



Clare W. Graves: The Eightfold Path

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The Eightfold Path

In understanding any theory of human consciousness we must recognise one significant fact; that we are perceiving that theory with a human consciousness.

The impossibility of the task is often described by those who have attempted the quest. In the words of J.T. Fraser 'we lack the platform from which to view ourselves'.

It may well be that the work of Dr. Clare W. Graves (1959, 1962, 1965, 1966, 1970, 1971, 1973, 1974, 1981, 2000, 2002, 2005) in the description of his levels of existence theory provides that platform.

However, understanding the view from that platform is not as simple as forming our own representation of what we think it should look like. It is always easier, and uniquely human, to speculate what the view might be like from where we presently stand. To confirm that our view is correct, it is necessary for us to climb the steps to that platform and to discover the view for ourselves.

The Eight Steps

In reading any piece of research we often find it useful to first understand why we are reading the piece and what we are reading for. To read any research on human consciousness a more reflective and conscious approach is essential, not only to provide the space for meta-cognitive reflection, but also to attain a meta-consciousness perspective. Our aim should not be to change the work by our view, but to have the view explained in the work, change us.

This article proposes eight steps in the staircase to the platform from which to view the work of Clare W. Graves and his levels of existence theory, not as a prescription, but simply as a metaphor to assist the traveler.

The Eightfold Path used as the scaffolding for this particular description consists of eight steps in three stages:

- Right View, Right Intention (Wisdom Paths),
- Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood (Ethical Conduct Paths),
- Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration (Mental Development Paths).

Each provides a necessary element in a complete understanding of the whole. They are not a sequence of single steps, but instead form interdependent principles of mind, body and spirit in contemplation, perception and practice. They provide the means to see ourselves. They are illustrated here by one person's reading of Graves' own view of his research.

Right View

Right View is the cognitive aspect of wisdom. It is simply to see things as they really are. However, until we have completed all the steps, we do not have 'Right View'. This makes forming Right View extremely hard. Right View requires more than simple knowledge. It requires us to see through the confusion to really understand. To do so we must begin with a sense of unknowing. Graves (2002) through his research sought a Right View of the theory of psychology. He said:

"I chose as an area of research concern, the confusion and contradiction, the conflict and controversy in psychological information and theory (2002:5). One of the things I came to in time, as you will see, is that in my mind we do not have any argument, whatsoever, as to whose theory of human behavior is correct or is the best. The vehicle we are going to look at will say to you that all of them are correct and what their relationship is to one another (2002:4)."

Graves was a professor of psychology. His research question was intended to discover a biopsychosocial systems conception of personality (Graves 2002). The eight levels of human existence he outlined comprise a description of levels of biopsychosocial equilibrium, comprising a response to a perception of the environment, a reciprocal state of neurochemical balance, which is reflected in a social construction, that in turn influences mental states of equilibrium and how the environment is perceived. Rather than being a *description* of personality, it is a systems *conception* of personality.

Many may alternatively view Clare W. Graves' work as a theory on values, a typology of adult personalities, as a cultural anthropology model of human history, a map of the organizational psyche or simply as an inconclusive aggregation of research data on the 1960's perceptions of adult psychological health. His work may be all of these things and none of them. The truth is in the effectiveness of the use to which it is put. ¹

Not having a Right View is like the man who mistakenly views a chainsaw for a lawnmower, later commenting "What an excellent lawnmower, but the most cumbersome I have ever used." Without Right View, everything done will be affected by that incorrect perception. When we adopt a Right View; all is easier.

Right Intention

Right Intention is the purposive and volitional aspect of wisdom. It involves letting go of desire, deciding to have a positive intention and intending to do no harm. The alternative of Right Intention is having thoughts of strong desire, ill will and harmfulness.

Graves' intention is expressed in his 1974 article published in *The Futurist* as:

"The present moment finds our society attempting to negotiate the most difficult, but at the same time the most exciting, transition the human race has faced to date. It is not merely a transition to a new level of existence but the start of a new "movement" in the symphony of human history. The future offers us, basically three possibilities: (1) the most gruesome is that we may fail to stabilize our world, and through progressive catastrophes regress as far back as the Ik tribe has. (2) Only slightly less frightening is a vision of fixation in the [existing] societal complex.... (3) The last possibility is we could emerge into the [next] level and proceed towards stabilizing our world so that all life can continue. (1974:78-79)"

Graves' intention was not that the world should be a certain way, or that people should be at a certain level, merely that the potential for the possibility to make transitions to new levels of existence was preserved so that all life can continue. Others may have their own personal intention for his work which would also be considered 'right'.

Not having Right Intention is like the man who does not set out to make enemies, but later finds himself surrounded by them, without ever knowing why. If we do not have Right Intention; we cannot be excused from the effects of our actions. When we have Right Intention; we (and others) will be pleased with all the outcomes.

Right Speech

Right Speech is the first of the moral discipline steps. Right Speech recognizes that our words can cause harm, to ourselves and others. This can occur even if our intention is to do good. While we must avoid voicing slanderous, harsh or idle opinions, to have Right Speech, we must also abstain from false speech.

Graves (1966, 1970, 1981, 2002, 2005) was very reluctant to change or simplify his description of his model. As he said:

"I will speak today about my emergent, cyclical, double-helix model of adult biopsychosocial levels of existence. [Pause] Well that's what it is!"

We feel it kindly to explain things simply so that people can grasp them easily. However, to do so may be to prevent someone from ever forming a right view. Graves' words were carefully chosen. The description he used is complex because his theoretical model has many parts:

- Emergent – Nature of System
- Cyclical – Nature of Progression
- Double Helix - Nature of Structure
- Biopsychosocial – Nature of Scope
- Adult – Nature of Subject
- Levels of Existence – Nature of Span

His model is an emergent open model, unlike Maslow's closed model of the hierarchy of needs that applies at all stages. His model is cyclic, so that between the stages there is a repeated pattern. His study was biopsychosocial, rather than merely a psychological study. His model is oscillating, such that each alternating stage must be viewed with a different premise. His model was about stages of development in adults, and may or may not be applicable to childhood development. His model is of existential levels of existence, not of one aspect of existence, such as the values which emerge from the complete set of dynamics at each level. Missing out one word changes the meaning of the whole and removes our ability to understand any of the parts. Our words must be carefully chosen if we are to have 'Right Speech' in describing Graves' work.

Not having Right Speech is like the man who says one thing, but means another, confusing all. If we do not have Right Speech; we will mislead without intending to. When we have Right Speech; we may need to repeat or explain ourselves, but we will always be understood, because we understand.

Right Action

Right Action is the moral discipline that reflects that thought is made visible by deed. Right Action involves not taking that which is not given and is therefore not yours to take. Right actions lead to the right results, without unintended consequences.

The study of human consciousness involves ethical and practical difficulties in its implementation.³ While we can consciously consent to someone taking our pulse how can we give consent to someone influencing something that we do not know we have? Graves (1981) considered this in his research, noting of the higher systems:

“In this system the means to the end or organizational goals are restructured to fit the individual characteristics of the organizational member, rather than attempts to restructure that person to fit the organizational needs. The manager’s role is to rework the organization so that its goals are achieved utilizing the people as they are not as someone wishes them to be or perceives they should be. (1981:8)”.

This was reflected in Graves’ own view of the right approach to organizational management (Graves 1971). Attempts to change people in organizations based on an opinion of what their right way of being should be, would not be right actions. Graves’ research provides us with a means to resolve ‘tremendous organizational problems’, and also to create these problems through the wrong actions. We must accept that people have a right to be as they are – not change them to how we are.

Not having Right Action is like the man who makes an illegal turn on a road; they know where they want to go and hope no-one else is injured in their shortcut. If we do not have Right Action; we may cause harm while hoping to do good. When we have Right Action; our thoughts are expanded in their benefit by our deeds.

Right Livelihood

Right Livelihood is the third moral discipline. It recognizes that a livelihood should be obtained, but not so as to violate the principles of Right Speech (deceit) or Right Action (illegality). Right Livelihood should only be obtained in a way that does not cause suffering to others.

Graves had been teaching the fragmented parts of the theory of psychology at Union College with a personal conflict. In discovering the reason for his research he resolved this conflict² and re-found right livelihood. He said in 1971:

“When I entered into this research I had just about had it with the profession of which I am a part. I had gotten sick and tired of going into the classroom and having to referee the argument as to whose research was right or whose theory was right. I had gotten to the point where in the summer of 1952 I was seriously considering that there must be some other way a man can make a living.” (2002:4)

One of the difficulties identified and raised by Graves (2002) in his presentation to the American National Institute of Health in 1971 was that the incorrect therapeutic approach by someone helping in the way they are, instead of the way the person they are helping is, means the person being helped can ‘end up with more psychoses than improvement’. Right Livelihood means we must do no harm, including the harm that we may not even be conscious of. Because we are asked, does not mean we should. Right Livelihood means that before we help we must contemplate the harm we may do and be accountable.

Not having Right Livelihood is like the man who desires us to act one way, but lives by another. They will excuse themselves for the thing they would not have you do. If we do not have Right Livelihood; the later realization finds the exception was never justifiable and we are always remorseful. When we have Right Livelihood; the honest path may be slower; but will not be longer.

Right Effort

Right Effort is the first of the three concentration paths. Right Effort is the mental discipline of applying yourself to the things that matter most and avoiding the things that distract. It requires us to work with unflagging perseverance. Quick results although easily gained are easily lost. Focus and diligence are boring. They are, however, necessary if we are not to adopt a false view too soon.

Graves began consciously working on his level of existence theory in 1952 after already establishing a career in psychological theory. Up until the time of his death in 1986 he continued to assist with the understanding of the results of over two decades of research. The model that emerged was not created, but discovered gradually by doing the work and letting the data speak:

“A decision to conceptualize the systems as derived from these two components was not made capriciously. It was made because my data required that the systems be so represented. (2002:46)”

Graves research involved independent review by judges to code written conceptions of the psychologically healthy adult, correlation of the results of thirty six separate psychometric tests for different sub-dimensions of personality, transcribed interviews of a diversity of participants, tachistoscopic testing of

responses to word recognition, observational studies of group and individual problem solving in different social contexts and longitudinal re-testing with the same participants - all while not rushing to an answer and remaining open to the question. The uniqueness of this effort in its unflagging perseverance and breadth is possibly why the observations that presented themselves spoke to Graves with such conviction. If only our own convictions would benefit from such effort.

Not having Right Effort is like the person who swaps one bad habit for another. If we do not have Right Effort; we may take one step forward and one step back, and progress no further. When we have Right Effort; our progress is doubled.

Right Mindfulness

Right Mindfulness is the second of the mental disciplines. It is when we become conscious of our own mental processes. The insight within is ours to discover when we do not accept the authority or faith of others and find it ourselves. Right Mindfulness is the presence of mind, attentiveness and awareness that allows us to know our own mind, before attempting to know that of another.

Graves was rigorous to the point of being obstinate in his research methodology. Looking for the answer to a different question, he did not want to fall into the trap of simply adopting others' existing research opinions. He said (2002):

"You have to understand one thing about me and that is when I start anything I'm an ornery cuss. I believe no one else knows anything about it. ...If I want to know something I'm going to get my own facts and not waste a lot of time. It would take all the fun out of an experiment to find out what they've already found out in the field. I'd rather not find out what the guy had found out 100 years ago and then find it out myself. This shows the system I operate under (2002:75)."

A difficulty with research to validate a systems theory of personality is that we may test for validity using that same theory. We will find that what we look for is what we already know and is therefore what we will see. Our difficulty is, that in already knowing the answer, we are not mindful of the question. The strength of Graves' work was the lack of presumption about what he would discover, being mindful of his own psychology, in his research of the psychology of others.

Not having Right Mindfulness is like the man who is riding an uncontrolled horse in a pre-determined direction; he does not want to go where it takes him, but cannot make it stop. If we do not have Right Mindfulness; our habitual mind will fall into the same routine and find only what we know. When we have Right Mindfulness; our efforts are directly controlled - and the outcome may surprise.

Right Concentration

Right Concentration is the final step. It is when we use all of our awareness which is directed to the subject of our focus to fully cognize the object. Right Concentration is not simply about focus, it requires a wholesome focus that collects together dispersed and dissipated streams to a unification at a higher level of awareness. It requires us by our concentration to shift our view.

Graves was aware of the difficulty in developing a methodology to test his theory as this would require a consistent assessment approach at different levels of existence while recognizing that both the researcher and person being assessed may themselves be at different levels and unconsciously unaware of this. In observing we would bias that observation as part of the phenomena observed:

“I have been working in the direction of trying to develop some means of assessment which would, in theory, enable the individual to assess the degree of operation of all the systems in a person at any one time... But, I’ve run into a problem, and I can’t get it solved. It’s one of the things which is making me reluctant to hurry out with the book I am working on, and I don’t know whether I’m going to solve it (1971:22).”⁴

For those seeking to assess another person’s level of existence within the Graves’ model there is the risk that in the methodology used we will only find instead a perspective on ourselves. For example, a values analysis of personality suffers from the problem that the values held or espoused and the values enacted are often different. The difficulty is, in not knowing what we are looking for, we will not discover the correct way to find it. Without Right Concentration, our view is always from where we stand and not from where we believe ourselves (or others) to be.

Not having Right Concentration is like the man who climbs a mountain, and on reaching the clouds, loses concentration, but believing himself to be at the summit returns having not completed the task with a description of what he has seen. When we have Right Concentration; our focus and clarity allows us to know with confidence whether we have completed the task or not.

Perceived and Perceiver

Our view of Graves’ work is reflective of our own consciousness. The model is only words. It can be interpreted at any level of consciousness. For example, applying Graves’ theory to the theory itself, different levels of existence will see

the Grave’s model differently. Concerns about the model will also reflect the predominant level of consciousness (see Figure 1).

Level Seeing	Seen as System of	Concerned about
Level 1 (A-N)	Necessity	Restriction
Level 2 (B-O)	Appropriateness	Explainer
Level 3 (C-P)	Means	Response
Level 4 (D-Q)	Typology	Certainty
Level 5 (E-R)	Advantage	Evidence
Level 6 (F-S)	Diversity	Application
Level 7 (G-T)	Systems	Scope
Level 8 (H-U)	Flow Points	Subtlety

Figure 1: Source Varey (2005) *The Third Evolution*

The application of the Graves’ model to itself suggests that distinctly different interpretations of the model will occur. Graves himself saw the model with a human consciousness and had his own clearly expressed interpretations of the levels which are contained in over thirty separate records of his findings. He also depicted his research findings and the underlying model differently to business managers (1966, 1971), psychologists (1970, 1973) and social scientists (1974, 1981) so that it could be interpreted by each while still being true to the base data. Our review of any of Graves’ written works must reflect that these are consciously made interpretations for different audiences perceived secondhand, which we may mistakenly re-interpret out of the context of the original research as a whole.

The contradiction which we have difficulty resolving is that, if Graves’ model is correct, then the proof of this will be that his research and the model itself will be read differently by all. Although tautological, the inexplicable confusion about the work even when expressed clearly validates the work itself. This paper does not seek to resolve this confusion, only to draw our attention to that fact.

The Missing Step

The question then is; have we ourselves climbed the steps to the platform, and if so what step did we, or will we, potentially miss?

If we do not first have a Right View of Graves’ work, it is unlikely we will read his research correctly. Right View is formed by first having an empty mind.

If we do not have a Right Intention as to why we are reading the work, it is likely that in its application we eventually will defeat our own aims.

If we do not have Right Speech in describing the work, any confusion we seek to remove, we will instead create.

If we do not have Right Action in applying the work, any results of that work will be limited in their effect.

If we do not have Right Livelihood in using the work, others will profit from us, as we have from them.

If we do not have Right Effort in applying our understanding, our results will be at best disappointing.

If we do not have Right Mindfulness when doing the work, it is as though we never read it at all.

If we do not have Right Concentration to all of these steps, it is likely that we will stumble and fall at some point.⁵

Conclusion

A levels of existence theory of human consciousness pre-supposes that our perceptions of reality are restricted by our present (but transitory) level of existence. This reflects that our existing worldview is a continuous process of reconciling the stimulus received with our existing understanding as quickly as possible. If we are to attempt to be conscious of the consciousness of others, it may be that we first have to become conscious of the predictability of our own response.

Often the reason for examining any theory of human nature that suggests it is dynamic and transitory is that this supports a deeply held view of the potential for individuals and society as a whole to develop further to enriched levels and to fulfil an unrealised potential. The work of Dr. Clare W. Graves provides the means for that potential to be fulfilled, for both individuals and for all of humanity. Any realisation of this potential is solely dependent on what the perceivers of the work individually bring to the work. Fortunately for those seeking the means to this realisation, Graves has provided us with both the answer and the path.⁶

The quest along that path is ongoing. It was not completed by Graves, and is being actively continued and sustained by others. What does continue is the potential within the work and within ourselves. To quote from *The Never Ending Quest* (Graves 2005):

“The theory presented is of course a sketch; it is not finished. Obviously, it is oversimplified with yet much to be tested before one accepts this point of view. Man does not necessarily move slowly and steadily as described. In our world of past and present, there are societies and people at all levels, and societies and peoples whose levels are mixed; but these and other complications, such as transitional state value systems, are complications to be dealt with elsewhere. All men do not progress, and some societies may wither and die. Man may never cross his great divide; but on the other hand, ... - he may.”(2005:402)

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Footnotes:

¹ The description (in Figure 1) of the interpretation of Graves' levels of existence theory, at each of the levels, is premised with the understanding that persons at each level have the capacity for perception at great depth and a wide span of complexity. The interpretations and use of Graves' work at any level of existence may provide a positive contribution when looked at from the health of the whole. For example, an A-N system of consciousness has a sentience that can perceive and recall information in detail (e.g. in working with the autistic adult a response to a perceived stimulus reflecting the model may reflect automatic internal recognition and lead to increased autonomy). A B-O system of consciousness can expertly understand customary patterns and the appropriate response required (e.g. recognition of the type of vehicles community health care workers use and how a different anticipatory response to these workers is required). A C-P system can use an understanding of the model to enact its will (e.g. offenders recognizing that respect-responses work with authority figures – not because they are deferring but because it is useful to do so). A D-Q system can recognize and categorize types of levels to inform and critically assess surface stereotypes (e.g. seeing deeper motivations rather than surface behaviors in types). An E-R system can use the model to find different approaches to common problems in the leadership, learning and management of people (e.g. exploring workplace rewards, ranges of incentives, types of bonus). An F-S system can use the model to recognize a diversity of perspectives and accommodate all in communicating its message (e.g. in multiple language styles in communicating technical information). An A'-N' system can use the model to map the operant systems at increasing levels of depth and complexity informing the practice and adding rigor to the processes of change (e.g. to co-ordinate policy development that is multi-leveled). An B'-O' system may recognize that the mental maps made may change and see how changes will flow through the points between the systems (e.g. how the outbreak of war may alter the prior potentialities and priorities of each). There is no Right Level from which to form a 'Right View' and all are valid (and limited).

² Graves used a unique approach as his beginning premise for the initial part of his research. In determining what a psychologically healthy adult was he needed a test-question of great 'contradiction, conflict and controversy' so as to observe the human personality in conflict (2002). Noting the context of his work as a teacher of psychology it was appropriate and convenient to use as his test question the same contradiction, conflict and controversy over which he was trying to form an answer. From what we now know about consciousness theory, the most astute place to examine our own consciousness is obliquely, while also standing directly in its blind spot. The way of answering, not the answers, provided him with his main data.

³ Graves research methodology was a genuine attempt to understand human consciousness without directly asking a human consciousness. Much research that finds patterns *within* human nature (i.e. questionnaires) are not able to find the patterns *of* human nature. This because of the incorrect assumption that human nature is *fixed*. This is a bit like conducting a public opinion poll on how public opinion polls should be structured so as to make them valid. The findings will be redundant as soon as the work is completed. The correlations behind the answers may, however, show a deeper code of a transitory pattern with emergent properties.

⁴ In the Graves' article in the Futurist (1975) and in his address at the Washington School of Psychiatry (2002) Graves references a book "*Up the Existential Staircase*" as his work in progress. That manuscript has formed the basis for the work edited by Chris Cowan, Natasha Todorovic from the papers of William Lee published in 2005 as "*The Never Ending Quest*". The difference in title reflects that the later work is an amalgamation of Graves' original writings with that earlier manuscript and not simply that manuscript.

5. The use of this article is for those personally questioning themselves as to their own view of Graves' theory as questioner and practitioner. Any desire to correct other views held by referring to it should be accompanied by a pause, to consider Right Intention, and whether we understood what Graves meant when he said "People have a right to be as they are". The distinction between enabling correction of an incomplete view, and imposing our own view, is one that is often subtle.

6. The use of the eightfold path in this article is not accompanied with an intention to elevate the view proposed or the research described, only to note that any view held is better informed by many perspectives and particularly those on what we ourselves are seeing. The summary of the Eightfold Path in this article benefited greatly from the teachings prepared by Bhikku Bodhi (1994) 2nd Ed. "*The Noble Eightfold Path: The way to the end of suffering*" Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka, Online: <http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/bps/misc/waytoend.html#ch2> and for a complete rather than allegorical interpretation this reference is provided.

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