

Graves, Clare W. (2005). *The Never Ending Quest: Dr. Clare W. Graves Explores Human Nature*. Santa Barbara: ECLET Publishing.
(With Christopher C. Cowan & Natasha Todorovic, Eds.)
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This book is compiled from Clare Graves's unpublished manuscript, with reconstructions of missing chapters drawn from his papers and audio tapes. It recounts the fascinating story of a relatively obscure psychologist of mid-twentieth century America who, twenty years after his death and forty years after the most creative period of his life, is receiving the long overdue recognition he deserves. It represents an impressive and very successful effort by Christopher Cowan and Natasha Todorovic to piece together the unfinished book that Graves was unable to complete because of medical problems that finally ended his life.

In examining Graves' remarkable ideas it is well to remember the era in which he lived and worked. He began his research in 1951, in the midst of the latter years of academic behaviorism. It was this period for which Maslow observed that the only options on the table for human nature were behaviorism and Freudianism, the first reducing the human to a machine and the second to a boatswain on the dark ship of the unconscious. Graves was much more at home when humanistic psychology, Maslow's "third force" after behaviorism and Freudianism, came along in the early mid-sixties. Graves then began to use terms such as "self-actualization" in his working vocabulary. By the time Maslow's needs-hierarchy had become widely accepted in the late 60s, giving Graves a respectable context in which to lay out his discoveries, he had already created most of his theoretical edifice. Unfortunately, health problems denied Graves the completion of his work in the form of a book or other major publication. This book is that completion.

As many readers know, Graves' theoretical model forms the foundation for *Spiral Dynamics*,¹ a popular and generally well-received model of personal and cultural value systems which, by many accounts, has proven itself useful in both managerial and governmental settings. Graves, however, viewed his research primarily in the context of personality theory, a sub-discipline in psychology that by the late 1960s was associated with several prominent names such as Henry Murry, Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, Gordon Allport, and historically with Sigmund Freud (Jung was still but a cloud on the horizon for most Americans). With the subsequent decline of personality theory as a distinct discipline, along with increasing attention to developmental studies, Graves has now come to be seen as a pioneering *developmental* psychologist—though it must be admitted that until recently he influenced few other psychologists. It is in this context that he appears in *Spiral Dynamics*. To clarify this matter let us take a look at the form of his actual data, as well as the analyses that led to the creation of his theory.

At ground level Graves' research was an investigation of the written descriptions adults produced when asked to consider what a psychologically mature person would be like. Most of these written descriptions were obtained from students in his courses at Union

College in Schenectady, New York. His initial and by far largest data set was acquired during several years from undergraduates taking his course on the “Normal Personality”—a course that in many universities is titled “The Psychology of Adjustment.” Students ranged in age from 18 to 61 years and more than half were young men. He later corroborated his findings with data obtained in more advanced undergraduate courses such as Experimental Psychology and Industrial Psychology. His analyses were meticulous, to the point of showing that even groups of blind judges, given enough time, tended to find in the data the same general categories that he had found.

What Graves discovered was that about 60% of his written descriptions fell into a few clearly definable categories, with the remaining 40% mixed, though still exhibiting over 50% of their content in one or another of these categories. What was most interesting, however, was the discovery that when the question of psychological maturity was asked of the same participants again after a significant period of time, say one or more years, there was a tendency for responses to move from one category to another in a specific sequence. From this came the beginnings of a developmental theory.

Many readers will already be familiar with the general features of Graves’ categories from reading about *Spiral Dynamics* where they tend to be presented as value categories. Graves, however, preferred to present them in terms of the motivations he believed to underlie each, as illustrated in the following brief descriptions.

Subsistence categories.

1. Automatic. Maintaining physiological stability. [*Beige* in *Spiral Dynamics*]

Theme: Express self as if just another animal according to the dictates of one’s imperative periodic physiological needs.

Alternative Theme: Express self as if just another animal according to the dictates of one’s imperative periodic physiological needs and the environmental possibilities..

2. Tribalism. Achievement of relative safety. [*Purple* in *Spiral Dynamics*]

Theme: Sacrifice self to the way of one’s elders.

Alternative Theme: Sacrifice one’s desires to the way of one’s elders’ and Sacrifice self to the traditions of one’s elders, one’s ancestors.

3. Egocentric. Living with self-awareness. (*Express self, to hell with others.*) [*Red* in *Spiral Dynamics*]

Theme: Express self, to hell with the consequences, lest one suffer the torment of unbearable shame.

Alternative Theme: Express self but to hell with others lest one suffer the torment of unbearable shame.

4. Deferentialistic. Achieving everlasting peace of mind. [*Blue* in *Spiral Dynamics*]

Theme: Sacrifice self in order to receive reward later.

Alternative Theme: Sacrifice now to receive reward later.

5. Materialistic. Conquering the physical universe so as to overcome want. [*Orange* in *Spiral Dynamics*]

Theme: Express self for what self desires, but in a fashion calculated not to bring down the wrath of others.

Alternative Theme: Express self for what self desired without shame or guilt.

6. Personalistic. Living with the human element. [*Green* in *Spiral Dynamics*]

Theme: Sacrifice now in order to get acceptance now.

Alternative Theme: Sacrifice now in order for all to get now.

Being categories.

7. Cognitivistic. Restoring viability to a disordered world. [*Yellow* in *Spiral Dynamics*]

Theme: Express self for what self deserves, but never at the expense of other and in a manner that all life, not just my life, will profit.

Alternative Theme: ‘Express self but not at the expense of others’ conceptions.

8. Experientialistic. Accepting existential dichotomies. [*Turquoise* in *Spiral Dynamics*]

Theme: Adjust to the realities of one’s existence and automatically accept the existential dichotomies as they are and go on living.

Alternative Theme: Sacrifice the idea that one will ever know what it is all about and adjust to this as the existential reality of existence.

Cowan and Natasha Todorovic’s book provides detailed and reflective descriptions of each the above categories. It is worth noting that these were not part of the original incomplete manuscript, but assembled from Graves papers and tapes. Many of these can be found on the website they have created for him.²

Critique.

Having now reported on Graves' remarkable research and recognized its considerable contribution to the field of psychology it seems appropriate to examine some of its limitations as well. In doing so let us return to the original data set. This was a collection of descriptions of the idealized mature human personality generated by a large number of adults. Most, though certainly not all, of these adults were relatively young, in fact undergraduates who in most instances were freshman or sophomores, that is to say they were in their late teens or early to mid-twenties. The majority were men, though the actual numbers are not given in the book. Unfortunately, we know little about the makeup of the student body of Union College during the 1950s, though it is probably safe to guess that it was comprised largely of Caucasians.

It may seem unfair to put too fine a point on the composition of the participant population of a research program carried out long before an awareness of the importance of gender and ethnicity came to be a common aspect of psychological research, but unfortunately this is exactly where the problem lies. Descriptions of the idealized personality are not neutral with regard to ethnicity or gender, or age either for that matter. Yet through all of Graves' careful analyses we learn little to nothing about these factors and must assume they were overlooked or simply ignored. In the case of gender, for instance, feminist research has since shown over and over again that such idealizations tend to favor masculine over feminine traits. It is hard to imagine that differences in ethnicity and age do not also play significant roles in such descriptions. It would have been very helpful for understanding this research if the data had been parsed along these dimensions.

Perhaps, however, we should tread lightly here. I personally suspect that Graves' stages contain more than a little truth about human nature beyond the Union College students of the 50s. Broad similarities with the highly researched stage theories of Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan, as well as Robert Kegan and others are obvious and undeniable. Interestingly, Graves himself seemed to exhibit no restraints in generalizing beyond his subject pool. He treats his descriptive groupings as universal categories of human development. Not only that, but he includes tables showing when each first appeared in the long history of the human species. These speculations seem surprisingly at home with modern scholarship on the history of consciousness, as seen for example in the works of Jean Gebser, Ken Wilber, and even myself, but when they were originally developed by Graves it can only be said that they were both ahead of their times and well beyond what could be reasonably supported by his data. One only wonders to what extent this tendency toward unreserved and rather inflationary speculation may have cost Graves the respect he might otherwise have earned during his lifetime.

Indeed, substantial aspects of Graves' theory were based on pure speculation, though reasonably well informed by many hours spent in the library. This includes the earliest two developmental stages for which Graves had no real data, and an entire theory of biological roots. According to the latter, the essential structure of each grouping or stage is already embedded in the human nervous system awaiting the necessary trigger conditions to activate it. It then begins to unfold into a full-bodied personality structure. Graves was quite serious about this underlying neurological dimension of each structure.

His speculation is surprisingly detailed, even incorporating early notions of the influences of the left and right hemispheres. All in all, this body of speculation is curiously reminiscent of the physiological theories common to the 40s and 50s, with their emphases on specific motivational brain centers, activation and inhibition, and mutually inhibitory patterns of excitation. Of course, Graves had no direct evidence for any of it.

Despite these limitations, reading Graves' original manuscript, roughly the first half of the book, one has the feeling of standing in the presence of a man whose mind could not be confined by the age in which he lived, or the limitations of the data which he labored so diligently to analyze. If his speculations were inflated and outrageous at times, at other times they were sublime. He was apparently one of the very first theorists to adopt ideas from Ludwig von Bertalanffy's General Systems Theory into psychology, using them to conceptualize each of his personality categories as an entire cognitive and motivational pattern. And just as impressive, he seems to have anticipated the modern notion of a chaotic *attractor*, according to which each such category represents a complete discrete dynamical state with its own shape and internal dynamics. In line with this thinking, and anticipating contemporary ideas about intelligence and personality, he also recognized that developmental advances are undergirded at each stage by increases in complexity.

Summing it all up, Cowan and Todorovic have given us a fascinating account of the work of one of the most colorful and generative minds in the history of psychology. We owe them a debt of thanks. This excellent and long overdue book deserves to be part of every substantial psychology library and of many private collections as well.

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¹ *Spiral Dynamics* refers both to a book by that title, written by Christopher Cowan and Don Beck, and the proprietary use of the basic model presented in it for purposes of training and consultation.

² <http://www.clarewgraves.com/home.html>