

## Three stages of ethics

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Much of the confusion that occurs in conversations about ethics is eliminated if you allow that there are three stages of ethics, and people's thinking is primarily based on one of these stages. A stage is a set of concepts about ethical issues, or matters of right and wrong. When matters of right and wrong arise, people make their judgements about them in terms of their prevailing set of concepts.

The three stages are evolutionary, in the sense that each successive stage is more expansive and inclusive than the one before it. They are also evolutionary in the sense that people generally progress through these stages in order.

The three stages can be called: (1) Law, (2) Relationships, and (3) Identity. Note that there are two orientations within each stage. One orientation is emergence and the other is fulfilment. For both orientations within the stage, the decision-making concepts are the same.

### Law

The person who sees ethics as law sees no further than that people are required to obey legal injunctions. Concern for the well-being of other people is not considered. Ethics is reduced to what has been prescribed by society, organisations and social groups as being obligatory or prohibited.

In this stage, the emergence orientation means that the person has the concept of legality but they resist it; they only comply with laws when forced to, eg when there is the possibility of getting caught. The fulfilment orientation means that the person willingly complies with laws, but their consideration for others goes no further than what the law demands.

### Relationships

In the "Relationships" stage, people understand that ethics is essentially about how we treat other people. Empathy lies at the core of the thinking at this stage, and the person's commitment is to ethics as the cultivation and preservation of high-quality relationships between people and groups.

This stage accepts the previous stage. The person sees laws as the formalisation of necessary rules that enable a basic, functional level of relationships in society, but the person takes the previous stage further, accepting a positive responsibility to care for others, in a broad sense that goes beyond not causing harm. They squarely accept the thrust of the definition of ethics as "concern for the wellbeing of others".

In this stage, the emergence orientation means that the person recognises people's human concerns, but they interpret them in socially conventional terms. The values that come to the fore at this stage are values like respect, loyalty and fairness. Concern for the wellbeing of others is understood in terms of acting appropriately in accepted social roles.

The fulfilment orientation in the Relationships stage means that the person actively works to build high-quality relationships based on trust, beyond social roles. Such people understand that good (ethical) relationships lead to positive, trusting relationships where achievement, creativity and enjoyment are possible.

## Identity

The third stage, “Identity”, evolves out of the previous stage. It results when people act ethically , not just in order to achieve high-trust, productive relationships, but because acting ethically (and with social and environmental responsibility) is part of who they are – their identity.

The “Identity” stage involves an explicit commitment to ethics as a way of being, and people at this stage continually develop this capacity. At this stage, emergence and fulfilment simply mean that the person continues to evolve gradually, moving from insight to growth. The values have to permeate throughout every aspect of the person’s life, and be continually reinterpreted as they face new situations.