systematic and comprehensive framework for understanding how moral reasoning develops throughout the lifespan, moving beyond simplistic notions of right and wrong based on reward and punishment. The identification of a postconventional stage highlighted the potential for human beings to achieve highly sophisticated forms of ethical thought, where individuals can autonomously derive and adhere to universal moral principles, independent of external coercion or social conformity. This emphasis on principled reasoning elevated the discourse around human morality.

Academically, the Postconventional Level spurred extensive research into moral development, leading to numerous studies that attempted to validate, refine, or challenge Kohlberg's stages across different cultures and populations. It has been instrumental in shaping discussions about moral education, suggesting that educational interventions can foster the development of higher moral reasoning by exposing individuals to complex moral dilemmas and encouraging critical ethical reflection. Furthermore, the theory has influenced our understanding of social justice movements and civil disobedience, providing a psychological framework for explaining why

individuals might choose to defy unjust laws based on a commitment to higher moral principles, thus legitimizing such actions within a developmental context. It underscored the idea that moral progress involves a move towards greater universality and impartiality in ethical decision-making.

6. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its significant influence, Kohlberg's theory, and particularly the Postconventional Level, has been the subject of considerable debate and criticism. One of the most prominent critiques came from psychologist Carol Gilligan, who argued that Kohlberg's stages exhibited a significant **gender bias**. Gilligan contended that Kohlberg's research was predominantly conducted with male subjects and primarily emphasized a "justice perspective" in moral reasoning, which prioritizes abstract principles, rights, and rules. She proposed that women often adopt a "care perspective," which emphasizes relationships, responsibilities, and the context of moral dilemmas, suggesting that Kohlberg's framework might unfairly classify women's moral reasoning as lower or less developed.

Another major criticism concerns the potential **cultural bias** of the theory. Critics argue that the Postconventional Level, with its emphasis on individualism, abstract principles, and universal rights, reflects a Western philosophical tradition and may not adequately capture moral reasoning in collectivist cultures. In some non-Western societies, moral decisions might be more heavily influenced by community harmony, social obligations, or religious traditions, which Kohlberg's framework might not fully appreciate or might even categorize as lower stages. This raises questions about the universality of the stages and whether the highest levels are truly cross-cultural.

Furthermore, empirical studies have shown that very few individuals consistently operate at Stage 6, and even Stage 5 is not widely achieved by the general adult population. This observation has led to questions about the **practical attainability and empirical validity** of the higher stages. Some critics suggest that Stage 6 might be an idealized philosophical construct rather than a common psychological reality. There is also the challenge of distinguishing between moral reasoning and moral action; an individual might articulate high-level moral reasoning but fail to act accordingly in real-life situations, highlighting the gap between cognitive capacity and behavioral manifestation. Lastly, some philosophers contend that Kohlberg's theory places too much emphasis on justice and not enough on other crucial aspects of morality, such as compassion, virtue, or character, thus presenting an incomplete picture of ethical life.

7. Examples and Practical Applications

The Postconventional Level provides a framework for understanding many compelling instances of moral courage and ethical leadership throughout history and in contemporary society. The

provided example of an individual believing it acceptable to steal experimental animals to save their lives encapsulates the core tenet of this level: prioritizing a higher moral principle (the right to life/freedom from suffering for animals) over a conventional legal rule (property rights or laws against theft). This scenario highlights a principled stance that challenges legal norms for a perceived greater good.

Beyond this specific example, historical figures and movements frequently illustrate postconventional moral reasoning. Leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, such as **Martin Luther King Jr.**, famously engaged in civil disobedience, knowingly breaking unjust segregation laws because they believed these laws violated universal principles of equality and human dignity. Their actions were not based on personal gain or fear of punishment, but on a deep commitment to an ethical framework that transcended the existing legal system. Similarly, **whistleblowers** who expose corporate or governmental wrongdoing, often at great personal and professional risk, embody postconventional morality. They prioritize transparency, justice, and public welfare over loyalty to their organizations or adherence to confidentiality agreements, driven by an internalized ethical code that demands exposure of unethical practices.

In the medical field, a doctor who makes a difficult ethical decision that might technically bypass hospital policy to save a patient's life, based on their deep commitment to the principle of patient autonomy or beneficence, could be seen as operating at a postconventional level. These examples all share a common thread: individuals acting according to deeply held, universal ethical principles, even when those principles conflict with established laws, social norms, or personal convenience, demonstrating a profound internal moral compass.

Further Reading

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

[Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development - Simply Psychology](#)

[Carol Gilligan - Wikipedia](#)