

Preconventional Level

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Preconventional Level

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

1. Core Definition

The **Preconventional Level** represents the initial stage within Lawrence Kohlberg's taxonomy of moral development. At this foundational stage, an individual's ethical principles and moral judgments are primarily guided by the immediate and tangible consequences of an action, particularly in relation to their own direct benefit or detriment. Moral reasoning at this level is external, meaning that the individual has not yet internalized societal norms, abstract ethical codes, or a complex understanding of justice. Instead, decisions are fundamentally driven by an egocentric perspective, where actions are deemed "good" if they result in rewards or the avoidance of punishment, and "bad" if they lead to negative consequences imposed by an external authority.

This level is characterized by a concrete and self-centered outlook on morality. For instance, a child operating at the Preconventional Level might refrain from taking a piece of candy from another child not because of an intrinsic understanding of fairness, empathy, or a respect for the other child's property rights, but primarily because of the anticipated negative repercussions, such as being scolded by a parent, receiving a timeout, or facing other forms of punishment. The decision-making process is transactional and pragmatic; it revolves around "what will happen to me?" rather than "what is the right thing to do?" or "how does this affect others' well-being?" This initial phase highlights a critical period in human development where the nascent understanding of right and wrong is fundamentally shaped by external enforcement and personal expediency.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The concept of the Preconventional Level was introduced by American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, who elaborated on Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development to propose his influential stages of moral development. Kohlberg's work, which began with his 1958 doctoral dissertation, suggested that moral reasoning progresses through a series of distinct stages, organized into three overarching levels: Preconventional, Conventional, and Postconventional. The term "Preconventional" itself signifies that this level precedes the internalization of societal conventions and norms, focusing instead on a more rudimentary and self-oriented form of moral consideration.

Kohlberg's methodology involved presenting individuals with various moral dilemmas, such as the famous Heinz dilemma, and then analyzing the reasoning behind their responses, rather than the responses themselves. He argued that the cognitive structures underlying moral thought evolve systematically with age and experience. The Preconventional Level, typically observed in early childhood but sometimes persisting into adolescence and adulthood, represents the earliest and

most basic form of moral reasoning. Its development is critical because it lays the groundwork for more sophisticated ethical frameworks, demonstrating how individuals first navigate the complex landscape of right and wrong through immediate, concrete feedback and self-preservation.

3. Key Characteristics

The Preconventional Level is further subdivided into two distinct stages, each reflecting a specific orientation towards moral reasoning. These stages illustrate a gradual shift from a purely punishment-avoidance mentality to one focused on personal gain and reciprocal exchange, albeit still within an egocentric framework.

Stage 1: Obedience and Punishment Orientation

In this initial stage, moral behavior is directly equated with avoiding punishment. An action is considered "bad" simply because it leads to negative consequences imposed by an authority figure, and "good" if it does not. There is little to no consideration for the intentions behind an action, the welfare of others, or abstract ethical principles. The individual's perspective is entirely egocentric; they are focused on the direct impact of rules on themselves. For example, a child may believe that stealing is wrong because they will be sent to their room or have their toys taken away. The inherent wrongness of theft, its impact on the victim, or broader societal rules are not part of their moral calculus. Authority figures, such as parents or teachers, are seen as absolute arbiters of right and wrong, and their commands are followed out of fear of retribution. This stage highlights a very concrete and external understanding of morality, where the physical consequences of an action dictate its moral value.

Stage 2: Individualism and Exchange (Instrumental Relativist Orientation)

As individuals progress to Stage 2, their moral reasoning evolves to consider not just the avoidance of punishment, but also the pursuit of personal rewards and self-interest. Actions are deemed "right" if they satisfy one's own needs or desires, or if they lead to some form of personal benefit. This stage introduces a rudimentary understanding of reciprocity, but it is a pragmatic, "what's in it for me?" kind of exchange rather than genuine altruism or a sense of justice. For instance, a child might agree to share their toys with a peer, not out of generosity, but with the expectation that the peer will reciprocate by sharing their own toys later. Rules are followed only if they serve one's immediate interests. If a rule does not offer a clear advantage or can be circumvented without immediate negative consequences, it may not be adhered to. This instrumental perspective signifies a slightly more sophisticated, yet still self-centered, approach to moral decision-making, where fairness is interpreted as an equal exchange of benefits.

4. Significance and Impact

The Preconventional Level holds significant importance in developmental psychology and our understanding of how moral reasoning takes root. By identifying this initial stage, Kohlberg's theory provides a foundational framework for observing and analyzing the earliest forms of ethical thought in individuals. It underscores that moral development is not static but a dynamic process that begins with a basic, self-serving orientation before progressing to more complex and socially conscious forms of reasoning. This understanding has profound implications for education, parenting, and even legal systems. Educators can tailor moral education programs to address the specific cognitive capabilities of children at this level, for instance, by emphasizing clear rules and consistent consequences before introducing more abstract ethical concepts.

Furthermore, recognizing the characteristics of preconventional moral reasoning helps parents and caregivers understand why young children might behave in certain ways or express particular justifications for their actions. It highlights the necessity of providing structured environments with clear boundaries and predictable outcomes, which are crucial for children to learn the initial connections between actions and their consequences. In a broader societal context, the Preconventional Level also sheds light on instances where adults might exhibit similar reasoning patterns, particularly in situations of extreme duress or when operating outside established social norms, suggesting that moral regression or situational ethics can sometimes align with these fundamental, self-preservation instincts. The theory's articulation of this level emphasizes that moral maturity is a gradual achievement, not an inherent trait, and is deeply intertwined with cognitive development.

5. Debates and Criticisms

While Kohlberg's theory, including the Preconventional Level, has been highly influential, it has also faced several significant debates and criticisms. One of the most prominent critiques comes from Carol Gilligan, who argued that Kohlberg's research was largely based on studies of male subjects, leading to a potential gender bias. Gilligan proposed an "ethics of care" perspective, suggesting that females might prioritize relationships, empathy, and the well-being of others (care orientation) over abstract rules and justice (justice orientation), which could cause their moral reasoning to be miscategorized or undervalued within Kohlberg's framework, potentially making them appear "lower" on his scale even if their reasoning is equally complex and valid.

Another major criticism revolves around the potential for **cultural bias**. Kohlberg's stages were developed based on Western philosophical traditions and might not universally apply across all cultures. Different societies may emphasize distinct moral values, such as communal harmony, respect for elders, or spiritual duties, which may not align neatly with the progression of stages proposed by Kohlberg, potentially leading to misinterpretations of moral maturity in non-Western

contexts. The reliance on hypothetical dilemmas also draws criticism, as people's stated moral reasoning in abstract scenarios might not always reflect their actual behavior or decision-making processes in real-life situations where emotions, personal stakes, and social pressures play a significant role. Critics also point to the issue of **stage inconsistency**, observing that individuals do not always operate at a single moral stage across all situations; their reasoning can vary depending on the context and the specific moral challenge presented. Despite these criticisms, the Preconventional Level remains a crucial starting point in understanding the developmental trajectory of human morality.

Further Reading

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

[Lawrence Kohlberg - Wikipedia](#)

[Jean Piaget - Wikipedia](#)

[Heinz dilemma - Wikipedia](#)

[Carol Gilligan - Wikipedia](#)

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