

Part 1: How To Be An Adult— Kegan's Theory of Adult Development

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Ever wondered what it means to be an adult?

I'm not talking about buying guest towels or renters insurance. I'm talking about how we ought to be developing in adulthood. How should we be perceiving and engaging with the world? Or handling conflict and interacting with the people around us?

With children it's easy. Children have distinct developmental stages and rituals (terrible twos, bar mitzvah, sweet sixteen), so we pretty much know what to expect when they grow older.

But what about adults? For most of us, adulthood just happens. We don't have a framework for adult development that can help us understand where we are and where we want to be.

This is where Dr. Robert Kegan's Theory of Adult Development comes in.

Kegan (a former Harvard psychologist) shows that adults go through 5 distinct developmental stages (just like children).

Becoming an 'adult' means transitioning to higher stages of development. It means developing an independent sense of self and gaining the traits associated with wisdom and social maturity. It means becoming more self-aware and in control of our behavior, as well as increasingly aware of, and better able to manage our relationships and the social factors affecting us.

However, most of us—about 65% of the general population—never become high functioning 'adults', i.e. we never make it past Stage 3 (out of 5 Stages!). We still lack an independent sense of self because so much of what we think, believe, and feel is dependent on how we think others experience us.

So how can we transition to higher stages?

This article will review Kegan's Theory of Adult Development. Part 1 will outline Kegan's Stages 2–5 because being aware of the different Stages can help us better understand ourselves and the people around us (friends, partners, children, etc.) and gives us something to aspire to. I encourage you to read each stage carefully and think about which stage you're in, and where you'd like to be.

Part 2 will focus on how to get transition to the higher stages of development.

How do we grow? Transformation & the Subject-Object Shift

Kegan's theory outlines **5 distinct stages of development** (Stages 1 -5). Most of us are in transition between stages.

Before we go into the theory, we need to understand 2 key concepts:

Transformation

Many of us think that being an adult simply means getting better at what we do (i.e. acquiring more skills and knowledge). Kegan would disagree.

According to Kegan, becoming an adult isn't about learning new things (adding things to the 'container' of the mind), it's about transformation — **changing the way we know and understand the world (changing the actual form of our 'container')**.

Transformation is akin to a “personal Copernican shift”. Prior to Copernicus we thought the earth was the center of the solar system. Then Copernicus came along and showed that the sun is at the center. So while nothing physically changed, our entire conception and perception of the world was transformed.

This happens to us all the time. Think, for example, of a book you reread from high school. While the information is the same (same words, same book), the way you experience and understand the book (and the world!) is fundamentally different. This is transformation.

It's only through transformation that we can transition to higher stages of development (this is also why personal tragedy can be such a catalyst for growth).

Subject -Object Shift

Transitioning to higher stages requires a subject-object shift—moving what we 'know' from Subject (where it is controlling us) to Object (where we can control it).

This is my favorite part of the theory. It's based on the premise that the more in of our lives we take as Object, the more clearly we can see the world, ourselves and the people in it.

- **Subject (“I AM”)**—Self concepts we are attached to and thus cannot reflect on or take an objective look at. They include personality traits, assumptions about the way the world works, behaviors, emotions, etc.
- **Object (“I HAVE”)**—Self concepts that we can detach ourselves from. That we can look at, reflect upon, engage, control and connect to something else.

For example: Many of us experience a subject-object shift with regards to religion. When we're young our religion is subjective—i.e. I'm Catholic, I'm Jewish—and dependent on our parents or community. We don't have the capacity to analyze or question these beliefs.

When we're older, religion becomes more objective—i.e. I'm no longer my beliefs. I am now a human WITH beliefs who can step back, reflect on and decide what to believe in.

From my experience, the more I can step back and analyze, reflect on my own behavior, feelings, desires and needs, the more I can operate from a place of wholeness, peace and strength.

This is also very similar to Buddhist ideas around detachment. Suffering arises from over-identifying with our thoughts, beliefs, emotions, etc. The solution? Detachment. Detachment is not indifference, it is the act of viewing these things objectively, i.e. **I am not** my feelings, emotions, past or beliefs, **I have** feelings, beliefs, emotions, etc.

Transformation and the subject-object shift are critical for adult development.

Where you at? Kegan's Stages of Adult Development

- Stage 1—Impulsive mind (early childhood)
- Stage 2—Imperial mind (adolescence, 6% of adult population)
- **Stage 3—Socialized mind (58% of the adult population)**
- **Stage 4—Self-Authoring mind (35% of the adult population)**
- **Stage 5—Self-Transforming mind (1% of the adult population)**

I focus on Stages 2–5, because they're most applicable to adult development. Most of the time we're in transition between stages and/or behave at different stages with different people (i.e. Stage 3 with a partner, Stage 4 with a coworker).

The 'goal' is to pay attention to which stage we are at, when and with who. Only then can we deliberately work to change our perspective, thoughts, feelings and actions.

Notice as you transition to new stages what was once subject becomes object.

Stage 2—The Imperial Mind (6 years—adolescence, some adults)

Stage 2 used to include only adolescents, but many adults never get past this stage. I feel like we all know a person who falls into this category.

- Subject: **IS** needs, interests & desires
- Object: **HAS** impulses, feelings & perceptions

In Stage 2, the emphasis on **one's own needs, interests and agendas** is primary.

Relationships are transactional. Stage 2 individuals view people as a means to get their own needs met, as opposed to a shared internal experience (how we feel about each other). They care about how others perceive them, but only because those perceptions may have concrete consequences for them. For example, when Stage 2 friends do not lie to each other, it is because of a fear of the consequences or retaliation, not because they value honesty and transparency in a relationship.

Moreover, individuals follow along with rules, philosophies, movements or ideologies because of external rewards or punishments, not because they truly believe in them. For example, a person in Stage 2 won't cheat because they're scared of the consequences, not because it goes against their personal values.

Stage 3: The Socialized Mind (most adults)

Most of us are in this stage.

- Subject: **IS** interpersonal relationships, mutuality
- Object: **HAS** needs, interests & desires

In Stage 3, external sources shape our sense of self and understanding of the world.

Whereas in Stage 2 the most important things were our personal needs and interests, in **Stage 3 the most important things are the ideas, norms and beliefs of the people and systems around us (i.e. family, society, ideology, culture, etc.).**

For the first time we begin experience ourselves as a function of how others experience us. For example, we take an external view of our ourselves (“They’ll think I look stupid”) and make it part of our internal experience (“I am stupid”).

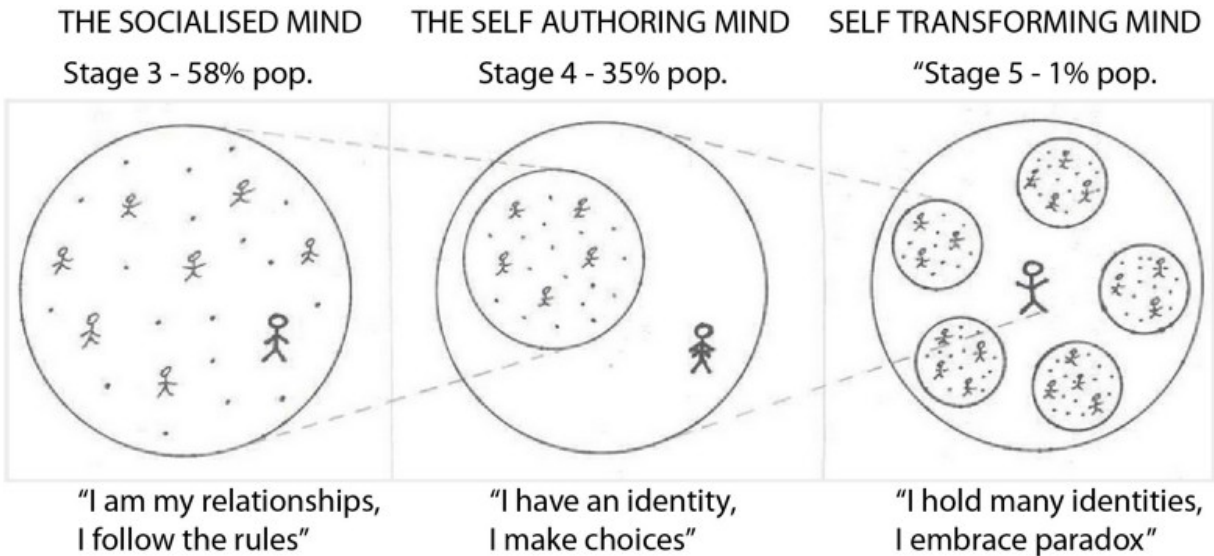
More characteristics:

- **We get our thoughts, beliefs, morals (what we know to be true) from external sources.**
- **We take too much personal responsibility for how other people experience us.** As a result we spend too much energy trying to avoid hurting other people’s feelings.
- **We look for external validation to derive our sense of self.** For example, a student doesn’t know whether he has successfully mastered a subject until he sees his grade on a test; an executive doesn’t know whether a particular meeting was successful or not until her colleagues tell her it was.
- **We don’t have an independent, strong sense of self.** When there is a conflict between important ideologies, institutions, or people, we have a hard time answering the question: what do I want? We’re too busy focused on others’ expectations or societal roles.
- **We no longer view other people as a means to an end.** We can internalize others’ perspectives and actually care about others’ opinions of us—not just with regards to the consequences of those opinions. For example: I care that you’re angry with me because I care about you and our relationship, not just because if you’re angry then you won’t invite me to your party.

For example, with regards to cheating:

- **Stage 2 cheater**—worried about getting caught and the consequences (breaking up, being kicked out, etc.)
- **Stage 3 cheater**— feel guilty and a disturbing dissonance because cheating is wrong and goes against his/her belief system and values.

For many people, social maturity seems to stop here. However, the potential for continued development continues onwards and upwards.



Excerpt: Constructive Development Theory - Robert Kegan "In Over our Heads"

Stage 4 — The Self Authoring Mind

According to Kegan, about 35% of adults live at this stage.

- Subject: **IS** self authorship, identity and ideology
- Object: **HAS** relationships, mutuality

In Stage 4, we can define who we are, and not be defined by other people, our relationships or the environment.

We understand that we are a person, with thoughts, feelings and beliefs that are independent from the standards and expectations of our environment. We can now distinguish the opinions of others from our own opinions to formulate our own "seat of judgment". We become consumed with who we are—this is the kind of person I am, this is what I stand for.

We develop an internal sense of direction and the capacity to create and follow our own course.

More characteristics:

- **We can question expectations and values, take stands, set limits, and solve problems with independent frames of mind.**

- **We can explore other thoughts and feelings, creating our own sense of authority or voice.**
- **We can take responsibility for our own inner states and emotions**—“I feel angry because I interpret what you did as a violation of important values of mine, and if I interpreted your actions differently I might feel sad instead.”
- **We generate our understanding of the world** and are not unduly shaped by the context in which we find ourselves.
- **We realize that we’re always changing, that who we are is something that we can still negotiate.**

Stage 5—The Interconnected Mind

- Subject: **IS**
- Object: **HAS** self authorship, identity and ideology

Only 1% of adults reach Stage 5.

In Stage 5 one’s sense of self is not tied to particular identities or roles, but is constantly created through the exploration of one’s identities and roles and further honed through interactions with others.

This is similar to the Buddhist concept of an evolving self—a self that is in constant flux, ever changing.

More characteristics:

- **We are both self-authoring and willing to work with the authority of others.** We can not only question authority, but also question ourselves.
- **We are no longer held prisoner by our own identity.** We see the complexities of life, can expand who we are and be open to other possibilities—we are reinventing our identity. Our identity is limited—our circumstances in life will continuously change and our identity needs to change with it.
- **We can hold multiple thoughts and ideologies at once.** We can understand things from many different perspectives.

Now what?

Now that you've reviewed the stages, which Stage do you think you're at? And where would you like to be?

According to Kegan, we all believe we're in a higher stage than we are. So pay close attention to how you behave across contexts and with different people.

In Part 2 I'll review strategies for transitioning from Stage 2 or 3 to the higher Stages (4–5).

Part 2: How To Be An Adult –Kegan's Theory of Adult Development

In [Part 1](#) I introduced a new way of viewing adulthood, based on Dr. Kegan's Theory of Adult Development.

According to Kegan, becoming an adult isn't only about gaining new skills, status or money.

It's about becoming someone who doesn't need others to tell them what to do, is self-directed, can navigate across seemingly competing ideas and perspectives without subsuming their own and can [develop authentic, mature relations with others](#).

It means operating at Kegan's higher stages of development: Stage 4—Self Authoring and Stage 5—Self Transforming. If you didn't read [Part 1](#), I suggest you do now (it provides a general overview of Kegan's theory).

In Part 2, I focus on how to transition to Stage 4. Part 3 will focus on transitioning from Stage 4 to Stage 5.

It's important to note that the path to higher stages is not linear, it's complex and involves a lot of back and forth. Moreover, each stage describes an ideal outcome—no individual fits all aspects of these descriptions. Rather these stages serve as a road map, as a way for us to orient ourselves about how we currently experience reality.

What is Self-Authorship?

Self Authorship is about **defining and reshaping (authoring) what you believe (epistemology), your sense of self (intrapersonal), and your relationships with others (interpersonal)**, rather than uncritically accepting them from other people.

All three dimensions are critical for the construction of a self-authored system.

- **How/what do I know? (Beliefs)**—Generating and coordinating one’s own beliefs, values and internal loyalties, rather than depending on external influences for shaping one’s thoughts.
- **Who am I? (Intrapersonal)**—Being concerned with personal integrity - aligning actions with values.
- **How do I want to construct relationships with others? (Interpersonal)**—Thinking about feelings and relationships instead of being subject to them.

The key is to view your ‘self’ as object—i.e. something that can be evaluated, analyzed and understood.

How to Get There—The 3 Phases of the Journey to Self Authorship

Building on Kegan’s theory, [Marcia B. Baxter Magolda](#) discovered three key elements of self authorship (*the following reflects my thoughts, based on Magolda’s and others’ work).

1. Moving towards self-authorship—cultivating the internal voice

We listen to and cultivate our internal voice by shifting our energy from worrying about what other people think (about us and everything else), **to clearly determining what we think.**

The problem is that we’ve been mixing up our thoughts with other people’s thoughts for most of our adult lives.

What we need is clarity. Clarity about who we are, what we think, what we want and why.

How do we do this? **By practicing curiosity, critical reflection and openness.**

We know what it’s like to be curious about other people and things.

Yet, we’re rarely as curious about ourselves. We take ourselves for granted, as though we’ve got ourselves figured out and need to move on to something more interesting.

That’s bullshit.

The only way to start operating from Stage 4—Self Authorship, is to practice being curious about ourselves.

So how do you practice curiosity? By asking yourself questions.

Question #1: What do I think?

The first aspect of Self Authorship is epistemological—i.e. your beliefs, thoughts and values.

Most of us don't really know what we believe, think and value.

We repeat what we hear or experience—from our parents, our friends, our communities, society, etc.—without taking the time to explore and analyze our thoughts. Moreover, conversations rarely get deep enough (unless you're in therapy, a workshop, etc.) to really challenge us to think about what we think.

Simple exercise: What do you think about the phrase “love means never having to say you're sorry.”

We've all heard this before, and often accepted it as truth. But what does it mean to you?

Do you agree or disagree and why? State your opinion in a full sentence.

That means more than a 'yes' or 'no' answer. It means stating an opinion and then supporting it with your beliefs and values.

Practice this throughout your day. Pay attention to what you see and hear around you. Stop for a second and be curious about what you think and ask: What do I actually think about this and why?

The key is to state your thoughts in a coherent sentence (in your mind or out loud, whatever you want).

We don't spend enough time stating and explaining our beliefs and thoughts. I believe that doing so can bring us more in touch with who we are.

Here are more examples:

- What do I think a relationship should look like and why?

- How do I know that someone is a good friend?
- What's my policy on honesty and why?

Question #2: What do I want?

This relates to the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of Self Authorship.

Operating from Self Authorship means **defining what we want and clearly communicating those wants to the people we care about.**

Most of us spend too much time managing and reacting to other people's wants (partner, kids, co-workers, boss, parents, etc.), and not enough time clarifying what we want.

The result is that we've gotten into the habit of doing things because we feel guilty or 'bad' instead of doing them because they align with the person we want to be.
In order to reach Self Authorship, we need to practice operating from the place of "what do I want" versus "what do other people want from me".

For example, a few months ago I was part of a camp where everyone is expected to help out. For the first few days I felt guilty for not helping out enough and started worrying about how the other camp members were perceiving me. While I started helping out more, it was because I felt guilty and didn't want the other camp members judging me. These feelings persisted the entire time I was there.

I could have avoided all these negative feelings by simply asking "what do I want?" Do I want to be a contributing camp member? Or do I want to bail on my responsibilities? Either way, I decide what I want and I deal with the consequences of my decision. It doesn't matter what other people think of me. What matters is the kind of person I want to be.

It's a small shift but it can go a long way. The important thing is to put yourself in the driver's seat of your emotions and behaviors. To clarify what you want and then be willing to accept the consequences.

Remember, what we're after here is clarity.

A good exercise for clarifying your wants is to get very very specific.

We often use 'big' words to describe what we want—i.e. "I want you to care more", "I want more responsibility", "I want more alone time", etc.

The problem is that no one (including yourself) knows what you really mean—which causes conflict and misunderstandings.

Instead, do the work and first figure out exactly what you want. For example, you can say: “I want you to check in with me once a day”, “I want you to take the lead on Project X” or “I want one hour a week to work on my own”.

The clearer you are about what you want, the easier you make it for yourself and other people to make decisions.

For example, by stating specifically “I want you to check in with me once a day”, you do three things: 1. You clarify what you want to yourself, 2. You clarify what you want to the other person (now they can decide if they can give you this or not) and 3. You decide what you’re willing to live with.

If the other person can’t give you what you want, you then need to decide what to do next. The point is that now the conversation has moved to real, tangible things—not abstract concepts and misunderstandings.

It’s important to practice articulating your wants to the people you care about. In general, people are not good at doing this. However, the more you practice this the more authentic your relationships can be.

Question #3: What are my motivations?

In order to get real about what you want, you need to understand your motivations.

We all have higher and lower motivations. Or, as [James Altucher writes](#), good reasons and real reasons.

- **Higher motivations (good reason)** come from our ‘higher’ selves—the person we want to be, or imagine ourselves to be
- **Lower motivations (real reason)** come from our ‘lower’ selves—driven by guilt, desire, ego, uncertainty, etc.

For example, take criticizing a colleague. Your higher motivation may be to help them improve their performance. Your lower motivation may be to make them feel bad, or make yourself feel better.

We all have these different motivations. The main question is which ones are driving you more and why?

And more importantly: Which ones **do you want** to drive you more and why? What kind of a person do you want to be?

The point is not to get rid of the lower motivations (that's impossible), it's to manage them (instead of letting them manage you).

Remember Kegan's subject/object? It's about taking these low motivations and making them object. Things you can explore, analyze and manage.

The point is to get to know them. To be curious about them.

This is also where we begin to practice openness. That means (among other things) being open to see yourself as you really are.

2. Building a self-authored system—honoring internal commitments

The previous step focused on building a self-authored system (identifying what you think, believe and want, and why).

Now it's time to live according to this system—to let this internal foundation guide your actions. This is done by honoring your internal commitments.

How do we honor internal commitments?

By making decisions that are aligned with our wants and values (which you clarified above).

Every decision we make is an opportunity to get us closer to what we want. To bring us closer to expressing our authentic selves.

However, most of us experience a dissonance—a gap between what we say we value and how we actually behave. This is most obvious in dating. People say they want a serious committed relationship, but will date people who are unavailable.

This is because it's not easy to align our actions with our values. It takes a lot of damn work. It's easier to follow the path of least resistance. But this path usually keep you where you are, or heading in the 'wrong' direction.

The path to what you want is paved with small decisions.

But the best way to get better at knowing what we want is, like everything, to practice.

For example, this really hit home for me when I first read Brene Brown's work.

I've always said that I value and want open and honest relationships. But I never invested a lot of time and effort into my relationships. The result is that I was stuck—there was a dissonance between what I say I want and how I actually behave. And, as we all know, experiencing dissonance can be soul sucking.

And then I read Brene Brown's books and realized that in order to have deep relationships I need to give of myself (i.e. share more, invest time in, etc.).

In short, I need to align my want (for deeper relationships) with my actions (practicing vulnerability).

It sounds trivial, but it wasn't for me. It was hard and it took work. It meant that I needed to start opening up, sharing my feelings and being honest about what's going on with me (something that doesn't come naturally to me). It would have been much easier to talk about the weather.

So that's what I started doing—I began practicing vulnerability with the people closest to me. And this has profoundly changed my life, from deepening my relationships to laying the foundation for my relationship with my now-husband.

Think about the last time you made a decision about the person you want to be, and followed through with concrete actions. Feels good doesn't it?

The reason is because when we honor our internal commitments, we gain confidence. The more you do it, the more confident you become.

Pay attention to the decisions you make every day, how many of them are reactions to external circumstances? How many of them are made with a deliberate intention to align your behaviors with your values?

The same is true for Kegan's theory. If you want to reach higher stages of development then you need to make an internal commitment to change your behavior.

Now what?

I encourage you to be curious about what you think and believe and why. And start paying attention to the small decisions you make every day.

The goal is—as always—to raise awareness and live more intentionally.