

Summary, Notes, and Analogies

In My Reading of Robert Kegan's

In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life

by

Paul H. Hooverson

A Required Presentation in

Course EL3528

Adult Development & Christian Life

St. Paul, Minnesota

Spring, 2006

Orders of Consciousness

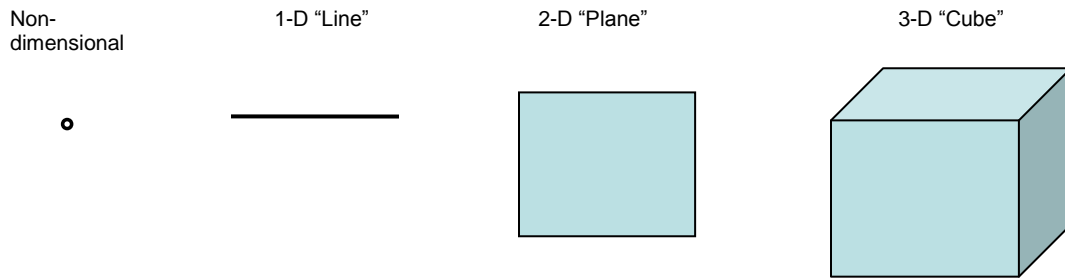
How should a Christian leader think about the various “orders of consciousness” as described in Robert Kegan’s *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*? What exactly are these “orders of consciousness”? How can they benefit Christian ministry? What pitfalls should be avoided as we ponder their nature? How can we determine the order of consciousness at which we ourselves presently function? Compared to our peers, are we operating at an “OOC deficit”? What can we do to raise our current order of consciousness?

Analogy from Geometry

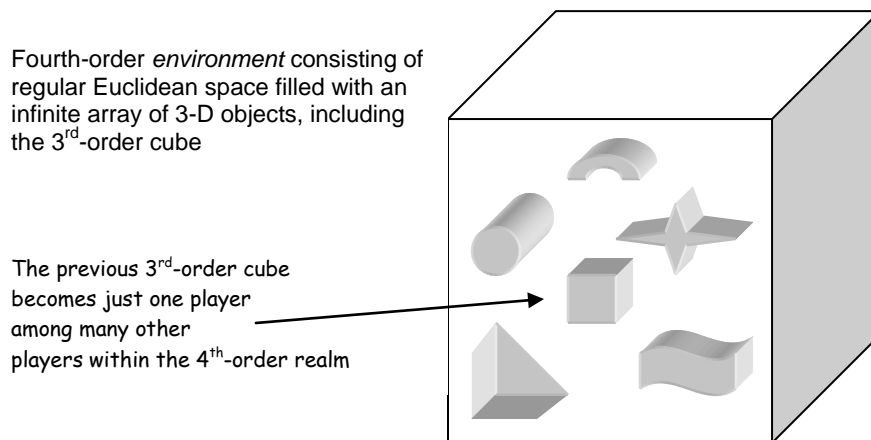
An “order of consciousness” is a particular manner of comprehending one’s experiences. It isn’t so much a matter of “knowing *what*” but rather of “knowing *how*.”

Geometric analogies may be useful here. A geometric “point,” to the extent we can imagine it as possessing a certain kind of “consciousness,” could not imagine a “line”; the “line,” for its part, would not be able to comprehend a two-dimensional “plane”; and the two-dimensional “plane” would not be able to grasp a 3-D “cube.” Note that each of these higher-dimensional geometric objects depends upon, or “encompasses,” the lesser-dimensional objects. There can be no *cube* without planes, no *plane* without lines, and no *line* without points.

If we relate the “solitary geometric point” to a newborn’s self-absorbed, self-enclosed “zero-level” order of consciousness, then we can similarly relate the “line,” the “plane,” and the “cube” to the first, second, and third “orders of consciousness,” respectively.



The fourth order of consciousness may be compared to the broad concept of Euclidean space, filled not just with cubes, but rather with *all manner of multi-dimensional geometric objects* as they relate to each other *through the dimensions of space and time*—and, to spice up our analogy a bit more, we could add into the mix innumerable other variables such as pressure, temperature, light, and aroma.



Finally, there is the fifth “order of consciousness” which involves consideration of *non-Euclidean* geometries that suggest—contrary to all natural intuitions—that perfectly straight parallel lines may actually intersect at certain points, due to fundamental curvatures within the space-time continuum. Imagine, if you can, a [Salvador Dali](#) painting in which the above fourth-order environment is but one of *many different environments* pictured, and those other environments *do not conform* to our ordinary notions of regularity and/or conformity to known physical laws.

We can see by this analogy, then, that each increase in one’s order of consciousness entails a corresponding *transformation* in one’s mental and psychological vistas, an unfolding of new capacities for grasping, examining, and analyzing ever more complex dimensions of one’s experience.

The First “Order of Consciousness”

A young child operates at the first order of consciousness: she can recognize that other persons exist separately from her, but she cannot comprehend that they have feelings or purposes that differ from her own. She cannot take the other person’s point of view as distinct from her own point of view. The whole world revolves around her.

The Second “Order of Consciousness”

Starting at about age six, the child starts to exhibit “second-order” characteristics of consciousness. She is beginning to see that the whole world does not necessarily revolve around her, but she does not grasp the implications of this fact. She cannot consider her own

point of view *simultaneously with* another's point of view, nor is she able to hold alternate viewpoints in creative tension with each other.

The Third “Order of Consciousness”

Beginning with the teenage years, the adolescent begins to understand some of the responsibilities, obligations, expectations, and implications inherent in the fact that the whole world does not revolve around her. By the time she has completed the transition from second- to third-order consciousness (this usually occurs anywhere between the late teens and the mid-twenties) she understands that shared feelings and agreements can take precedence over her own individual interests.

What she *cannot* do at this stage, however, is see herself as the *author*, rather than merely the *theatre*, of her own inner psychological life. At the third order of consciousness, she does not *have* relationships; rather, her world of relationships *has her*.

According to Kegan, the majority of adults in Western societies operate at this order of consciousness. Indeed, most societies and cultures throughout the world intentionally strive to raise their children to operate at this level, so that they will grow up to become responsible, productive, *non-disruptive* adult citizens *within their given traditional society*.

The Fourth “Order of Consciousness”

While the third order of consciousness is adequate for adults who find themselves operating within the remaining pockets of undisturbed traditional societies, the fourth order is preferred for adults who live within the hustle and bustle of today's complex, multicultural world. Such adults can no longer rely on shared community values that foster the

development of fully functioning communal support structures; instead, they find themselves continually being pulled in many directions at once—with nowhere to go to for help, answers, or support.

The frazzled modern adult needs to be able to step out of her third-order consciousness and begin to experience herself as the author of her own psychological awareness. The bubbling cauldron of pressures, needs, and expectations that formerly constituted her subjective self now becomes the *object of study* for her newly unfolded fourth-order *self-as-subject*.

Having discovered her ability to analyze and examine the events and competing demands of her day-to-day life, she frees herself from the subjective merry-go-round of merely *living through* the events from moment to moment. She is no longer simply carried along by the events and relationships in her life. She can rise above the waves and the pull of the currents; she can begin to *chart* and *follow* a new course for her life within her inherited social context.

The Fifth (and Final?) “Order of Consciousness”

According to Kegan, the fifth order of consciousness has only recently begun to gain notice; it culminates from at least four recent phenomena: 1) increased human life-spans; 2) diminished geographical and cultural boundaries; 3) newly discovered “ethics-busting” technology; and 4) a transition from modern to *post-modern* realities.

The close contact between multiple cultures—combined with critical and ongoing social, economic, spiritual, political, and environmental issues—demands leadership that can step

back from the current world situation, and look for new and creative ways to work together to solve global problems. The goal is to step outside of one's inherited social context, so as to appreciate the perspectives of other social systems throughout the world.

“Subject” Becomes “Object”

So we see that all of these “orders of consciousness” are related to each other—each is dependent upon the previous or “lower” order(s). A “higher” order does not merely *replace* the previous “lower” order. We are not talking about the simple addition or accumulation of skills; rather, each successive order of consciousness depends on a *qualitative mental or psychological transformation*, an “unfolding” that subsumes or encompasses the prior level(s).

That condition or state which operated as the *subject* within the initial order of consciousness becomes the *object* of the new order of consciousness; i.e., a new subject comes (almost miraculously) into the fore of consciousness, and this *new subject* is then able to take as its *object of study* precisely that which had been the *former subject*.

Consciousness and Pastoral Care

Kegan states that a person operating at a particular level of consciousness can understand others functioning at a lower level; she can even appreciate those operating at the same level. What this person cannot do, however, is fathom *higher-order* thinking.

Since the majority of adults in our society operate at the third level, and since many of these people—particularly those requiring pastoral care—are finding their current mental

framework inadequate for meeting the mental demands of modern life, it follows that anyone who endeavors to assist such people must necessarily function at the fourth order or higher. Any third-order pastoral-care provider will be unable to assist others in their move toward fourth-order consciousness.

Kegan's book, *In Over Our Heads*, gives some specific examples of how an awareness of "orders of consciousness" can inform and improve one's performance in pastoral care—especially beginning with Chapter Seven, "Healing: The Undiscussed Demands of Psychotherapy." Since other presenters this afternoon may go into some of these details, and since you can also read them for yourselves in the book, I am going to pass over the specific examples, and instead offer some concluding cautionary words.

Concluding Cautionary Words

First caution: a higher order of consciousness cannot be achieved "on demand." We do not simply wake up one morning and say, "Today I'm going to start operating at the fourth order of consciousness." Instead, there is a process involved, a minimum level of maturity and sensitivity that must be cultivated. As students here at Luther Seminary, we have an entire faculty and administration dedicated to helping us move on to the fourth order and beyond. Most of us will be involved in this process for at least two or three years, and our experiences in community, study, and worship should work together to channel our consciousness up toward the next level.

Second caution: a higher order of consciousness is most definitely *not* a Pelagian pathway to salvation. No matter what level we attain, we will still be sinners. In fact, as we move from one order to the next, it is possible that we might become more efficient sinners

(consider [Dr. Strangelove](#), for example) though of course we hope to become more efficient at doing good things. The “orders of consciousness” concept is strictly a “kingdom-of-the-left” feature. Faith is the great equalizer: God can plant the seed of faith into our hearts regardless of our “order of consciousness” (see [Mark 10:15](#), for example).

Third caution: do not assume that “conservative” or “fundamentalist” Christianity must always be associated with third-order thinking, or that “liberal” or “progressive” Christianity should always be associated with higher-order thinking. Remember that these “orders of consciousness” have more to do with “knowing *how*” know than with “knowing *what*.”

Someone socialized into liberal theological dogma is quite vulnerable to a sort of third-order “reverse fundamentalism.” For every third-order “Pat Robertson” bogeyman on the right, there is always a corresponding third-order “[John Shelby Spong](#)” on the left. Higher orders of consciousness flourish *not* at the extreme ends of the spectrum, but rather on the delicate theological tightrope (see Diagram 1) that hangs in tenuous tension between the opposing poles.

Fourth caution: where ideologically motivated clashes occur at the local level (the situation at the national and international levels is more complicated) they most often stem from leaders operating at the third order of consciousness. At the popular level, not all religions or ideologies are equally amenable to the minimally necessary fourth-order consciousness; some religions, in fact, appear to have been structured with built-in mechanisms to defend and maintain the “pure and unadulterated” third-order thinking of their adherents. In order to overcome these very difficult challenges, we may need to adopt fifth-order strategies.

Perhaps we should start, and end, with these: 1) Love your neighbor, 2) turn the other cheek, 3) serve the least of these, 4) the last shall be first, and 5) pray without ceasing.

Suggested Resources:

***Christian's Calling in the World* by Marc Kolden**

(<http://www.augsburgfortress.org/store/item.asp?clsid=156332&isbn=0974228303>)

***In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* by Robert Kegan**

(http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0674445880/ref=ed_oe_p/002-2196755-4672009?%5Fencoding=UTF8)

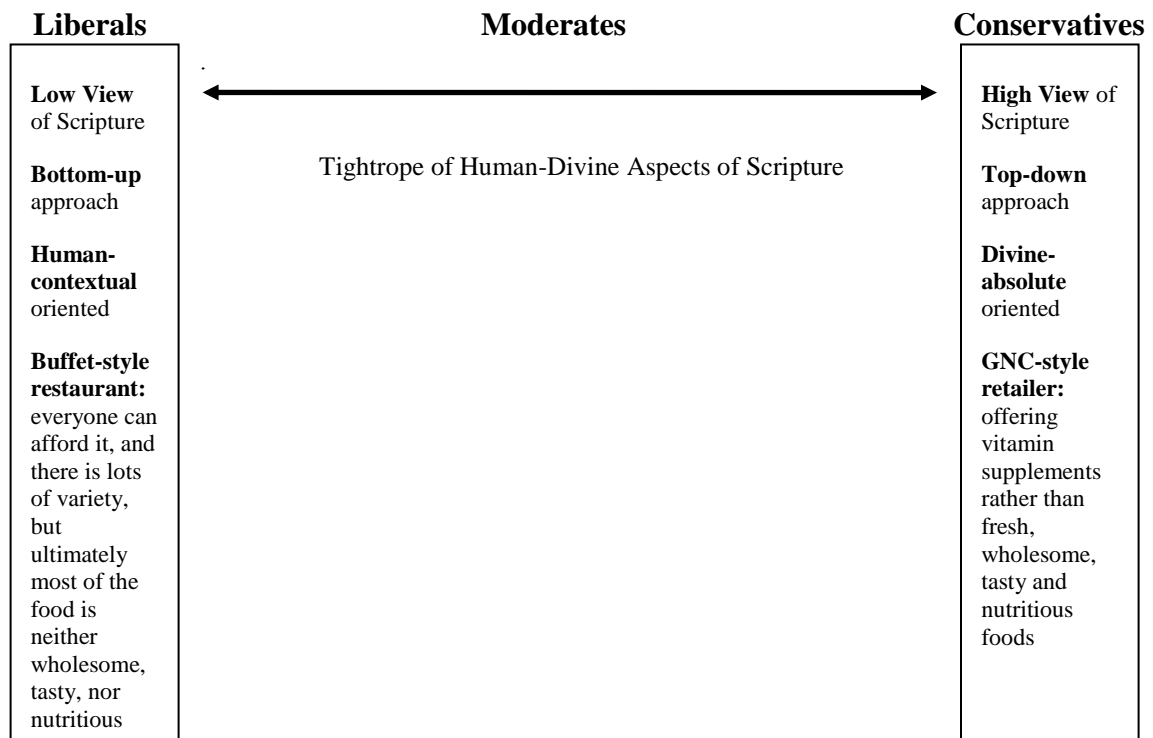
Dr. Strangelove starring Peter Sellers

(http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B0002XNSY0/qid=1140800827/sr=1-2/ref=sr_1_2/002-2196755-4672009?s=dvd&v=glance&n=130)

***Christianity Looks East* by Peter Feldmeier**

(http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0809143313/qid=1141091504/sr=2-1/ref=pd_bbs_b_2_1/002-2196755-4672009?s=books&v=glance&n=283155)

Appendix A: Liberal – Conservative Tightrope



Appendix B: A Lesson from Captain James T. Kirk

For those of you who are Star Trek fans, there is the example of James T. Kirk during his training at the Federation's Academy, when he was confronted with an impossible test known as the "Kobayashi Maru" scenario. The purpose of the simulated conflict was not to see who would defeat the enemy and save the starship and crew; in fact, the scenario was specifically designed to be hopeless. Its purpose was to determine how long and how well the trainee would be able to endure the psychological pressure of the deliberately contrived "no-win scenario."

Cadet Kirk, having gleaned from upperclassmen the true nature of the simulation, hacked into the Federation's computer system and altered the software; consequently, when it came his turn to take the test, he achieved unprecedented victory against impossible odds. He thus demonstrated fourth-order thinking by acting creatively, yet *fully within*, the boundaries of the overarching Federation paradigm.

Rather than stepping out from the unquestioned legitimacy of the dominant system, he justified his "cheating" by a resort to the traditional logic and standards of fair play already accepted by the Federation. They had "cheated" by making the scenario unwinnable, by unfairly subjecting young cadets to an impossible situation; therefore, his reciprocal "cheating" was nothing more than an attempt to rebalance the scales of justice.

Had he operated at the fifth order of consciousness, however, he would have questioned the composition, the norms, the logic, and indeed the *relevance* of the Federation itself, as it stands in comparison to other viable—though perhaps quite different—entities, paradigms, or meta-structures.

[Kobayashi Maru Scenario](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kobayashi_Maru)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kobayashi_Maru