

Overview of Perry Scheme

Original text found at <http://www.perrynetwork.org/schemeoverview.html>

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NOTE: Citations in excerpt can be found [here](#)

Based on a series of open-ended interviews conducted primarily with Harvard undergraduates during the late 1950's and through the 1960's, and since replicated with a wide variety of students and institutions, the Perry scheme emerged from exhaustive qualitative analyses of the ways in which the students described their experiences and transformations over their college years (Perry, 1970, 1981, 1998). Perry and his colleagues were looking for, and expecting to find, personality differences, in particular aspects of the authoritarian personality notions popular at the time (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). Instead of stable individual differences in personality, however, what Perry and his colleagues found was a consistent educational journey—what Perry characterized as "an intellectual Pilgrim's Progress"(1974, p. 3). In his original book describing the study, Perry (1998) compares the developmental progression seen in the model to "the Fall" as depicted in the book of Genesis in the Bible, with this particular Fall centered on students' understanding of knowledge and learning. As in Genesis, the Fall consists not of goodness and evil per se, but of the knowledge of goodness and evil, or as Perry describes it, "the knowledge of values and therefore the potential of judgment...in a world devoid of Eden"(1970, p. 60-61). More precisely, this particular progression traces a Fall from a world of Absolutes and Truth into a world of contexts and Commitments in which one must take stands and choose as a way of making meaning of one's life through identity choices.

The Perry model reflects the critical intertwining of cognitive and affective perspectives at the heart of a college education--a difficult journey toward more complex forms of thought about the world, one's discipline/area of study, and one's self. Perry's work underscores the notion that the most powerful learning, the learning most faculty really want to see students achieve as a result of their experiences with classes/curricula, involves significant qualitative changes in the way learners approach their learning and their subject matter. Nine distinct stages,

or what Perry prefers to call "positions," as in positions from which to view the world, were discerned in the students' common paths, although two, the first and the last, were hypothetical extensions of the empirical work, constructed for the sake of elegance and completeness. In Perry's original conceptualization of the scheme, positions 1 through 5 describe the primarily intellectual portion of the scheme: systematic, structural change toward increasing differentiation and complexity. In positions 6 through 9, the primary focus of the journey shifts to what Perry calls ethical concerns in the classical Greek sense: issues of identity and commitments in a relativistic world. Following the conventions of some of the most significant refinements in the ongoing evolution of the model (Knefelkamp, 1974; Knefelkamp and Slepitz, 1978; Moore, 1991, 1994), the sequence of nine positions of the scheme can be grouped into four major categories: Dualism, Multiplicity, Contextual Relativism, and Commitment within Relativism.

Dualism: Positions 1-2

While position 1 has rarely been found empirically, either in the initial work or in subsequent research (Moore, 1994), it represents the original "Garden of Eden" in terms of one's view of the nature of knowledge and truth. In the position 1 perspective, there is a completely unquestioned view of truth as Absolute Truth in stark black and white terms. The identification with the Authority figure--parent, teacher, Church--is absolute and unquestioned, with no tolerance for alternative points of view. In position 2, different perspectives and beliefs are now acknowledged but are simply wrong. Thinking in this position is characterized by dichotomies and dualisms, i.e., We-Right-Good vs. They-Wrong-Bad or some variation. The world thus consists essentially of two boxes--rights and wrongs--and there is generally little trouble in distinguishing one from the other.

Multiplicity: Positions 3-4

Perry describes the entire progression across the first five positions as "successive modifications of right-wrong dualism in attempting to account for diversity in human opinion, experience and 'truth'" (Perry, 1974, p.3). The modification in position 3 represents the first acknowledgement of legitimate uncertainty in the world; instead of two boxes or categories, right and wrong, there are now three: right, wrong, and "not yet known." Thus, the knowledge that is not yet known is knowable, and will be determined at some point in the future. This acceptance of uncertainty as legitimate, albeit temporary, is a profound departure from the dualistic perspective, and for many students an exciting one. Positions 3 and 4, then, are characterized as Multiplicity--the confrontation and coping with diversity and "multiples" in virtually everything.

The initial solution to the problem of uncertainty is that "there are obviously right ways, or methods, to find the right answers," and learning becomes a focus on

process and methodology. In position 4, the "not yet known" notion of position 3 often becomes a new certainty of "we'll never know for sure," and thus what is most important is one's own thinking. Self-processing and a sense of idea ownership increases, but frequently in position 4 the stance taken is that there is no non-arbitrary basis for determining what's right (Benack, 1982); hence an attitude of "do your own thing" or "anything goes" tends to prevail in this position.

Contextual Relativism: Position 5 (and beyond)

The movement from position 4 to position 5 is arguably the most significant transition within the Perry scheme. This transition represents a fundamental transformation of one's perspective--from a vision of the world as essentially dualistic, with a growing number of exceptions to the rule in specific situations, to a vision of a world as essentially relativistic and context-bound with a few right/wrong exceptions. The most significant distinction between the pseudo-relativism of position 4 and the contextual relativism of position 5 is the self-consciousness of being an active maker of meaning. As Perry makes clear even in the title of his book (1998), one's task in life is finally understood fully as intellectual and ethical--a question of judgments and meaning-making in both academic and personal contexts. Johnson (1981) clarifies this crucial distinction:

"In position five we recognize that any act of knowing (thinking, talking, reading, writing) requires taking a point of view, and we are forced to acknowledge our own. From this point on, thinking becomes acting, [and] "knowing" will always represent a placing of oneself, for better or worse, in one or another of many possible positions in relation to persons or [ideas]." (p. 3)

Commitment within Relativism: Positions 6-9

As defined by the model, the primary developmental emphasis shifts beginning in position 6 from intellectual to ethical: namely, the anticipation, clarification, and ongoing refinement of Commitments. These 'Commitments' are distinguished from commitments or what Perry referred to as "considered choices" by **being chosen in the face of legitimate alternatives**, after experiencing **genuine doubt**, and reflecting a clear **affirmation of one's self or identity** in a contextually relativistic world. Perry's original contention was that the changing perspective beyond position 5 were not structural changes, at least not in the same way as in the earlier positions, and there is some substantial work (Slepitzka, 1984) supporting that notion. Other researchers (e.g., King and Kitchener, 1994) dispute this contention, and Perry himself seemed to raise questions in later writings (e.g.,

1985). Unfortunately, there has been little additional work done on these upper positions, partly due to the necessity of researching them through qualitative interviews, and partly because work with the Perry scheme generally concentrates on undergraduate students, a population rarely reflecting post-contextual-relativistic thinking. The two significant efforts taking a closer look at these issues as students move into their adult lives (and presumably the upper positions) are the ongoing longitudinal projects being conducted by Alverno College and by Marcia Baxter Magolda at the University of Miami, Ohio.

Space does not permit a more detailed description of the Perry model here; more thorough summaries are available elsewhere (Moore, 1994; Perry, 1998). Overall, however, the Perry scheme reflects two central interwoven dynamics: 1) *confronting and coping with diversity and uncertainty with respect to new learning*, and 2) the attendant *evolution of meaning making about learning and self*. As depicted in the nine qualitatively distinct positions (and transitions between them) of the Perry scheme, learners cycle through three increasingly complex encounters with diversity in the form of multiples:

- multiple opinions about a given subject or issue (positions 1 through 3);
- multiple contexts/perspectives from which to understand or analyze issues or arguments (positions 4 through 6);
- multiple Commitments through which one defines his or her values and identity (positions 7 through 9).

As learners confront these different forms of diversity and multiples, their meaning making shifts and evolves in predictable ways. Most significantly, knowledge is seen as increasingly conjectural and uncertain, open to (and requiring) interpretation. This central epistemology about knowledge and learning triggers parallel shifts in the learner's views about the role of the teacher--moving from an Authority as the source of "Truth" to an authority as a resource with specific expertise to share--as well as the role of the student, moving from a passive receptor of facts to an active agent in defining arguments and creating new knowledge.