

Lawrence Kohlberg's Moral Development Stages

Lawrence Kohlberg. (1927-1987) Kohlberg, who earned his PhD in Psychology from the University of Chicago in 1958, originated the idea that humans develop morally along certain pre-determined lines. His stages of moral judgment are divided into Pre-Conventional, Conventional and Post-Conventional levels. While he did not write about spiritual development per se, we can see how his moral stages correlate more or less with the spiritual stages.

Though usually typical in children, Kohlberg's Pre-Conventional levels can persist into adulthood in cases of inadequate development. In particular the second stage—the Self-Interest “What’s In It For Me?” orientation—is similar to [our Lawless stage](#).

Lawrence Kohlberg's two Conventional levels of Moral Development are typical of adolescents, but often exist in adulthood. In Kohlberg's Stage three—the first of his Conventional stages—the emphasis is on group conformity; the person tries to be a “good boy” or “good girl” to live up to the expectations of the group.

In Stage four—the second Conventional stage—there is a submission to “authority” and a “law and order” orientation where right from wrong behavior is determined according to the “rules.” Both of Kohlberg's “Conventional” stages of moral judgment correspond with [our Faithful stage of spiritual development](#).

Kohlberg defined two Post-Conventional levels where morality is determined by forces within the individual (i.e. his conscience) as opposed to being dictated by the outside force of authority. (This is roughly the same thing as saying the person is self-governing.) The fact that many adults never reach these stages leads to confusion in our society. Because they cannot envision how anyone could live an ordered life without strict obedience to the rules, Conventional level adults tend to (needlessly!) suspect and accuse Post-conventional people of anarchy.

At Kohlberg's Stage five rules are considered important but subject to change when necessary. Individual rights begin to take on greater importance—the person can allow that different social groups may hold different values, opinions and rights, all of which should be respected.

At Stage six Universal ethical principles, such as justice and truth, take precedence over rules of the current society. Thus if a person at Stage six perceives society's current rules as transgressing against a certain universal principle, he may be inclined to fight for change. He may be willing to put himself at risk for the sake of principle. This is exemplified sometimes in cases of civil disobedience.

Kohlberg felt that few individuals consistently behave at his Stage six level. He called it a “theoretical” stage, though Martin Luther King is given as a possible example. The correlation between Kohlberg's moral judgment stages and our spiritual development stages is muddled at the Post-conventional levels but without excessive

attention to the details, we can summarize that [our Rational and our Mystic levels](#) correlate to Kohlberg's Post-conventional levels.