

Selflessness: Congruences between the Cognitive-Developmental Research Program and the Bahá'í Writings*

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* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 15th Annual Meeting of the Association for Moral Education, Notre Dame University, Indiana, November 1990.

Abstract

This article aims to illustrate four major concepts shared by the protagonists of cognitive-developmentalism, such as Piaget, Kohlberg, and Kegan, and the primary authors of the sacred writings of the Bahá'í Faith—Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi. These concepts include: a developmental teleology, the stage-like nature of development, the importance of an epistemic focus, and selflessness. As the Bahá'í teachings stress a developmental approach to self and a universal approach to moral education, and as the Faith is rapidly growing, it would be helpful for psychologists and educators a universal approach to moral education, and as the Faith is rapidly growing, it would be helpful for psychologists and educators to become familiar with a Bahá'í view of development. Additionally, as the Bahá'í writings stress access to science, it will be beneficial for Bahá'í readers to become acquainted with the cognitive-developmental research program as an important body of psychological literature that can help inform their own understanding of their sacred writings. It is intended that this article chart an avenue of communication for psychologists with members of a “post-modern” religion over topics of mutual interest (cf. Laszlo, “Humankind’s” and *Inner Limits*).

Résumé

Cet article vise à illustrer quatre concepts principaux partagés par les protagonistes des théories du développement cognitif, tels que Piaget, Kohlberg, et Kegan, et les auteurs des écrits saints de la foi bahá'íe—Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá et Shoghi Effendi. Parmi ces concepts on trouve le développement téléologique, le développement par étapes, l'importance de l'approche épistémologique, et l'altruisme. Puisque les enseignements bahá'ís mettent l'accent sur le développement de la personne et voient l'éducation morale de façon universelle et que la foi bahá'íe est en croissance rapide, il serait utile pour les psychologues et les éducateurs de se familiariser avec le point de vue bahá'í sur le développement. Plus, puisque les enseignements bahá'ís préconisent l'acquisition des sciences, il serait bon pour les lecteurs bahá'ís de se familiariser avec les travaux de recherche portant sur le développement cognitif car cet ensemble de documentation psychologique peut les aider à mieux comprendre leurs propres écrits saints. Le but de cet article est de proposer des voies de communication entre les psychologues et les membres d'une “religion post-moderne” sur des sujets d'intérêt mutuel (cf. Laszlo, “Humankind’s” and *Inner Limits*).

Resumen

Este escrito busca ilustrar cuatro conceptos de mayor importancia compartidos entre los protagonistas del perceptivismo-autoevolutivo tales como Piaget, Kohlberg, y Kegan, y los autores primarios de los escritos sagrados de la Fe Bahá'í, Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá y Shoghi Effendi. Estos conceptos incluyen: una teleología autoevolutiva, la característica escénica del desarrollo, la importancia de un enfoque epistemológico, y la abnegación. Por aquello de que las enseñanzas bahá'í acentúan un acercamiento autoevolutivo al yo propio, un acceso universal a la educación moral, y la Fe crece rápidamente, sería provechoso para los psicólogos y educadores familiarizarse con el punto de vista bahá'í referente al desarrollo. Pero además, ya que los escritos bahá'í enfatizan el acceso a la ciencia, sería beneficioso para los lectores Bahá'í ponerse al corriente con el programa de investigación de lo perceptivo-autoevolutivo por su carácter de conjunto importante de literatura psicológica del cual podrán valerse para aumentar su entendimiento de sus escritos sagrados. Se propone que esta disertación trace una vía de comunicación para los psicólogos con los adherentes de una religión “postmoderna” sobre temas de interés mutuo (Laszlo, “Humankind’s” y *Inner Limits*).

If you ask a small child why she should keep a promise, she may say, “Because Mom told me to,” with no further justification possible. Inquiring from an older child about why he should keep a promise to return his friend Johnny’s cassette tape, he might be fully satisfied to say, “So Johnny will return tapes that I loan to him.” Asking a youth why she should follow up on her agreements with her 4th-period cooperative study group, might find her responding with, “That way they will think well of me.” Probing an executive’s reasons for not misrepresenting his

company's products may elicit this response: "Being honest with consumers is also being honest with myself; it involves my own integrity." Questioning a senator about why she will stick to her campaign commitments may bring this answer, "Promises are based on trust, and trust is the foundation of all human interaction." These five scenarios represent different stages of thought about moral issues.

Explicating the individual's personal evolution of thought has been a major goal of the cognitive-developmental research program. As the aim of this article is to relate Bahá'í concepts to this school of psychology, the article's sequence will be to: (a) introduce the general ideas of the cognitive-developmental school, (b) introduce general Bahá'í concepts, (c) examine the cognitive-developmental and Bahá'í views of three aspects of the "hard core" of the cognitive-developmental research program (see Lakatos, *Methodology*; Lapsley & Serlin, "Alleged Degeneration"; and Phillips & Nicolayev, "Kohlbergian" for explanations of the concept of the hard core of a research program), and (d) conclude with a fresh look at the concept of "selflessness."

Introduction to Cognitive-Developmentalism

The forms of research in cognitive–developmentalism have been on the organization of thinking (cognition), and how that thinking grows and changes (development) (Kohlberg, *Psychology*; Broughton & Freeman-Moir, *Cognitive*). Jean Piaget's four classic stages are: (a) the sensori-motor, in which the infant "thinks" about or structures his or her experiences through sensory and motor schemata; (b) pre-operations, when the small child begins complex linguistic represent but not with "logical" (operational) cause and effect; (c) concrete operations, wherein the child can structure thought that is logical, reversible (understanding that subtraction is the reverse of addition), and conservatory (understanding that mass or volume remain the same, despite changes in objects' shapes), but is limited to thought that is directly representative of concrete objects; and (d) formal operations, in which a youth can operate upon non-concrete thought-actions (the abstract), such as thinking about thinking, algebraic math, and role-taking of others' non-apparent feelings.

Piaget and Kohlberg have emphasized the "doctrine of cognitive stages" (*Psychology* 14), which includes several claims. Differences in stages are not only quantitative (knowing more) but also qualitative (a different way of knowing). Stages form an invariant sequence, that is, no one skips stages. Environmental or endogenous factors may slow down or speed up stage change, but no one thinks in formal operations without having thought in concrete operations earlier in one's life. Stages form "structured wholes," that is, they are a lens through which one's entire experience is filtered. A structure is a manner of organizing experiences and needs to be differentiated from the content of thought. As Kohlberg's stages demonstrate, anyone, from the age of 2 in a pre-operational stage to age 60 in a late formal operational stage, can use the word *fairness*, but the organization of the meaning of the concept changes radically with increasing stage development. Stages form hierarchic integrations, that is, later stages allow greater differentiation and integration of thought than earlier stages, and the later stages have at their disposal all understandings and abilities gained at earlier stages (*Psychology*; Colby & Kohlberg, *Measurement*).

There is, and has been, much debate over the particulars of all the above claims, both within and without the cognitive-developmental school (Lapsley & Serlin, "Alleged Degeneration"; Phillips & Nicolayev, 'Kohlbergian'). All the cognitive-developmentalists, however, rely on some form of stage theory: Piaget with basic logical operations, Kohlberg on stages of justice reasoning from childhood to adulthood (*Development*; *Psychology*; Colby & Kohlberg *Measurement*), Perry's intellectual and ethical stages in the college years (*Forms*), Loevinger with ego development (*Ego*), Damon regarding young children's social understanding (*Social World*), Selman concerning progressions of friendships and interpersonal relations (*Growth*), Fowler on stages of faith (*Stages*), Commons and Richards general stage model ("General Model"), and Parsons with development of aesthetics in art (*How We Understand*), to name a few. Even Thomas Kuhn credits his theory of the development of scientific paradigms with Piagetian roots (see Kuhn, *Structure* vi).

Theorist	Content Area	Stage 0	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5
Piaget	Logico-Mathematical	Sensori-Motor	Pre-Operations	Concrete Operations	Formal Operations	Formal Operations	Dialectical Operations
Kohlberg	Justice	n/a	Heteronomy	Instrumental	Mutuality	Social System	Social Contract
Perry	Intellect & Ethical	n/a	n/a	Dualism	Multiplicity	Relativism	Commitment
Loevinger	Ego	Pre-Social	Impulsive	Opportunistic	Conformist	Conscientious	Autonomous
Selman	Role Taking	Undifferentiated Egocentric	Differentiated Subjective	Second-Person Reciprocal	Third-Person Mutual	Societal-Symbolic	n/a
Kegan	Self	Incorporative	Impulsive	Imperial	Interpersonal	Institutional	Inter-Individual
Fowler	Faith	n/a	Intuitive-Projective	Mythic-Literal	Synthetic-Conventional	Individual-Reflective	Conjunctive
Commons & Richards	General Model	Sensory Motor	Pre-Operations	Primary & Concrete Operations	Abstract Operations	Formal Operations	Systematic & Meta-Systematic Operations
Parsons	Aesthetics	n/a	Favoritism	Beauty & Realism	Expressiveness	Style & Form	Autonomy
N.B.: The stage sequences of the various theories do not coincide as smoothly as this table implies, and several theorists also posit a sixth stage or higher (i.e., Kohlberg's Universal Ethical Principles, Loevinger's Integrated, Fowler's Universalizing Faith, and Commons and Richards's Cross-Paradigmatic).							

One of the most readable of the neo-Piagetian works is Robert Kegan's *The Evolving Self*. To give the reader a sense of the cognitive-developmental "self," five stages he has described will be examined (Kegan, *Evolving*; Lahey, et al., "Subject-Object"). Kegan prefers the term "constructive"-developmental to "cognitive"-developmental and defines constructive developmentalism as the union of "two separate Big Ideas": "Constructivism (that persons or systems constitute or construct reality) and developmentalism (that organic systems evolve through eras according to regular principles of stability and change)" (*Evolving* 8). Kegan pointed out that the constructive developmental framework encompasses: (1) the adaptive relationship of organism and environment, (2) the ego's dialectic of self and other, and (3) the truth-creating relationship of subject and object. He considered all three systems of adaptation, ego-development, and truth to be different foci of a single process; that of meaning-constitutive evolution. The self creates meaning as it evolves, and each developmental stage indicates a whole new way of making meaning.

Kegan has described five basic stages that are analogous to the stages identified in the work of Piaget as extended by Kohlberg (*Psychology*). What Piaget termed the sensori-motor period is analogous to Kegan's incorporative stage 0, in which self is completely subject to the senses and motor output and feedback, and initially can field no objects. In the process of the self's development of meaning-making, a human is able to take that which she is subject to, and turn it into that which she can take as object (examples to be given below). In Piaget's preoperational period, or Kegan's impulsive stage 1, the evolving child can control the sensori-motor systems as the content of his perceptual structure. The perceptual structure becomes the unreflected subjectivity of the self. It is the lens of the self, but the self cannot conceive of it. When, through disequilibrating interaction with the environment, the human being becomes disembedded from her perceptions, she can then operate upon them, and her subjectivity becomes that of Piaget's concrete operations, or Kegan's imperial stage 2. This dialectical see-saw of that which the self is "subject to," becoming that which the self can take "as object," is the marker of stage change throughout each stage of development.

In Kegan's stage 3—the interpersonal—the person can operate on, or take as object, the needs and interests of the self (i.e., that which the stage 2 imperial self was subject to). The demands of the social environment, however, completely subject the person. This is the stage of "co-dependency," wherein the self can think abstractly (early formal operations), but that self is subject to the internalization of significant others' thoughts. Thus mutuality absorbs the self.

At the institutional stage, stage 4, the self takes on an independent identity but is subject to its own authorship and to ideology. It is able to take its relationships as object. It is no longer bound to co-dependency but is

independent. The self organizes its world systematically, though it is subject to “closed systems” reasoning (Koplowitz, “Projection”).

The interdependent stage 5 finds the self able to take its own psychic administration as object and able to look outside the frame of ideologies. It is subject to interindividuality; it consciously experience interpenetration of self and other. It is guided by dialectic schemata (Basseches, “Dialectical Schemata,” *Dialectical Thinking*), open-systems logic and a unitary paradigm of thought (Koplowitz, “Projection”).

To explain this, the concept of “guilt” will be illustrated through three stages. At Kegan’s stage 2, the imperial, the youngster only feels guilty when having been caught in an indiscretion. This child is subject to the concrete, being caught, and takes as object her own actions and behaviors. She can control her body and impulses, but not her needs and interests. In Kegan’s stage 3, the interpersonal, the person feels guilty when having transgressed a rule of a significant other (parent, spouse, close friend), even when he is confident the significant other will not find out about the error. This person can take his interests and needs as object, is able to choose interests and control them, but is subject to mutual expectations. During Kegan’s stage 4, the institutional, the person feels guilty when she has violated her own personally chosen norms. She is able to take her friendships and relationships as object; she can decide how much she wishes her friends or parents to influence her. She is subject, however, to her own identity and ideology, that is, she has tight ego boundaries that do not recognize the essential interdependence of personalities.

Each stage is the creation of a world, with the self being the constructor. For stage transition to occur, disequilibrium must take place (Langer, “Disequilibrium”). In a very real sense, this is the same as one’s old world falling apart. This process can be extremely frightening, requiring courage and faith that there is a new world ahead (the next stage) one that will make sense (Kegan, *Evolving*). This “new world” is a new stage, a qualitatively different way of knowing, which is why Piaget called stage progression “genetic epistemology.”

Developmental Teleology

Using the Lakatosian notion of the “hard core” of a research program (Lakatos, *Methodology*), this article advocates three concepts to be included in the hard core of the cognitive-developmental research program: development is a purpose of being, development is necessarily stage-like, and a focus on cognitive development is critically important. Lakatos divides a series of related theories, which he calls a “research program,” into a “hard core” and a “protective belt.” The hard core is similar to the idea of “first principles,” in that researchers within a program, consciously or unconsciously, consider the hard core as tentatively irrefutable. Experiments are directed against the protective belt, which comprises the auxiliary hypotheses related to the core of the theory, and it is changed, adjusted, or even replaced, while defending the continually hardening core of the theory.

As I have argued previously (Diessner, ‘Ethical’), there is a teleological focus that underlies the cognitive-developmental research program. Tacit in all developmental theories is a teleological view. There is an explicit, or implicit, emphasis that development is not only what does happen but also that it *should* happen; that development is the end, the aim, or the purpose of a human and humanity. This is most clear in Kohlberg’s classic piece, “Development as Aim of Education.” Our aims are our moral “goods”; and whether the focus is a child or a parent, a teacher or a student, a physicist, a carpet layer, a girl scout troop, a college, a nation or a planet, the aim is development: progress for the better.

The word *development* encompasses two critical meanings. One is that of change. Development necessarily implies growth or change in an organism. The second is change for the better. Development is an inherently normative word in a positive sense. Kegan states about *The Evolving Self*: “This book is about human being as an activity. It is not about the doing which a human does; it is about the doing which a human is” (8); and that “later stages [are] ‘better’...on the philosophical grounds of their having greater truth value” (294). Kohlberg makes similar, if more involved, arguments (*Philosophy* and *Psychology*). Piaget wrote that “what is important for psychological explication is not equilibrium as a state but, rather, the actual process of equilibration” (*Six* 101).

Developmentalism is congruent with the principles of the Bahá’í Faith, both on an individual and collective basis. The “chief goal [of the Faith] is the development of the individual and society...” (Shoghi Effendi, cited in Rost, *Brilliant* 95). All humans “have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 215). “...the growth and development of all beings is gradual; this is the universal divine organization and the natural system’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Questions* 198–99). “This state of motion is said to be essential—that is, natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement, as it is the essential requirement of fire to burn’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Questions* 233).

Creation is the expression of motion. Motion is life. A moving object is a living object, whereas that which is motionless and inert is as dead. All created forms are progressive in their planes, or kingdoms of existence, under the stimulus of the power or spirit of life. The universal energy is dynamic. Nothing is stationary in the material world of outer phenomena or in the inner world of intellect and consciousness. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 140)

The Stage-like Nature of Development

Development can be viewed as stage-like and discontinuous or as gradual and continuous. Psychologists who emphasize stage theories conceive of human growth as choppy and step-like—sometimes instantaneously rapid, sometimes slow; sometimes in balance (an even-stage level), sometimes out of balance (disequilibrium, stage transition). Other psychologists see development as gradual, cumulative, continuous, and quantitative. There is concern that stage theories overemphasize hierarchic and linear relations at the expense of understanding human growth as web-like and circular (cf. Belenky, et al., *Women's Ways*).

If, however, one applies dialectical reasoning to this dichotomy, development becomes simultaneously quantitative and qualitative, continuous and discontinuous, linear and circular. This is the logic of physics, which understands light as both wave-like and particulate. Inherent in the word development is the concept of change. To be able to distinguish change or development, it is necessary to demonstrate, at a minimum, differences in an organism over time. As soon as this is accomplished, then at least two stages exist—the prior state and the latter state. To understand the relationship between the prior and latter states, development must in some way be continuous and circular, or the being would have no continuity of identity. The Bahá'í writings are full of references to stage-like development. Bahá'u'lláh writes of the “grades of self” (*Seven Valleys* 21), and 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to stage-like development in many passages:

From the beginning to the end of his life man passes through certain periods, or stages, each of which is marked by certain conditions peculiar to itself. (*Promulgation* 438)

...every level of existence is known by its signs and symbols, and every degree in man's development has its identifying mark. (*Secret* 99)

In a living organism the full measure of its development is not known or realized at the time of its inception or birth. Development and progression imply gradual stages or degrees. (*Promulgation* 131)

Man must walk many paths and be subjected to various processes in his evolution upward. Physically he is not born in full stature but passes through consecutive stages of fetus, infant, childhood, youth, maturity and old age. (*Promulgation* 295).

The paradoxical logic that allows us to see human growth as both hierarchical and circular, or light as particulate and serpentine, is found in the Bahá'í claim that truth is both relative and absolute. As Piaget made clear, individuals construct or create their understandings of “reality,” whereas the world's religions stress that human constructs are always deficient, relative to God's absolute knowledge. As an hermeneutic approach shows, the concept “development” has many legitimate meanings, some hierarchical, some not (cf. Packer & Addison, *Entering*). Bahá'u'lláh cites the well-known hadīth, “Every knowledge hath seventy meanings....We speak one word, and by it we intend one and seventy meanings; each one of these meanings we can explain” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 255). Although support be found for stage-theory in the Bahá'í writings, there is no indication that it is the only, or even main, way of viewing development.

An Epistemic Focus

Piaget referred to his own theory as one of “genetic epistemology,” meaning that the stages emerge naturally and that each stage represents a theory of knowing. Natural emergence doesn't simply mean the expression of chromosomal heredity, rather, it represents the universal experience of a unique set of genes interacting with a unique configuration of environmental inputs. Piaget was an interactionist and stressed the constant reciprocal actions of organism and environment upon each other. Although the cognitive-developmental research program has emphasized knowing and cognition, this does not inherently detract from the importance of either affective or conative abilities. Knowing, feeling, and willing are all inextricably interactive. Nevertheless, we understand our will and our feelings through thought processes; whether those are intuitive, simultaneous, and parallel cognition's

or linear, sequential, and serial cognition's. This is not making a case of what is more important, rather it is establishing that a cognitive emphasis is legitimate. The theories of the cognitive developmental research program emphasize the importance of thought and knowledge. Kegan refers to each of his stages as coherent epistemologies (*Evolving*), and Kohlberg's later articulations of Kohlbergian theory referred to it as generally one of "justice reasoning" (*Psychology*, ch. 3).

The Bahá'í concept of knowing and knowledge likely exceeds in many ways the typical usage of the words *reason* and *logic*. Human intellectual powers are considered spiritual abilities in the Bahá'í writings (*viz.* 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Questions*, ch. 56) and are given a lofty station in the human world. Bahá'u'lláh wrote, "Consider the rational faculty with which God hath endowed the essence of man.... Immeasurably exalted is this sign, in its essence and reality." (*Gleanings* 164–65). And 'Abdu'l-Bahá confirmed, "God's greatest gift to man is that of intellect, or understanding" (*Paris Talks* 41).

In the Piagetian view, the stage of formal operations separates the child from the young adult. A similar view is found in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's writings:

The suckling babe passeth through various physical stages, growing and developing at every stage, until its body reacheth the age of maturity. Having arrived at this stage it acquireth the capacity to manifest spiritual and intellectual perfections. The lights of comprehension, intelligence and knowledge become perceptible in it and the powers of its soul unfold. (*Selections* 285)

A Fresh View of Selflessness

Generally selflessness is viewed as altruism, in the form of putting others before one's self. This is an excellent meaning for the word *selflessness*. There is, however, another view that makes sense, particularly in light of the findings in the cognitive developmental research program. This meaning has two dimensions: selflessness is relative to the stage of self a person is currently in, and selflessness is demonstrated while manifesting the virtues needed to advance between cognitive stages.

In Kegan's (*Evolving*) description of the stages of "self" development, it is somewhat obvious that to move to a higher stage of self, one must leave behind a lower stage of self. This "leaving behind" is a form of "selflessness." A person who organizes a world in Kegan's interpersonal stage 3 has shed the imperial self of stage 2; a person structuring her moral experience in Kohlberg's prior-to-society stage 5 has shed the social system self of stage 4. There is a tremendous sense of freedom and power when someone has performed the psychological work to advance to a higher stage of social cognition. Prior to this sense of freedom and power is a sense of fear, frustration, and danger. Leaving behind an old epistemology, an old understanding of the world, is frightening (Kegan, *Evolving*).

Those virtues which enhance stage transition are those abilities that could be summarized in the word *selflessness*. One must shed one's biases and prejudices, and look for information that is at variance with one's regular manner of thought (*cf.* Piagetian "accommodation"). To do this takes the virtues of courage and honesty with one's self. One needs to seek truth, both to break down an earlier sense of self and to find a new epistemology for the self.

The classic Kohlbergian educational method is for students of differing stages to discuss a dilemma, and the dissonance provided for the persons in the earlier stages generates movement to the next stage. It has been shown that one-third to one-half of the students change stages in one semester with this type of dilemma discussion (Blatt & Kohlberg, "Effects"). What Berkowitz and Gibbs found, however, is that those students who carefully pay attention to others and who operate mentally on others' reasoning, are the students that actually change stages ("Measuring" and "Relation"). This indicates that caring about others and being interested in reasons important to them are involved in stage change.

In Bahá'u'lláh's most popular mystical work He states:

The stages that mark the wayfarer's journey from the abode of dust to the heavenly homeland are said to be seven. Some have called these Seven Valleys, and others, Seven Cities. And they say that until the wayfarer taketh leave of self, and traverseth these stages, he shall never reach to the ocean of nearness and union, nor drink of the peerless wine. (Seven Valleys 4)

A fruitful area for empirical research would be investigate which moral virtues are particularly useful or critical for the development of the self and selflessness. Courage, honesty, a regard for truth, lack of prejudice, care,

and concern have been briefly put forth here. An interesting hypothesis is that certain virtues are more important for different stage transitions. Perhaps love is the critical virtue to move from Kegan's imperial stage 2 to his interpersonal stage 3, or "independent quest" for the movement from his stage 3 to the institutional stage 4.

By focusing on the cognitive-developmental view of selflessness, it has been shown that there is a spiritual challenge in shedding an earlier stage of cognition in human development, which results in spiritual growth. Although there appears to be a positive relationship between various assumptions of the cognitive-developmental research program and the Bahá'í writings, exploring any incongruence between cognitive-developmentalism and Bahá'í teachings may also be useful. Likewise, examining how this conceptualization of selflessness relates to other visions of selflessness would be beneficial. Despite a universe of remaining unanswered questions, this paper has illustrated that breaking through earlier epistemic constructions of self is at least part of the path to finding that "the station of absolute self-surrender transcendeth, and will ever remain exalted above, every other station" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 338).

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