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# WILLIAM PERRY'S SCHEME OF INTELLECTUAL AND ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT

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We are all aware that people grow and change, and a variety of schemes have been proposed to measure this growth. William Perry's scheme is based on a life time of studying cognitive and ethical development in undergraduate students. He proposes that college students (but others, too) "journey" through four major stages of intellectual and moral development: from dualism, to multiplicity, to relativism, to commitment. These four stages are subdivided into 9 "positions."

What Perry's scheme (as well as schemes by others) tell us is that not only are our beliefs subject to change, but the way a person reasons changes as that person matures. Perry's scheme is subtle, but also powerful, and especially valuable because he delineates why and how a person transitions from one position to another. Furthermore, the scheme includes the fact that the rate at which we progress through the positions differs from one subject or issue to another; the same person can be at different stages at the same time with respect to different subjects. For example, you might be at Position 3 in your beliefs about gun control, while at the same time at Position 5 in your reasoning about abortion. Furthermore, sometimes we have to repeat part of our journey; for example, when our understanding makes us ready to move on, but emotionally we may not be ready to.

Furthermore, while Perry's research was conducted with young adults, people often do not reach the later stages in their youth. A 40-year-old may have progressed to commitment when he chose his lifetime profession, but may still be struggling with relativism on issues of an intellectual nature. However, we tend to enter college at Position 2 or 3, progressing to Position 5, 6, or 7 by the time we graduate.

As with all models, these are not definitive paths. They show tendencies in growth, directions that people take as they move from less to more complex reasoning. But there are always individual differences. Life is more complex than we grow up thinking it is, so we naturally change to accommodate that complexity. What follow are synopses of Perry's model, arranged from simple to more elaborate descriptions.

The statements below are often spoken of in terms of "the student" since Perry was writing specifically about college students, but non-students also pass through these stages, although perhaps not as quickly or easily.

The quotes are drawn from three web sites that summarize Parry's scheme, and come in the following order.

C <http://www.cs.buffalo.edu/~rapaport/perry.positions.html>

C <http://web2.concordia.ca/ctls/pdf/resources/intellectual%20development.pdf>

C [http://www2.tntech.edu/honors/FacultyStaffandOfficial/handbook/9\\_models\\_of\\_growth\\_and\\_development.pdf](http://www2.tntech.edu/honors/FacultyStaffandOfficial/handbook/9_models_of_growth_and_development.pdf)

References to Perry's publications are the following:

C Perry, William G., Jr. (1970), *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston); reprinted November 1998; Jossey-Bass; ISBN: 0787941182 .

C Perry, William G., Jr. (1981), "Cognitive and Ethical Growth: The Making of Meaning", in Arthur W. Chickering and Associates, *The Modern American College* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass): 76-116.

## DUALISM

*Received Knowledge: There are right and wrong answers, engraved on Golden Tablets in the sky, known to Authorities and our responsibility is to obey Authorities.*

### 1. Basic Duality:

- C All problems are solvable;
- C Therefore, student's task is *to learn the Right Solutions*

### 2. Full Dualism:

- C Some Authorities (literature, philosophy) disagree; others (science, math) agree.
- C Therefore, there are Right Solutions, but some teachers' views of the Tablets are obscured.
- C Therefore, student's task is to learn the Right Solutions and *ignore the others!*

### Summary of Beliefs and Positions

- C Believes knowledge to be an accumulation of facts; the more facts you know, the smarter you are.
- C Assumes that "Authority" figures such as professors, parents, or "experts" in a field have "The Answers."
- C Answers should be simple and definitive.
- C The world is divided into those who know and those who don't; those who have Right Answers and those who are Wrong.
- C Truth and falsity are easily distinguished by the experts.
- C Generally speaking, those who agree with them are Good and Right; others are Bad and Wrong.
- C This is the person who adopts parental views without questioning – or who shifts without analysis to peer views – epitomizing the "examined life". (A phrase used by students at this stage is "*What is the right answer?*")

**Position 1: Basic Dualism:** Typically this person is very young; however, it is not uncommon to find college students who still operate from this understanding of the universe. Here, right answers exist for everything, and we can trust our authorities to know them and inform us of whatever we need to know. Authorities include not only people but textbooks (don't you assume your textbooks have the right answers?), the Bible, television, whatever you accept as showing you the way things are. In Position 1, the behavior roles are very distinct: **the authorities** (our parents, teachers, etc.) **exist to give us the answers, and we exist to obey them**. Knowledge and rightness are measured by the number of right answers we can repeat back to whichever authority is questioning us, and goodness is attained by hard work and obedience. Magical thinking and superstitious behaviors lurk nearby.

**Position 2: Full Dualism:** Several things go on at once here. Faced with the realization that there are other systems of beliefs in the world, we feel compelled to protect our own. In a dualistic world, if "our" authority is good, then all other authorities are bad, and this is exactly the conclusion we come to in Position 2. **Those who do not believe as we do are wrong**, and to take it a step further, **those who do not offer clear-cut answers are also wrong**. There is no "both-and" in this stage. Simplicity is the rule of the day, and **those would-be authorities who offer complexities are not to be trusted**. So what happens when "our" authorities offer complexities? What happens when our teacher refuses to give a straight answer? The obvious answer here (to us) is that our authority, for whatever ineffable reasons, is trying to teach us to think. **If our authority gives us complexities, it is to teach us to find the answers for ourselves**. Our authority knows the answers, but is holding them back from us to teach us something.

**Transition:** *This last statement gives rise to a more disturbing realization. If we have to search for the answers, then maybe so do the authorities. Even our "good" authorities don't have all the answers (yet). The assumption during this transition is that there are answers out there, and if we simply wait for a while, our authorities will find them and give them to us, and this leads us straight into Position 3.*

## MULTIPLICITY

*Subjective Knowledge: There are conflicting answers; therefore, must trust one's "inner voice", not external Authority.*

<p><b>3. Early Multiplicity:</b>                  There are 2 kinds of problems:                  1. Those whose solutions we know.                  2. Those whose solutions we don't know yet, (thus, a kind of dualism).                  Student's task is to learn <i>how to find</i> the Right Solutions.</p>	<p><b>4. Late Multiplicity:</b>                  Most problems are of the second kind. Therefore, everyone has a right to their own opinion.  <i>or</i>                  Some problems are unsolvable. Therefore, it doesn't matter which (if any) solution you choose. Student's task is to shoot the bull.</p>
<p>C Person begins to acknowledge that ambiguity exists in at least some realms of knowledge (sociology or politics, perhaps, but rarely math, physics, or biology) but feels this is probably either a function of the particular professor's lack of expertise or a lack of research on the subject – someday we will have certainty.</p> <p>C After a while, this person may come to feel that <b>since there are no clearly "right" answers</b> in a particular area of inquiry, <b>anyone is entitled to think anything</b>; those who argue their views forcefully may be perceived as "biased." (A phrase characteristic of this stage is: <b>"Everyone has a right to their own opinion"</b>)</p>	
<p><b>Position 3:</b> Having realized that our <b>authorities don't have all the answers, we settle down to wait for our authorities to find other authorities to give us the answers.</b> There is uncertainty here, after all, the safety of Position 1 has been challenged by this new information, but the uncertainty is understood to be temporary. Here, when our authorities don't agree, their answers are legitimate, at least until we find the real answers, when all our authorities will line up again behind the truth. The idea at Position 3 is that our good authorities don't have all the answers, <b>yet</b>.</p>	
<p><b>Transition to 4:</b> <i>The transition comes when we realize that the "yet" could take a very long time, in fact, the authorities might never find the answers. The feeling of disbelief and horror is summed up in this statement by a student going through this transition: "Here was this great professor and he was groping too!"</i>  <i>Gone is the safe and understandable world of dualism. We can no longer rely on our authorities to give us the answers, yet nothing before this has prepared us for the full weight of the choices that are laid out before us. Some common reactions to this transition are fear, anger, betrayal, depression, and grief. This is a very difficult shift, and virtually no one makes it out unscathed. People who get hurt or overstressed while trying to reason at Position 4 or higher often regress to Position 2 and hold it even more vehemently than they did before.</i></p> <p>If we can no longer rely on authorities then there are two options, rebel against authority, or enter into playing the game by sticking meticulously to the rules. Most people do only one of these stages on the way to Position 5.</p>	

**Position 4a: Rebellion:** With the realization that the authorities are fallible, an easy generalization follows: where the authorities don't have the answers, everyone's opinion is equally valid! Note that we still accept that authorities have the answers and that they still give them to us; the difference here is that **we realize that our authorities are not necessarily omniscient or expert**. Here we see the typical student struggling to assert some sort of independence in critical cognitive skills. In those places where the authorities don't know, it's safe for us to make our own answers. However, we still have not built a way to discern "better" answers, so we must assume that everyone's answers are equally right.

The **answers** of a student at Rebellion are very subjective; that is, they **need not make sense or be true beyond the student's personal experience**. As long as the authorities cannot prove a statement wrong, it is assumed to be right. These statements are largely unexamined; there need not be evidence to back up statements. Students who are working at Rebellion are sometimes confused by the difference in grading quality vs. quantity; they are **accustomed to supporting facts with other facts**, but this new method of supporting opinions and interpretations with facts is difficult to understand. A student would respond with confidence when asked to tell whether abortion is wrong, but might be perplexed when asked why s(he) believed as s(he) did. *For most people metacognition, or thinking about their thinking, has not yet developed.*

**Position 4b: Playing the Game:** Position 4's other possible direction can simply be called "playing the Game." The student does not assume that all answers are equally valid, but instead tries to stay away from that level of autonomy by playing meticulously by the rules. The idea is that **if we tell the authorities exactly what they want to hear, that will do just as well as the "right" answers**. Trusting that authorities have the right to grade the student, even in areas of uncertainty, the student sets out to find the rules by which the authorities grade. Ironically, the student often learns to think independently because s(he) believes that is what the authorities want her to do: in other words, **the student is being independent under orders**.

There is still an assumption at this position that the authorities, even if they don't have all the answers, still control most of them. The point is to find out the rules governing the answers. Typically, the student knows that what s(he) is saying is not what s(he) truly believes, but is a parroting back of the answers s(he) has received from his/her instructors *ex cathedra* (that is, infallibly), assuming that they have externally validated their statements.

## RELATIVISM

*It all depends, so we must learn to evaluate solutions.*

<p><b>5. Contextual Relativism</b>                  All proposed solutions are supported by reasons; i.e., must be viewed in context &amp; relative to support. Some solutions are better than others, depending on context. Student's task is to learn to <i>evaluate solutions</i>.</p>	<p><b>6. "Pre-Commitment"</b>                  Student sees the necessity of:                  C Making choices                  C Committing to a solution</p>
<p>C Recognizes that "ambiguity" is a fact of life since all facts and theories are or rest upon constructs developed by fallible human minds. However, the person recognizes also that within a limited context, one can gather considerable evidence and attempt to interpret it to create an overall view of the phenomenon, to develop a reasonable and defensible explanation (often termed a "theory") of what is observed.</p> <p>C Facts are seen to be without real meaning unless the context is understood; some facts seem to be absolutes because the context is so much a part of what is taken for granted in our reality, but if pressed far enough one can uncover the assumptions and definitions required to give that fact its existence.</p> <p>C There is an effort to be "balanced" in looking at different points of view. Sometimes this can be problematic, since more than one side of the story may be convincing, and synthesis hard to arrive at. Authorities are people with more experience in the process and more "factual" background to draw from in their analyses. (This stage is characterized by "It all depends")</p>	
<p><b>Position Five: Relativism:</b> This is possibly the most uncomfortable of all the stages. The student has been rudely thrust into a place where s(he) must be autonomous, where the <b>authorities can no longer be counted on</b> to provide any answers that are worthwhile. Nothing before this has prepared him for this eventuality: even though s(he) has known for a while that the authorities don't know all the answers, s(he) has always assumed or hoped that the authority would save her if it was important, that right answers exist somewhere, and that authorities exist somewhere to give him those answers. At Position 5, those assumptions are coldly and powerfully shattered. As a result, a deep feeling of loss, bewilderment, betrayal, and even rage can erupt. Students may flounder for weeks or months feeling that nothing has meaning.</p> <p>This position offers a deep perception of paradoxes - <b>for every "truth" there is an opposite but equally valid "truth" - but no way to bring them together</b>. The student is left uncertain, with nothing to direct her. It is in this stage that we find the existential angst of Camus, Sartre, Dostoevski and Beckett: seeing the possibility of meaning but having no internal way of discerning between conflicting meanings and no way to reconcile the paradoxes. Now the student has <b>a taste of true autonomy, but, ironically, nothing to stand on to make decisions</b> - only the understanding that s(he) is independently and self-sufficiently confused.</p> <p>This position is very traumatic for most people, and the majority will find several ways of avoiding the full brunt of the uncertainty of Position 5. Very few students, in fact, do not indulge in at least one of the following avoidance patterns during their growth.</p>	

**Deflections from Growth** - dealing with the loss and betrayal felt at Position 5

One common way that students at Position 5 attempt to avoid uncertainty is through *temporizing*. This method involves simply waiting, refusing to make decisions or commitments in the hope that some authority will come back to set things right. This apathy often results in feelings of guilt or shame for what the student sees as a failure of responsibility with which s(he) felt helpless to cope. Here we see a strong nostalgia, a desire to go back to earlier, simpler times, and a poignant but **futile refusal to recognize ambiguity**. The student who indulges in temporizing usually waits for events to decide themselves: s(he) remains reactive instead of proactive.

Another method, *retreat*, involves moving back to previous stages. We have seen earlier that it is very difficult to move back to dualism once the transition from 3 to 4 has been made; however, this does not mean that it is impossible. **In reaction to the terrifying uncertainty of relativism, the student regresses to Position 2, but with an added moralistic righteousness and a hatred of otherness.** Not only are others wrong, but they are so wrong that they deserve no rights at all. An immense amount of prejudice, bigotry, and closed mindedness emerges as the student attempts to regain the certainty s(he) once understood.

*Escape* has a more nebulous definition: a desire to deny the reality of relativism. The student who is trying to escape feels the pull of relativism but does not want to be there. Studies of adults show that the alienation of escape can become a settled condition. However, in general, the student comes to terms with the deeper truth of relativism, and experiences within himself the origin of meaning, which s(he) had previously expected to come from outside. This brings about a greater degree of autonomy as s(he) begins to realize that if s(he) is to make sense of the universe, s(he) must make meaning for herself.

**Position 6: Commitment Foreseen:**

In this position the student begins to see the necessity of commitment. Having lived through the plethora of choices available in multiplicity and relativism, Position 6 is seen as a “narrowing down” of choices in preparation for the commitment of Position 7. There is also a newfound sense of inner strength that comes of the autonomy of choosing; that is, the reality that the choice is his/hers grants the student a confidence in himself, or at any rate, a realization that the choice is his/hers to make. The awareness of Position 6 also makes the choices more personal and proactive instead of reactive: the choices are not made because authorities have told her to think a certain way, but because s(he) has decided on his/her own. This does not necessarily mean that s(he) has discounted the words of his/her former authorities, but simply that they have now assumed a more reasonable place in our minds as fallible and human. The student’ choices become his/her own instead of theirs, and his/her beliefs are distinctly individualized.

**Commitment in Relativism**

- C Holds the same view of knowledge and authority but has chosen – in a deliberate, conscious way, based on a close review of the situation – to adhere to a particular point of view, subscribe to a particular school of thought, or stand up for a particular value.
- C The difference between this person and the Dualist is that the Committed Relativist has given thought to the issue, and recognizes that the other perspectives have validity too; thus this person is marked by a high degree of tolerance of the (differing) views of other people, so long as they are willing to articulate the basis of their point of view and support it with evidence, sound reasoning, etc.(This stage is characterized by:“This is right for me.”)

## COMMITMENT

### *Integration of knowledge learned from others with personal experience and reflection*

#### **Position 7-9: Evolving Commitments**

Commitments take place in any of several domains. The student may decide to commit to a set of values, a vocation, a person, or some other ideal. The domain that usually marks this position for most students is that of a career (or vocation), although some people commit to a set of moral beliefs, a spiritual path, or a significant other first. Whatever the domain, commitment is the important aspect. It is the commitment that gives a place to stand in the uncertainty; it offers structure in the ambiguity of relativism.

It is important to notice the difference between Positions 2-3 and Positions 7-9. A person who is working from Position 2 might hear a person's Position 7 statement and agree - and see no difference in their stances. However, the difference lies in the level of autonomy of the statement, not in the statement itself: the person who is at Position 2 espouses this belief because it is what s(he) has been told to believe by his/her authorities, who are still infallible at this point; while the Position 7 person has made a decision after living the alternatives and coming to a reasoned, experienced decision.

Unfortunately, Perry does not delineate his/her model in detail past Position 7. Broadly, Position 7 contains the ontological shift that comes with making a formal commitment, Position 8 entails learning to make more commitments in different domains, and Position 9 involves balancing commitments and devotion to the commitments. Position 9 is a more distinct balancing of paradox such that the ambiguities that were discovered in Position 5 and categorized or prioritized in Position 7 are now brought into play and lived.

Ambiguities become an integral part of personal identity: no longer does the student fight the uncertainty, but rather accepts it as a part of life, regarding uncertainty with more equanimity.