

# The Construct-Aware Stage of Ego Development and its Relationship to the Fool Archetype

Susanne Cook-Greuter<sup>1</sup>

This brief essay is based on a keynote and workshop held at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Integral Theory Conference in Siófok, Hungary, May 2018. It addresses the fine art of Foo-Ling, the use of laughter as a tool to lighten up our own lives and the lives of those around us. While fools and jesters can come from any stage, it is a late-stage discovery to recognize the poison of taking ourselves too seriously and its antidote: light-heartedness and delight. Let's face it, we Integralists take ourselves and our mandate to raise collective consciousness very seriously. That is why we exchange ideas and work with each other. As integralists we have much important knowledge to share. And while that is as it should be, I am here to remind us of the fool in all of us and to engage in our work with a deeper level of awareness.

Ego development theory proposes that it is a characteristic of maturity to discover that not knowing is the highest form of knowing. Foo-ling is about the capacity to recognize the folly of trying to explain and map everything. It is about truly seeing how thoroughly we tend to confuse our maps and theories with the territory.

Some of you may bristle at this notion of being a fool especially if you cherish your identification as an Integralist or expert in constructive developmental theory. The question Horace asked in ancient Rome: Who is not a fool?<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Shakespeare's fool Feste in act III of *Twelfth Night* had this to say "Foolery, sir, does walk about the orb like the sun, it shines everywhere."<sup>3</sup> Finally, we quip: "Anyone who does not wish to see a fool, should smash his mirror."



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<sup>1</sup> **Susanne R. Cook-Greuter** is an independent scholar who is recognized for her ground-breaking work in ego development theory and the function of language in meaning making. She has a doctorate in human development and psychology from Harvard. She is a founding member (2000) and an elder of Ken Wilber's Integral Institute and the integral community. She sees herself as a benevolent skeptic of all the certainties and beliefs espoused in the field of vertical development and transformational and approaches. At the same time, she remains fascinated by the very joys and challenges all humans face on the pilgrimage through life. From 2018 on she will delegate world-wide engagements to disseminate developmental insights and in training in tailored coaching to a group of highly committed colleagues. Instead, she will be focusing on writing the definite book on ego development and continue to do research with and about the MAP instrument.

cookgsu@comcast.net

<sup>2</sup> Horace, 65-8 N.C) *Qui non stultus est?* Satires, 2.3.158

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.william-shakespeare.info/act3-script-text-twelfth-night.htm> (3.1.39-40)

You see, you and I are in the best of company. We are all fools when we so avidly strive to gain greater insight to master our lives, reach nirvana and hope to leave traces of our greatness. As a group we tend to believe that if only everyone else could collaborate and see the world through our color-tinted glasses, then we could be saved from our self-induced global calamity both as individuals and as a species and create the longed-for better world.

I am an old fool. I have known that I can be fooled for a long time. An early rude awakening was to discover that the much-feared Santa Claus turned out to be a neighbor dressed up in Santa gear. The longer we have lived and the more we think we understand about existence, the more we need reminding of the Buddhist teaching that says: "Understanding is the ultimate illusion."

I propose that there is a relationship between the capacity to see through the function and games of the ego and the archetype of the fool. Both show an increasing affinity for mirth and laughter. Both tend to point to all that is pretentious, self-important or takes itself too seriously.

Since time immemorial, all cultures, groups and individuals have told stories about where they come from, and who they are in relation to nature and the universe. They have explanations about why they exist and where they are headed in life and after death. From myths to grand theories of everything, storytelling seems to be a universal human characteristic.

Based on my observations, the Construct-Aware stage in ego development theory is the first in which some people begin to explore our astounding world-wide impulse to explain everything under the sun and the concomitant capacity to fool ourselves about what it means to know.<sup>4</sup> It's liberating to be able to take life more lightly and to laugh at ego's sincere and relentless efforts to cement its illusive supremacy.

## What is Ego?

First, what do I mean by ego?<sup>5</sup> As I define it in ego development theory, ego underlies the universal drive to explain everything and make us feel safe, important, and to belong. Ego represents the striving of human beings to understand themselves and the world they live in. It is the tireless organizer, interpreter, and synthesizer of experience. Its task is to turn experience into a coherent narrative about the world. How does it do that? It does so by telling a culturally influenced story about who we are, why we are here and for what purpose.

Overall, the ego labors mightily to create and maintain meaning and vigorously defends against dissonant information and its deep, unspeakable sense of helplessness. Indeed, when we are not able to tell a good story about ourselves and our tribe, we feel anxiety and despair. Ego is invested

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<sup>4</sup> There are several adult measurement systems that equate being able to give complex explanations with human higher human performance and maturity primarily based on hierarchical complexity and skill theory.

<sup>5</sup> In several spiritual traditions the ego is framed as the enemy. Indeed, seekers are admonished to kill the ego. But who else but the ego itself would strive to get beyond itself?

in the denial of death, and in upholding the illusion of our immortality. Therefore, facing and embracing our finitude is part of late-stage realization.<sup>6</sup>

It is at the Construct-Aware stage that one becomes aware of ego's narrative function and its cleverness at fooling us into thinking we can know and understand. Few people begin to question the function of ego and our need for myths, stories, and theorizing. Even rarer among ordinary adults, some individuals learn to look kindly at ego's tireless striving for security and preeminence while seeing through its hopeless efforts.

Construct-Aware folks are the first who potentially realize the illusion of "knowing" and the futility of trying to make ever better maps of reality. Other names for the Construct-Aware stage are Magician, Alchemist, Fool, and Jester. It is these latter two aspects of the Construct-Aware stage 5/6, that I will explore further here.

## The Role of Language and Culture

Overall, human development as I describe it, moves from the newborn's unconscious union with mother to a conscious union with everyone and everything. As we grow up we construct meaning by learning the vocabulary, memes, grammar and the scripts available to us from our languages and cultures. Languages divide lived experience into separate objects with distinct boundaries and evaluative attributes. We are so totally immersed in a sea of language that we hardly notice the way it lures us into a false sense of knowledge and how it molds us into very particular notions of what is real and important.<sup>7</sup>

The idea of a separate self in Western cultures is just one result of this phenomenon. It is ironic that all of us have to communicate via symbols. Ironic also that concepts such as "purpose" and "soul" as well as "ego" are symbolic abstractions that do not exist outside of language and our agreed upon definitions. Yet we treat them almost always as if they were palpable, real things. We could choose to remain silent in the face of this paradox or to speak out and laugh at our dilemma while remaining conscious of the trap of speaking.

In this context, I will mainly address aspects of the penultimate stage in ego development theory, the Construct-Aware stage 5/6. The stage has several expressions: The *cognitively-focused* Construct-Aware and the more *meaning-focused* Ego-Aware. A third, more *action-oriented* form pertains to folks who bravely hold up the mirror to society and intervene in real time to debunk all forms of accepted dogma, non-sense, and pretense. The third form is the closest to the fool archetype.

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<sup>6</sup> In the we-space context, the ego can turn multiple "I"s into a "we" with much the same mandate: To defend against recognizing that we are mortals and live in an unpredictable cataclysmic universe. No one knows what the future will bring. Whether I or we, ego's noble task remains the same: to make us feel secure, special, and immortal.

<sup>7</sup> While there has been an ongoing argument whether Nature or nurture is more shaping our thoughts, the Ted talk below gives a succinct argument of differences not explainable by nature only.

Lera Boroditsky, 2017, On how language shapes the way we think  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKK7wGAYP6k>

The job of wise men and jesters has been to expose the blind spots of society and to unmask any emperor with new clothes since time immemorial. They often do so at the risk of their own lives as their message is rarely welcome. Gifted fools, however, can come from any stage, and yet it is at stage 5/6, that one first fully realizes there is nothing to gain or lose by pretending to know. We are just here, now, alive, on this tiny blue pebble hurtling through a vast mysterious universe. Existence cannot be explained without recourse to storytelling.

The first, the Construct-aware form of stage 5/6 understands the human need to create ever more comprehensive explanations of reality despite knowing that lived experience cannot be captured in words.

We think we are taking hold of reality when we concoct a plausible theory about it. Far from it. Our lived experience is always dynamic, moment to moment, and seamless comprised of myriad fleeting sensory impressions, feelings, and thoughts. The maps of reality we construct can never depict the undivided whole, the actual lived territory. They are, at best, temporary, and useful approximations that serve us as guidelines.

Moreover, we trust science and technology as well as highly developed human minds that we can and will eventually be able to explain the cosmos. Constructive adult development theory buys into this conception by asserting that meaning is made and that we can explain what it takes to become a mature and highly evolved human being.

Most developmental theories judge the complexity of thought as the best indicator of advanced understanding. They make great efforts to help people grow bigger minds, handle more complexity, wield greater influence, and have a more lasting and far-reaching impact. Most integralists assume that cognitive agility and a second-tier perspective are vital for solving our increasingly complex, deep-rooted, and global problems.<sup>8</sup>

As far as I know, most adult development theories do not, however, point out the fundamental limitations of symbolic mental activity that includes our penchant for storytelling and theory making. Who or what is behind meaning making remains undefined. Why we are striving for meaning and growth is taken as a given or explained away by other abstract concepts, such as, for instance, the idea of progress via the evolutionary impulse.

Ego development theory alone postulates that it is ego's task to construct meaning and to form a coherent narrative about existence to counter uncertainty.

Based on the evidence of more than 4500 sentence completions tests, I identified nine different self-stories, nine different ways of defining what is real and important in the Western world. These ways develop sequentially and represent increasing levels of individuation and integration. While complex reasoning is an aspect of later-stage meaning making, it is not sufficient by itself for becoming a mature adult. By mature, I mean a wise, discerning, and compassionate human being:

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<sup>8</sup> There is trust that if we just grow the minds of our citizens we will, in the end, make the world a better and safer place. As is often said we are living in a VUCA world: A world that is increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. Yet we believe that we can overcome uncertainty and ambiguity.

One who is aware of being held captive by language. One who accepts being mortal, and, thus, participates in the universal processes of growth and demise.

## A Brief Refresher of Ego Development Theory

Let me now briefly recapitulate the overall trajectory of ego development. In the 1960s, Jane Loevinger first saw a clear pattern of a developmental sequence in the stories women told about themselves by analyzing thousands of sentence completions. Ego development theory and its measurement still derives from empirical evidence, not from mere theorizing.

By analyzing thousands of additional sentence completion tests beginning in 1980, I was able to suggest the logical underpinnings of increasing perspectives and expand the stage sequence at the upper end. My hypotheses were validated both statistically and qualitatively in my 1999 Harvard dissertation.<sup>9</sup> Since then I have accumulated some additional 360,000 pieces of evidence. So far these support the current distinctions, but, for lack of evidence, do not allow for speculation about further stages.



**Figure 1:** The 9 station journey from knowledge to wisdom in ego development theory

<sup>9</sup> Cook-Greuter, S. R. (2010). Postautonomous ego development: A study of its nature and measurement. Harvard University (1999). Integral Publishers: Dissertation series. ISBN: 978-1-4507-2515-6

I chose the arc representation for this summary. I will not offer details about arrested adult development and the first three ego stages: The Self-Centric stage 2/3, the Group-Centric stage 3 and the Skill-Centric Stage 3/4.

The first half of this arc image shows the movement from an unconscious unity of the infant at birth to an ever more accurate, unique, and separate self-identity at the **Self-Governing Stage 4**.

At the apex of the arc, separation is at its most developed (modern science) and the boundary between “me and not me,” between “this” and “that” is most clearly-delineated. Stage 4 represents the ideal adult in most modern western societies. Its achievement and expression are encouraged, supported by our social institutions, and rewarded. At Stage 4, people tend to have the most definite idea of who they are, and what they want, and how to achieve their goals including how to make the world a better place. They rely on rational analysis and technology. They trust that humans can figure out solutions to all problems, if not now, certainly in the future. While they may know some of their personal traits, preferences, and behavior patterns, they do not yet fully recognize their historical, geographic, cultural, and linguistic conditioning.

The discovery of having been socialized into specific set of beliefs about what is real, is an aspect of the next, the **Self-Inquiring stage 4/5**. It is the first stage that can take a perspective on its own acculturation and assumptions. Individuals are now aware that other people have their own perspectives and unique programming to deal with and their own way of telling their stories. While there is one reality, there are as many perspectives on it as there are people. Moreover, rational linear analysis is often rejected in favor of free-spirited self-expression. One realizes that life and the world is much stranger and less predictable than one believed up to now. Great uncertainty to who one really is outside of conditioned responses is part of the confusion and challenge of Stage 4/5. At the same time, self-questioning creates a sense of freedom, and the open road.

At the next level, the **Self-Actualizing stage 5**, people gain a more integrated way to feel good, powerful, and certain about themselves. Rational analysis is an important part of meaning making yet supported by access to intuition, dreams, creativity, and other inner and outer resources. The person understands the interdependence of people and systems. That includes recognizing that we are inevitably influenced by the environment and that we shape it in turn. Many at Stage 5 can appreciate their own and others’ developmental journeys and, thus, relate to themselves and others in more skillful and appreciative ways. Many also feel empowered, masterful, and proud of their understanding as they indeed know a lot more about themselves, human nature, and the world than people at any stage before. Pride about how much one knows is one of the shadows of this stage along with its inner certainty and sense of importance. “If only everyone were second-tier then the world could be saved.”

The **Construct-Aware stage 5/6** is the first in the sequence to begin to understand the process of meaning making and identity formation. It recognizes the moment to moment construction of a self, and its ongoing deconstruction and reconstruction. While Stage 5 can discern patterns of evolution in nature, people, and society, it still trusts that more knowledge and control over the vagaries of life are attainable and will give us a way out of the current global catastrophe.

Stage 5/6 constitutes a radically new perspective. It can look at the whole paradigm of constructive developmental theory, compare it to other psychological theories and see both their similarities and differences, their benefits and limitations. It is thus a stage of differentiation from the previously held view of reality and meaning making. Stage 5/6 embraces the fundamental uncertainty about knowing and shows a greater and greater capacity to see through our human yearning for meaning and wholeness.

People at this form of Stage 5/6 often experience great existential tension as there is now really no ground to stand on, no single reality to observe from multiple perspectives. Instead, there are multiple realities created by humans in different cultures and languages.<sup>10</sup> All theories are seen for what they are: ego's attempts to create order, certainty, and predictability. While there can be tremendous suffering associated with seeing through the games our minds play, the pain can be appreciated and indeed embraced as a portal to deeper connection and fuller being.

In contrast, some individuals become aware of ego's function and how it does its work. **Ego-Aware** is a name we have used for 25 years for this aspect of Stage 5/6.<sup>11</sup> Ego is always trying to make us feel secure, important, and enduring. It executes its charge with exquisite finesse. This includes a tendency to adopt any ideology that;

- a) resonates with our own ideals and yearnings,
- b) gives us a sense of power and belonging, and
- c) promises us a sense of immortality.

Ego tries to usurp even the loftiest spiritual notions to feel good about itself. Trungpa Rinpoche famously diagnosed this tendency as spiritual materialism.<sup>12</sup>

My 40 years of research have shown just how readily the ego will appropriate any content to see itself as a hero and make itself feel more potent and indispensable. The suffering here can be intense as no attempt at overcoming ego's workings (shenanigans) will achieve its goal of ego-transcendence and self-liberation. The more one strives for greater insight and seeks detachment from ego, the more attached one is to whatever one is seeking.

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<sup>10</sup> Lera Boroditsky gave a TED talk in 2017 that demonstrates some of the cultural differences: Here is the transcript of the talk for those who have difficulty imagining that language influences how we see our roles as humans. Time and space can be experienced differently than we do in the West. Monolinguals are especially prone to the misconception that there is one reality we can look at from different perspectives. [https://www.ted.com/talks/lera\\_boroditsky\\_how\\_language\\_shapes\\_the\\_way\\_we\\_think/transcript](https://www.ted.com/talks/lera_boroditsky_how_language_shapes_the_way_we_think/transcript)

<sup>11</sup> While it seems rarer than construct-awareness, we have no evidence that it follows a pattern and is later than construct-aware, despite claims to the contrary by TOF who declares it a separate, more advanced stage.

<sup>12</sup> My years of research in adult development has shown just how readily the ego, in its identification as a separate self, will usurp any content in order to boost itself and make itself feel more potent and indispensable. It deserves noting that in the we-space context, the ego can turn multiple "I"s into a "we" with much the same mission: To defend against recognizing that we are mortals and live in an unpredictable cataclysmic universe. No one can predict what the future will bring. Whether I or we, ego's noble task remains the same: to make us earthlings feel secure, special, and immortal.

It is a Construct-Aware capacity to see through ego's efforts at safeguarding our illusion of knowing. Immersed as we are in language, humans everywhere participate in confusing discursive knowing with understanding. It takes courage to acknowledge that we are all prone to fool ourselves in myriad ways about our achievements, including in terms of development and spiritual attainment. It requires great grit to believe in the value of simply being alive and not to despair in the face of fundamental doubt about ever knowing and understanding.

As I like to say, we are all bozos on the same bus. Once we get this joke, we can become more light-hearted, and see ego's striving for control in a more benevolent light because *it can do no other*. Fooling us and misdirecting our attention is ego's task. It makes us feel secure, permanent, and important. It creates for us a pretend world in which we can reach heaven and in which we don't really have to die. And yet, there is no escaping the tragedy and randomness of life and our inevitable death.

To summarize, mature integration as a human being entails an increasing capacity to notice ego's workings. At the same time, we can lighten-up and experience the simple and childlike joy of being alive. We can delight in the senses and our inner world – moment to moment as well as appreciate the lives and struggles of humanity.

One of the surprising insights of late stage maturity is realizing what a hoot ego's efforts are. It is folly to wish experience to be different than it is. And yet many of us idealists feel it is its own madness to see life as it is, and not as we wish it to be, and as we think it should be. It is natural that we want to feel that we are here for a higher purpose, that our lives mean something beyond simple existence.

Perhaps most important of all, immersed as we are in language, humans automatically participate in the delusion that symbol-mediated knowing is true understanding.

In this little essay, I have opened the possibility that all of us are fools, prone to fall into the typical and very human trap of self-delusion. We are fooling ourselves especially when we believe that we know, and thereby that we can predict and control. We can learn to take ourselves less seriously and laugh at ego's folly while appreciating its hapless and important task. Embracing the inseparableness of laughter and tears, of life and death, is part of the unmasking process of Fool-Ling. I suggest that the ability to laugh whole-heartedly and with compassion at the human condition is an indicator of ego maturity and a mark of the wise fool.

To sum up, the Construct-Aware stage is the first stage in the sequence of ego development stages that sees through the function of the ego to make us feel safe, important, and permanent. We inevitably use language to describe experience and then make maps and tell stories about it.



## Fools are Everywhere!

Beatrice Otto's treatise "*Fools are everywhere*"<sup>13</sup> served as a rich resource of information about the fool character and its brethren and sisters. Throughout the ages and across the globe their role and special license was to tell the unvarnished truth.

Much has been written about the ubiquity and ancient recognition of the function of the fool as an archetype. He is the forerunner to the hero's quest to explore the unknown and deal with the demons awaiting us. Its closest ally is the **wise fool**, the kind we may encounter in seasoned elders and well-grounded late-stage meaning makers.

Human fools and jesters look at the human condition from a radically honest, and yet often deeply caring and imaginative perspective. Their function is to reveal and poke fun at the limitation of people, systems, and society. Historically and culturally, fools have played an essential role in holding up the mirror to power, vanity, and entitlement.

Like fools, the statistically rare, integrated individuals at stage 5/6 are marginal to society. As outsiders, they can observe the human drama while accepting that they are players in it. Because they have a perspective on meaning making itself, they can observe the clever games ego plays and how we can delude ourselves.

In academia, taking oneself seriously is almost a requirement. Jesters are rarely welcome. When they debunk established pet theories, they are likely expelled and hung out to dry. In times past, they were even burnt at the stake for challenging the powers that be. "Il dottore" in the Italian Commedia dell'Arte is the quintessential caricature of the learned man who is stuck in his head. He elicits ridicule by exaggerating his knowledge and his pedantic self-importance. Academic pretense can be found everywhere. You recognize it by all the neologisms, fancy multi-syllabic words presented with an aura of authority. Most of us tend to think something is deep and must be true if we don't really understand it. We don't want to appear ignorant and admit we are unable to get it whatever the "it" is.

Beatrice Otto points out that, and I quote:

It is often considered that to be taken seriously one had to be serious, that humor is frivolous, and not suited to weighty matters. Yet earnestness implies rigidity while humor tends towards fluidity and as such is surely a better means of dealing with serious matters, since it is well equipped to take the complexities and contradictions of life in its stride.

## Shared Characteristics

So, what do mature Construct-Aware meaning makers and wise fools and jesters have in common?

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<sup>13</sup> Otto, Beatrice, K. (2007). *Fools are everywhere: The court jester around the world*. University of Chicago Press.

They expose and laugh at all that is pretentious, inauthentic, and unpoetic.

- They unmask intellectual arrogance, expose mental rigidity, and uncover (defrock) spiritual ego inflation.
- They expose and poke fun at sacred cows, and pompous behavior of any kind especially in authorities.
- They deliver the truth raw without embellishing or softening it to please.
- They are spontaneous and often irreverent towards the established order.
- While they challenge the conventional mores and beliefs of society, they generally do not try to overthrow them as would rebels.
- They shake people out of deep-rooted patterns of thought and behavior and remind us of our human frailties and limitations.
- Like very young children, they embrace innocence, are joyful, imaginative and can play on the world stage with abandon.
- At the same time, wise fools are always also laughing at their own suffering, confusion, and the reality of our shared human lot.

Wise fools and jesters are an affirmation of all that is uncertain in the universe, the random and unknown factors of existence. That makes them a threat to those who want to believe we know where humanity is headed, to those who trust that all has been mapped out and already settled and that whatever mysteries remain will be unlocked in due time.

How do wise fools and mature humans hold up the mirror?

- They present a different angle or perspective on reality and offer a wider view of experience than people who swim with the mainstream.
- They use self-deprecating humor, puns, and wordplay to diffuse tense situation and soften the blow of their critical observations.
- They can voice disagreement by profusely agreeing with an absurd notion, so that the perpetrator sees the absurdity for him or herself.
- In scholarly contexts, they may use reason in such a way that the fallacy of a belief becomes evident. This requires that proponents of a theory are open to having their ideas and certainties challenged.
- They can create space by exaggerating the absurd that is taken for normal and thus create laughter as the only healthy response.<sup>14</sup>

Both wise humans and fools can turn the world on its head by making people see the ultimate insignificance of many of the things they hold dear by pointing to unwarranted beliefs and delusions as well as misperceptions and illusions.

We all benefit from practicing being OK with what is, especially with not being perfect and recognizing the function of the ego's to fool us into feeling in control of life. Getting over ourselves

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<sup>14</sup> As part of the Foo-Ling workshop, Doshin Nelsen Introduced sacred laughter. He invites people to complain about whatever annoys them to the hilt, till they break out in laughter because they see the folly of wishing things were perfect, or the way we imagine that they should be in an ideal world.

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is likely one of the biggest challenges we integralist can face. We are no different than the rest of humanity. We are all fallible and mortal human beings. Let's unlearn conditioned self-criticism, perfectionism, thinking we know, and wishing things to be different than they are.

Humor and laughter are wonderful remedies for pointing to folly and self-importance wherever they show up. While trying our best, let's learn to smile kindly at our foibles and clay feet. The very laughter gives us angel wings, the antidote to taking ourselves too seriously.

## **Footnote**

This essay is based on a talk given at the 2018 European Integral Conference. In addition, this inspired Angela Halvorson Bogo to create The Foo-ling Contract. You can find a copy of this text here: <https://www.thefoolstory.com/fooling-contract/>.