

PERRY ABSTRACT

In William Perry's 1970 taxonomy, the advancement of learning and ethical thought is distinguished as 9 segments or positions. An individual moves from a view with strict dual absolutes, right-wrong, yes-no, through an acceptance of complexity in outlook and experience, toward combining a pluralistic view with awareness of self and personal commitment. (Perry, 1970, p57-58)

Perry accounts for a halting or regression of this process through what he terms "positions of defection." (Perry, 1970, p57) An individual, whether through a conscience or unconscious act, can remain rooted in one position or move themselves, their thought process and ethical development, back to an earlier position. Catalysts for this can include a personal acknowledgment of lack of preparedness, experiences or situations that cause an individual to seek out and embrace absolutes, and/or an unwillingness to accept personal responsibility. (Perry, 1970, p177)

Important Terms

Basic Duality – Position 1

A view of the world; values, actions, behaviors, etc. in terms of dual value sets; us-them, right-wrong, authority-illegitimate, etc. In the same way Truth = what Authority says, Right = what Authority wants. (Perry, 1970, p59)

Multiplicity – Positions 2, 3, & 4 (Pre-Legitimate, Subordinate, Correlate)

An individual starts to recognize pluralistic views and value sets but cannot accept them as legitimate, perceives them as error. (Perry, 1970, p72-73) This follows through to understanding that multiplicity exists but possibly because absolutes have yet to be achieved/learned. (Perry, 1970, p89-92) In position 4, Perry notes that individuals branch off in two directions, the first of which is he calls Multiplicity Correlate. An individual perceives multiplicity, or pluralistic values sets, as an area of ambiguity where absolutes exist. However, since these absolutes are unknown, variations with equal or no value can also exist. (Perry, 1970, p97-100)– The second branch in position 4 of Perry's taxonomy is Relativism Subordinate. Individuals begin to perceive relativism within a multiplistic or pluralistic context. Here, absolute values still exist but in a complex, weighted system, where the path to reach the absolute can vary. (Perry, 1970, p100-102)

Relativism – Position 5 (the foundation concept for positions 6-9)

In two of the three segments contained in position 5, relativistic thinking starts to become a habit, an unconscious shift in thought process, where a temporary space for both relativism and absolutes exists. What Perry terms Relativism Correlate, examines thought with two separate realities being consciously created and followed. In one, absolutes exist and Authority holds right-wrong. In the other there are no absolutes. Relativism Competing has the same two basic structures but instead of being consciously created and followed paths, they end up a competing back and forth weave. In Relative Diffuse, the third segment in position 5, the transition from multiplicity to relativism is a

total switch with no need for separate thought paths. All knowledge is relative, Authority becomes authority and absolutes become degrees in value. (Perry, 1970, p109-116)

Commitment – Positions 6, 7, 8, & 9

Through the rest of Perry's taxonomy, growth switches from trying to understand and come to terms with view and value, to trying to understand and come to terms with the implications of commitment/responsibility in a relativistic world. This starts with recognizing the necessity of commitment/responsibility when trying to orient oneself in the newly accepted relativism. (Perry, 1970, p134-137) Then it involves taking the first steps in responsibility by making commitment, realizing the implications of one's commitments in regard to self and relation with/in the world, to using commitment and responsibility to form self. (Perry, 1970, p153-155)

Resources

Perry, W. Jr. (1970) *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Further Reading

Perry, W. Jr. (1981). *Cognitive and Ethical Growth: The Making of Meaning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Perry, W. Jr. (1968) *Patterns of Development in Thought and Values of Students in a Liberal Arts College: A Validation of a Scheme*. U.S. Department of Health Education, and Welfare, Office of Education, Bureau of Research, Final Report, Project No. 5-0825, Contact No. SAE-8973