

Late Stages of Adult Development: One Linear Sequence or Several Parallel Branches?

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Introduction

This text is intended to serve as a starting point for a discussion about the nature of late forms of adult development. It is primarily of interest for readers who are familiar with one or several stage models, such as ego development stages and hierarchical complexity levels. The basic proposition (to be critically scrutinized) is that frameworks that describe adult development as a linear sequence of stages defined by one core variable (such as hierarchical complexity or ego structures) do not accurately represent the diversity of the "higher" or "late" forms of adult development.

Most theorists of late stage adult development advocate one particular theoretical framework, such as Commons' Model of Hierarchical Development, Dawson's Lectical Assessment System, Cook-Greuter's elaboration of Loevinger's ego development theory, Kegan's orders of consciousness, Jaques' Complexity of Information Processing framework or O'Fallon's StAGES model. Ken Wilber (see e.g. Wilber, 1999) is a notable exception, using the notion of different lines of development and the distinction between structure-stages and states to build a very differentiated conceptual framework for understanding the nature of consciousness development. Otto Laske (2006, 2009) is another theorist who advocates the need to differentiate between different domains of development that might develop at different paces, such as socioemotional development (Kegan) and various aspects of cognitive development (Basseches, Bhaskar, Jaques and King & Kitchener).

Scholars focussing on the complexity aspect of adult development have generally ignored to consider the phenomenon of "spiritual awakening" or "enlightenment" as possibly relevant to understanding higher forms of adult development. Since this theme is probably quite foreign to many scholars in the adult development field, I will make an extra effort below to point to the potential insights that can be gained from considering empirical research on this phenomenon.

I hope to entice more adult development scholars with different theoretical orientations to consider what can be learnt when different frameworks are compared and contrasted against each other, thereby also challenging implicit or explicit assumptions that late stage adult development can be accurately understood in terms of a single line of development.

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This paper has three main parts. The following section briefly discusses a number of key concepts that I feel are needed in order to have a differentiated discussion of the nature of late stage adult development. After that, I will present a number of tentative but somewhat incisive propositions to be critically reviewed and discussed. The last main part sketches 5 prototypical late stage profiles of individuals that cannot easily be assigned to different stages in a linear developmental stage framework.

Key Concepts

It is necessary to define terms in order to be able to meaningfully discuss the complexities of adult development and spiritual awakening. This is a bit tedious, but it is a precondition for developing more clarity. Actually, I believe we need quite a few key concepts that represent various aspects of development. Here is my selection.

High *cognitive complexity* refers to the demonstrated capacity of a person to form mental representations of complex relationships between concepts and to make use of concepts at high levels of abstraction in order to resolve complex tasks. Levels of cognitive complexity can be defined, described and measured by analytical frameworks like Michael Commons's MHC (the Model of Hierarchical Complexity; Commons, 2008; Commons & Richards, 1984; Commons et al., 1998), Kurt Fischer's skill theory (Fischer, 1980; Fischer & Bidell, 2006), LAS (the Lectical Assessment System, based on Fischer's skill theory; Dawson & Gabrelian, 2003; Dawson & Wilson, 2004) and Elliott Jaques' CIP/CMP (Complexity of Information/Mental Processing; Jaques & Cason, 1994). MHC, for example, describes levels of hierarchical complexity, such as Concrete, Abstract, Formal, Systematical, Metasystematical, Paradigmatical and Crossparadigmatical. It should be pointed out that scholars operating with hierarchical complexity frameworks usually do not assume that individuals are "at" a particular stage. An individual's performance can vary depending on domain, degree of scaffolding and other variables. There are large similarities between the frameworks mentioned above, but also some significant differences. The main difference between MHC and LAS is that the latter framework refers to tiers, which are defined by the levels of abstraction of the objects people use when reasoning. A rather different framework for describing and analysing cognitive complexity is the typology of forms of dialectical thinking formulated by Michael Basseches (1984) and elaborated by Otto Laske (2009). This framework focusses post-formal reasoning using a typology of thought forms. The emphasis is not on stages/levels, but on the extent to which a subject considers factors relating to context, processes, relationships and transformation.

Complexity awareness refers to awareness of and expectation that there might be many varying conditions, causal relationships, system properties and other factors that influence a particular issue or task (Jordan, 2011; Jordan et al. 2013). Weak complexity awareness means that a person is simply not aware of the possibility that there might be significant complex conditions that impact a certain issue. Strong complexity awareness means that there is an expectation (or pre-understanding, German *Vorverständnis*) that there can be complex conditions, explanations and consequences related to, for example, a particular task. Strong complexity awareness does not necessarily imply a high level of individual capacity for forming very complex mental representations and solutions to complex tasks. Sometimes it means a recognition that it will be impossible for the individual to gain knowledge of and coordinate all factors and systemic

interrelationships that need to be taken into consideration. The person will then engage in action with an awareness that knowledge is very incomplete and/or will be motivated to build networks of actors that can generate collective capacity to deal with complex issues by drawing on diverse competences and sets of knowledge.

Strong perspective awareness refers to metasystematical reasoning applied to recognizing, comparing and using complex systems of notions (such as concepts, problem formulations, assumptions of causal relations and values), i.e. perspectives (Jordan, 2011; Jordan et al. 2013).² A person with a strong perspective awareness is able to take his or her own interpretive system as an object of reflection, recognizing how the properties of the interpretative perspective one is using condition what awareness focusses, how issues are thought about and patterns of making judgments. This leads to a rather low propensity to identify exclusively with a particular perspective (e.g. an ideology, a belief system, a discourse) on the one hand, and interest in using the contributions of alternative perspectives for a richer understanding of issues on the other hand. People with a strong perspective awareness recognize the constructed nature of all systems of meaning-making and can, at least to some extent, recognize the partial nature of their own favoured perspective. Examples of this can be to admit that one's own perspective is ill equipped to perceive certain aspects of reality, has blind spots in terms of circumstances that are marginalized by way the perspective foregrounds particular ideas and relationships and makes use of a large set of concepts that inevitably conditions how reality can be represented.

The **ego development** frameworks (following Loevinger and Kegan respectively: Loevinger, Loevinger, 1976; Hy & Loevinger, 1996; Cook-Greuter, 2010; Kegan, 1994) describe how individuals develop through a sequence of more or less universal stages, from birth through childhood and adulthood. Ego development theory describes a person's ego as a structured whole that develops as an integrated system through a linear sequence of stages. Jane Loevinger's ego development framework was built through pattern recognition in sentence completions and is more descriptive of salient patterns than explanatory. The stage descriptions include not only the *structure* of cognition, as in MHC and LAS, but also degrees of differentiation of the language used and shifting patterns of preoccupations in different stages, i.e. the *contents* of cognition. Robert Kegan's subject-object theory focuses the shifts in relationships between a self that is reconstructed in several stages on the one hand, and what this self can take as objects of awareness. At each new stage a reconstructed self gains more capacity for actively regulating elements of experience. The ego development theorists who have explored late ego development stages emphasise the roles of construct awareness (Cook-Greuter, 2010) and self-awareness/witnessing (Joiner & Josephs, 2007; O'Fallon et al., forthcoming; Murray, 2017) in forming the characteristics of the late stages.

Construct awareness refers to the awareness of the constructed nature of language, representations of experience and generally to people's meaning-making (Cook-Greuter, 2010). A person with a highly realized construct-awareness is aware that thoughts, judgments, narratives, feelings, images, etc. are products of a process of assigning meaning that depends on the person's conditioning through, for example, biographical experiences and collective constructions of meaning permeating the social environment one is embedded in.

² The concept is closely related to Ken Wilber's use of the term "vision-logic" in later works.

Self-awareness and *self-witnessing* are related concepts. The notion of self-awareness has been assigned different meanings in the literature. Here it refers to real-time awareness of internal processes, such as perceptions, emotional reactions, thoughts, judgments, desires, impulses, etc. (Jordan, 2001). A person with a highly developed self-awareness notices and can reflect on emerging thoughts, interpretations and feelings as they happen. Self-witnessing goes one step further and refers to a stable ability to witness upcoming internal events without being compelled to react and act in certain ways. Another way of putting it is that there is a fundamental acceptance of whatever transpires in the sense of not resisting the actuality of what happens (which does not imply that one doesn't take action when action is needed). The concept "witnessing" covers a broad range and can occur occasionally at rather early levels of ego development. A comprehensive and stabilized capacity for witnessing is intimately linked to the establishment of a more permanent self identification with the witnessing position. Mental and emotional processes are then perceived as events happening in the bodymind, but the self has a considerable freedom to make decisions about how to relate to those events.

Meta-awareness refers to awareness of awareness, i.e. a recognition that awareness as such can be differentiated from the contents of one's awareness field (Jordan, 2001; Kelly, 2015; Spira, 2017). Strong meta-awareness means a direct experience of the quality of "pure awareness", that there is a position for awareness that is not affected by the specific contents of awareness. Pure awareness is experienced to be unchanging, independent of time and space, empty but still a living presence without boundaries.

Spiritual awakening or *enlightenment* involves a profound shift in the nature of the sense of self, where the self is no longer identified as a separate self with a boundary to the environment and other people (Adyashanti, 2009; 2011; Culadasa et al., 2015; Frazier, 2012; Martin, 2012; Ullman & Reichenberg-Ullman, 2001; Young, 2016). The self is identified as a *pure awareness self* felt as boundaryless (ego dissolution), at one with everything, not separate. This can be associated with a very intense experience of well-being and sometimes an ecstatic sense of unity with everything. When thoughts and feelings occur there is no "I" they belong to. Spiritual awakening, at least in many cases, seems to be connected with (maybe also in some sense caused by) neurological changes in how the brain operates, e.g. deactivation of some brain subsystems and activation of other brain subsystems. This might explain why spiritual awakening can be a sudden event, rather than, as with ego development, the result of a slow process of gradual development.

Temporary "mystical experiences" can relatively reliably be induced by psychedelic substances (particularly LSD and psilocybin) under certain conditions (Barrett & Griffiths, 2018; Carhart-Harris et al, 2014; Griffiths et al., 2006; Liechti, 2017). A mystical experience typically includes the following qualities: A sense of boundaryless unity with something far greater than the individual self; a sense that everything is made up of one and the same consciousness; a very strong sense that one has encountered ultimate reality; an experience of sacredness; intense positive feelings of awe and well-being; and an experience of transcending boundedness in time and space (Barrett & Griffiths, 2018; Stace, 1960). Recent research using modern techniques for measuring brain activity under influence of psychedelic substances indicates that the experience of ego dissolution is connected with deactivation of the "default mode network", a network connecting different parts of the brain that plays a central role in continually constructing a narrative that

allows the sustaining of a coherent sense of self (see e.g. Nour & Carhart-Harris, 2017). Studies have shown that various forms of meditation are associated with similar shifts in patterns of brain activity as induced by psychedelic drugs (see eg. Brewer et al. 2011). Temporary ego transcendence experiences are as such of little relevance here, however, the mode of experiencing the self and the world in mystical experiences is very similar to the experiences reported by persons who have attained persistent states of spiritual awakening, i.e. persons who experience themselves as enlightened. DiPerna (2014), referring to Brown (2006), uses the concept *vantage point* to denote the anchoring positioning of the self-sense in relation to the outside world and inner experiencing. Spiritual awakening is here understood as a durable shift in the self's vantage point, e.g. from being embedded in a separate ego, to identification as a pure awareness self.

In the practice-oriented literature on enlightenment there is often mention of the difference between the "gradual" and the "sudden" path to enlightenment, where the former emphasizes the need for disciplined training over a long time period as a prerequisite for spiritual awakening, while the latter refers to enlightenment as a sudden, spontaneous and radical shift. There are numerous accounts in the literature of individuals who had sudden enlightenment events with dramatic consequences, for example by Eckhart Tolle and Sat Shree. Some of these individuals needed several years of adaption to their now very different mode of experience before they could function in a stable way. The existence of such sudden shifts fits well with recent brain research that indicates that spiritual experiences are linked to deactivation and activation of certain networks in the brain.

Lasting shifts in the experience of self and world of the kind described in this section have documented beneficial effects that can be interpreted as development of maturity: a stable sense of well-being, liberation from embeddedness in emotions generated by past negative experiences, a strong decrease of self-referential thoughts (such as preoccupation with how one is perceived by others or a self-narrative as a victim) and a radical weakening of the need for ego defense mechanisms (see e.g. Martin, 2012).

Propositions

In the interest of keeping this reasonably brief, I have formulated a number of propositions about how the different aspects of development are related to each other. These propositions take the form of assertions, but they are just statements of my current beliefs, rather than truth claims. I invite you to critically review and discuss these propositions.

1. Late *ego development* stages are not defined by increasing *cognitive complexity*.

The development of cognitive complexity is strongly correlated with the stages of ego development up to and including the stage Autonomous/Strategist (E8). Key properties of the ego development stages can be related to and explained by levels of cognitive complexity. However, this does not go for cognitive complexity in general, but specifically for complexity in cognition relating to the interpersonal (social) and intrapersonal (psychological) realms. Cognitive complexity in relation to the external non-human world is only weakly related to ego development. A person can be capable of highly complex reasoning about, for example, technical issues and still be scored at one of the conventional ego stages. The ego stages beyond Autonomous/Strategist are

not generated by increasing complexity of cognitive operations, but by increasing **construct awareness** and, in the latest stage(-s), **meta-awareness** and an increasingly stable shift of the identification of the self sense to the pure awareness position.

2. **Spiritual awakening** is more or less independent of **cognitive complexity**, **complexity awareness** and **perspective awareness**.

Many individuals who are genuinely spiritually awakened have a weak perspective awareness and don't engage in highly complex mental operations, such as MHC's metasystematical, paradigmatical and crossparadigmatical levels of complexity. Weak perspective awareness can, for example, show up in the form of firm beliefs in the correctness of one's own particular belief system and discourse about the nature and patterns of spiritual awakening (enlightenment) and a corresponding categorical dismissal of alternative discourses.

3. People can have a very high level of **cognitive complexity** without having a strong **perspective awareness**.

People can have the capacity of grasping and interrelating multiple systems of ideas without being able to reflect on the limitations of their own systems of meaning-making. However, metasystematical cognition (an ability to reason about and interrelate properties of systems) is a precondition for fully realized perspective awareness.

4. People can have a strong **construct awareness** without having a strong **perspective awareness**.

This means being strongly aware of the constructed nature of thoughts, judgments and narratives, and therefore being able to take them as objects of a witnessing self that has a degree of freedom in deciding how to relate to the constructs, while at the same time *not* having the capacity to recognize the systemic nature of perspectives and actively using an awareness of properties of different perspectives for gaining insight and resolving complex tasks. Perspective awareness requires capacity for systems reasoning.

5. The phenomena referred to by the concepts **spiritual awakening** and **construct awareness** are related but not identical.

People can develop a high degree of construct awareness without having the profound direct experience of there being no self that is characteristic of genuine spiritual awakening.

6. The phenomena referred to by the concepts **spiritual awakening** and **meta-awareness** are also closely related but not identical.

People can have a firm experience of pure awareness (the quality of awareness apart from its changing contents) without experiencing the cessation of being a separate self.

Five Prototypical Late-stage Awareness Profiles

In this section I outline five different prototypical awareness profiles for individuals that could be argued to display late adult development patterns. The argument is that these profiles are examples of patterns that cannot comfortably be assigned to different stages in a unidimensional sequence of developmental stages. The table below gives an overview of the five cases.

Table 1: Five examples of different late-stage awareness profiles

	Cognitive complexity	Perspective awareness	Construct awareness	Self-awareness	Pure awareness self
Person A	Strong	Weak	Weak	Weak	Weak
Person B	Strong	Strong	Strong	Moderate	Weak
Person C	Weak	Weak	Strong	Weak	Moderate
Person D	Weak	Weak	Weak	Strong	Moderate
Person E	Weak	Weak	Strong	Moderate	Strong

A: Strong cognitive complexity. A is someone who is capable of perceiving and reasoning about complex systems, processes and how multiple dynamic systems interact and evolve. However, A's construct and perspective awareness are weak, A does not reflect on how the properties of A's own system of interpretation leads to selective perception, to foregrounding of some issues and backgrounding of others, and to a tendency to make use of a selection of concepts and causal principles when interpreting issues. Since A indeed has a strong capacity for perceiving and reasoning about complex interrelationships, A has reason to have confidence in A's own judgments. This confidence in combination with weak perspective awareness leads to a strong identification with A's perspective and, at best, a weak interest in alternative perspectives. At worst, A will actively dismiss the relevance of alternative perspectives without really trying to consider what might be valid insights offered.

A weak capacity for witnessing from a position outside identifications means that the sense of self is firmly embedded in a system of convictions.

B: Strong perspective awareness. B is a person whose meaning-making includes systematical and metasystematical reasoning. B is aware of dialectical interdependency and systemic causation, and therefore expects, inquires into and makes use of systemic conditions and processes. But B also directs the capability for grasping complex systems towards understanding the properties of perspectives. Not only perspectives "out there", but also B's own perspective. B is aware to some extent of how the properties of B's own perspective leads to selective attention and a pattern of foregrounding and backgrounding that follows from the particular patterns of the discourse system used to form the perspective.

B has, in a sense, a certain level of construct awareness. However, this applies mostly to being able to recognize that meaning-making *systems* are constructed. B has not developed a keen familiarity with the pure awareness position and is therefore also not identified as a witness self,

but rather as a dynamic, complex self system with views and values, even though these are held with a great deal of lightness and flexibility.

C: Strong construct awareness. C is keenly aware that our concepts, images, narratives and even feelings and desires are constructed. C recognizes that the meaning assigned to mental representations is highly conditioned by both socially constructed meaning, and accumulated meaning-making patterns throughout a person's biography. This construct awareness has loosened up C's attachments to convictions and opened up space for the emergence of a witness self.

However, C's cognitive world is made up of mental representations on the concrete, abstract and formal MHC levels. There is little consideration of systemic connections, processes and structures. C does not have the cognitive skills required for roles that include managing complex tasks with a long time frame and overviewing and coordinating complex systems.

C is also not someone who has developed a keen interest in turning attention inwards, towards the details of the continuous stream of thoughts, emotions, desires and impulses generated in C's bodymind. C is therefore not very mindful in taking responsibility for C's own reactivity in social situations.

D: Strong self-awareness. D has a keen ability to notice internal processes, such as generation of emotions, evaluations, thought threads, interpretations, reactive impulses, desires, etc. This has led to a certain degree of freedom in relation to those processes, and hence the beginning of a witness self. However, D has not developed the more complex forms of cognition, does not expect and operate with systems cognition and is not able to reflect on and make use of properties of different perspectives. D is not able to take own patterns of meaning-making, the systemic properties of D's perspective, as objects for reflection, and is therefore subject to them.

E: Pure awareness self. E has gone through a process of shifting what the self-sense is identified as, from identification with a separate self made up of convictions about the self and the world to an identification as pure awareness. This means that E doesn't have any substantial need for defense mechanisms that protect the coherence of the ego, and therefore no need to manipulate other people into supporting own ego needs.

E is well aware of the constructed nature of thoughts, narratives and emotions. However, when E has to engage in problem-solving or talk with other people about complex issues, E still has to use a perspective made up of concepts and convictions. This perspective is not essential to E's sense of identity, but since E does not have the capacity to recognize and reflect on the systemic properties of perspectives, E will easily fall into a strong belief in the correctness of E's own views.

E's identification as pure awareness does not mean that E has a keen mindful contact with the stream of thoughts, impulses and emotions that the body and the sum of earlier conditionings give rise to. E does also not have a well honed skill in detecting what other people feel and think, and sometimes handles social relations in unskillful ways.

The five prototypical profiles outlined above are intended to provide food for reflection rather than making validity claims. Is it reasonable to assume that such combinations as in these five

examples might exist? Even if the ego development frameworks of Cook-Greuter and O'Fallon would prove to describe the most common patterns of late ego development, are there significant variations that cannot easily be assimilated into the models?

Empirical Studies

I have not been able to find more than a few empirical investigations into the correlation of different aspects of adult development, such as cognitive complexity, ego development and spiritual awakening. However, the few studies that have been made are intriguing in terms of the basic questions asked in this paper. Here are two examples:

Glenn Mehlretter (1995) studied 25 subjects by having them fill out the Washington University Sentence Completion Test and scoring interviews using Jaques' Complexity of Mental Processing model. All but two of the subjects were scored at the Self-aware and Conscientious ego development stages. Of the 11 subjects who were scored at the Conscientious stage, the CMP score varied from 2.5 to 6.75, indicating a very wide spread of cognitive complexity among people who scored at the same ego development stage.

Jeffery Martin (2010) recruited 36 individuals who self-reported a "persistent non-symbolic experience", i.e. being spiritually awakened. He let them fill out the Mysticism Scale form and the Washington University Sentence Completion Test. All participants scored high on the Mysticism Scale, confirming their self-assessment as fulfilling a range of criteria for being spiritually awakened. Their ego development scores were spread out over six ego development stages, from Self-aware to Unitive (according to Cook-Greuter's elaboration of Loevinger's framework), with 12 participants at Self-aware and Conscientious, 11 at Individualist and 13 at Autonomous, Construct-aware and Unitive, thus indicating that ego development and spiritual awakening are not correlated.

Both studies are very limited in terms of number of participants and in both cases there are methodological limitations, but they certainly indicate that there are reasons for doubting that there is a strong correlation between the three constructs cognitive complexity, ego development (in the Loevinger-based tradition) and spiritual awakening.

Conclusion

The purpose of this text is to point to a couple of questions about the validity of certain assumptions that seem to be built into some of the theoretical frameworks used to describe and explain adult development, here with particular focus on the late/high/mature forms. There were two more concrete reasons that triggered me to write these pages. One was the recurring assertion among the advocates of hierarchical complexity frameworks (MHC and LAS) that cognitive complexity is the key variable that can explain many empirical patterns of development among adults. The other was Terri O'Fallon's claims that her StAGES model can both describe and explain ego development from childhood to transpersonal forms in terms of a linear sequence of stages formed by the combination of a small number of variables. I want to invite scholars in the field to critically inquire into both views. I believe that the hierarchical complexity frameworks exclude from consideration aspects of adult development that are essential to understand the nature of late

forms of development, notably self-witnessing and the transcendence of the sense of a separate self described in the literature on spiritual awakening and mystical experiences. I am also concerned that the assumption that later forms of development can be accurately represented through frameworks that describe a linear sequence of ego development stages might obscure the variability of patterns. It seems warranted to specifically inquire into the variability of developmental patterns, using a number of different analytical constructs. For some of these, quite well researched measurement instruments already exist, which could be used in combination in empirical studies in order to test correlations. However, I also believe that it would be productive to use qualitative methods, such as semi-structured interviews and 360 degree assessments, that allow for probing a broad range of indicators of different aspects of late/mature forms of adult development.

The propositions formulated in the second main section of this paper are meant as invitations to dialogues, discussions, or (though less appealing) debates about the strengths and limitations of different theoretical frameworks, including consideration of the epistemological assumptions behind the orientation in our field regarding theory construction. There is still, in my opinion, too much monological rationality and too little practice of perspective awareness in the field of adult development. Creators of theoretical frameworks often have, not surprisingly, a nomothetical bent, i.e. they strive to develop an elegant framework that explains a lot with one basic principle. The potential weakness of nomothetical scholarship is the striving for theoretical simplicity, which tends to marginalize consideration of variability. I think we also need idiographical approaches to theory-building, approaches that aim at capturing and explaining variation by constructing theoretical frameworks that flexibly can combine different variables. At the very least, I do hope that scholars will stop including tables in their articles and books where they correlate higher levels of hierarchical complexity with the late ego development stages.

Editor's Invitation

Integral Review invites you to consider submitting a response to expand the dialogue begun here. What reflections, clarifications, inquiries etc. emerge for you from reading Jordan's presentation of these distinctions, propositions and considerations? We would like to gather such responses to publish in the next issue of Integral Review.

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