
Six Perplexities

A psychological and philosophical developmental arc,
traced through 19 notebooks (November 2015 – April 2026)

“The demand for a solution of a perplexity is the steadying and guiding factor in the entire process of reflection... a question to be answered, an ambiguity to be resolved, sets up an end and holds the current of ideas to a definite channel. Every suggested conclusion is tested by its reference to this regulating end, by its pertinence to the problem in hand.”

— John Dewey, *How We Think*

7	Praxeology	Actions, Intentions
6	Axiology	Values, Judgements
5	Epistemology	Beliefs, Know-How & Data
4	Cosmology of Persons	Politics
3	Cosmology of Nature	Economics
2	Metaphysics	Fundamental Powers & Limitations
1	Ontology	Fundamental Substance(s)

Six perplexities sit between these seven levels. Each one is a crisis that the level below cannot resolve from within itself. Its resolution carries you upward — into a larger knowledge structure that contains and surpasses the previous one.

543 entries · ~39,241 words · 19 notebooks · Queried and distilled by Perplexity Computer · April 2026

HOW TO READ THIS

The diagram you drew places seven philosophical disciplines in a vertical stack. Your sketch adds a spiral of six numbered perplexities running between the levels, with a note at the bottom: ‘each perplexity moves you from one knowledge structure to the next (which includes the previous), and is better, because it covers more territory.’

This is a description of how psychological and intellectual development actually proceeds — not by accumulating more facts at the same level, but by being forced, through a genuine crisis of understanding, to ascend to a higher level that includes and explains what was below it. It maps onto Erich Neumann’s three-stage developmental arc (Creation, Hero, Transformation), onto the Piagetian concept of schema reorganisation, onto Kuhn’s scientific revolutions, and onto the personal developmental trajectory recorded across your notebooks.

The perplexities are numbered here from the top down (Perplexity 1 between Praxeology and Axiology), but they are encountered from the bottom up: you begin with action, and the failures of action drive you downward through the spiral to its ontological root. The numbering in your sketch also runs 1–6 from top to bottom, which is the order in which each perplexity is typically encountered in a developing life.

Each perplexity section below is structured in three parts: (1) the question itself; (2) the personal arc — how this appeared in your notebooks over time; and (3) the universal dimension — how this same perplexity manifests for contemporary people generally.

THE CRISIS OF EFFECTIVE ACTION

Why do my actions keep failing to produce what I want — even when my intentions are good?

PERSONAL ARC

This is the first perplexity most people encounter in life, usually in early adulthood. You act. You work. You try. And the results are consistently disappointing, incomplete, or backfire entirely. NB#4 has it with deceptive simplicity: “Good intentions induce positive unintended results, and vice versa.” The *via negativa* of that observation is the real sting: bad intentions produce negative unintended results. Intention is not sufficient to govern action. Your NB#5 sharpens the diagnosis with the concept of Bounded Agency: every act of will is limited by ‘information available, cognitive limits, time.’ You cannot act beyond what you can perceive, and your perception is always partial.

UNIVERSAL DIMENSION

For contemporary people, this perplexity tends to arrive as repeated frustration with productivity systems, relationships, career moves, or political activism that produces the opposite of its stated goal. The modern world is saturated with praxeological advice — ‘how to’ books, coaching, goal-setting frameworks — yet the divorce rate, workplace disengagement, and political polarisation all suggest that optimising action at the praxeological level alone is insufficient. The question this perplexity forces is: ‘What are you actually trying to achieve?’ This is an axiological question — a question about values and ends.

THE CROSSING

The crossing: you stop asking ‘How do I do this better?’ and start asking ‘Why am I doing this at all?’ NB#1 records the insight that resolves it: “Values are ends based... Don’t confuse means with the ends — Religion with spirituality, University with education, Cricket with sport.” This is Axiology arriving as lived necessity.

FROM THE NOTEBOOKS

“Good intentions induce positive unintended results, and vice versa.”

— NB#4 §4.32 — Intentions

“Bounded Agency: Limitations — information available, cognitive limits, time.”

— NB#5 §5.13 — Bounded Agency

“Inaction is often the most powerful form of action, for it allows desired end states to be better understood, the discovery of nearer best means, making highly effective action inevitable.”

— NB#3 §3.16 — Inaction as Action

THE CRISIS OF MORAL DISAGREEMENT

I know what I value — but others with equal intelligence and sincerity hold completely different values. How is moral agreement even possible?

PERSONAL ARC

Having climbed to axiology — having identified ends and stopped confusing them with means — you encounter the more disturbing realisation: other reasonable people arrange their ends differently, and there appears to be no neutral ground from which to adjudicate. MacIntyre, transcribed in NB#3, names it precisely: “There seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture.” Your marginal note beside it: ‘2019 — axiology = postmodernism.’ That annotation is itself a developmental marker — the moment you diagnosed the cultural impasse as an axiological failure rather than a mere political disagreement. The perplexity sharpens when you discover that Gresham’s Law applies to values as to currency: bad values, once institutionalised, drive out good ones.

UNIVERSAL DIMENSION

This perplexity is the defining philosophical crisis of the contemporary West. Postmodernism is, at its root, the axiological perplexity institutionalised as a conclusion rather than a question. When moral discourse produces only assertion, identity politics, and interminable culture wars, it is because the participants are stuck at the Axiology level, mistaking their values for knowledge. The perplexity demands a descent to a deeper level: not ‘which values are correct’ but ‘what are the conditions under which any values are held at all?’ That is an epistemological question.

THE CROSSING

The crossing: you stop debating which values are correct and start examining the structure of the worldview that holds values in place. NB#5 records it as Worldview Exaptation: “Each belief comports with the rest of the worldview. An anomaly presents; a new axiom is accepted if evidence is sufficient. Exaptation of worldview such that it comports with the anomaly.” Values are not free-floating preferences; they are downstream of a prior knowledge structure.

FROM THE NOTEBOOKS

“The most striking feature of contemporary moral utterance is its interminable character. There seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture.”

— NB#3 §3.10 — Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*

“Anything can be believed if it comports with the whole. Applies to self and others.”

— NB#6 §6.5 — Comporting

“Values are ends based... Don’t confuse means with the ends.”

— NB#1 §1.3 — Values

“Bad money drives good money out.”

— NB#14 §14.29 — Gresham’s Law

THE CRISIS OF THE SELF-ENCLOSED WORLDVIEW

If my worldview is self-confirming by design — since all beliefs comport with the whole — then how can I ever know whether I am mistaken about myself?

PERSONAL ARC

Epistemology as a level explains how worldviews form and change. But it contains a trap. If every belief coheres with every other belief, then the most dangerous error — being fundamentally wrong about who you are — is the hardest to detect. NB#3 names this the Objective Straitjacket: “A belief that one’s beliefs are in their final form... that is immutable. Mistaking beliefs for knowledge.” Your NB#1 entry on the Facade/Persona is the personal version of the same problem: the gap between what you present, what others perceive, and what is inherent — the ‘centroversion’ failure — is invisible from within the self-system that created it. You cannot see your own mask.

UNIVERSAL DIMENSION

This perplexity is the psychotherapeutic threshold. Therapy, properly done, is not about fixing behaviour (Praxeology) or clarifying values (Axiology) or even correcting false beliefs (Epistemology). It is about confronting who you actually are as a person — the Cosmology of Persons level. Erich Neumann describes the contemporary version of being stuck here: the atomised individual, detached from the primary group, who ‘devalues the group and exalts the mass,’ leading to a psychic fragment — the mass man — that acts autonomously and destructively because it has never been integrated into a whole self. Most ideology is this fragment acting as if it were a complete identity. To understand politics (your sketch labels Cosmology of Persons as politics) you must first understand persons.

THE CROSSING

The crossing: you stop trying to think your way to self-knowledge and start accepting that the self is not transparent to itself. The subject has its own permanence independent of whether you believe in it. NB#16 asks: “Is there a subject permanence equivalent? The understanding that a subjective truth is still active even when people or yourself don’t believe in it.” This is the moment you discover that the person is not the same as the personality — that there is something underneath the worldview.

FROM THE NOTEBOOKS

“A belief that one’s beliefs are in their final form... that is immutable. Mistaking beliefs for knowledge.”

— NB#3 §3.3 — Objective Straitjacket

“Mass man has never existed before — this is a novel phenomenon! The renegade ego of modern man succumbs to a reactionary mass mindedness.”

— NB#7 §7.17 — Erich Neumann

“Is there a subject permanence equivalent? The understanding that a subjective truth is still active even when people or yourself don’t believe in it.”

— NB#16 §16.55 — Subject Permanence

“A person’s identity (worldview), is like a pattern drawn on a tightly stretched parchment. Touch just one part of it, just one allegiance, and the whole person will react.”

— NB#11 §11.12 — Identity

THE CRISIS OF THE INDIVIDUAL IN THE COLLECTIVE

If persons contain nature and can modify it, why does the collective behaviour of persons so consistently produce outcomes that no individual person wanted or chose?

PERSONAL ARC

At the Cosmology of Persons level, you understand persons as agents with beliefs, powers and limitations. But persons live inside institutions, economies, and politics — your sketch labels this level as ‘politics.’ The perplexity at the threshold between persons and nature is that aggregate human action produces emergent properties that no individual chose and no individual can reverse. Your notebooks here are political and economic in their focus, but they converge on a single insight: the order of civil society, law, and money is not designed by persons — it is the accumulated sediment of countless choices operating under constraints that themselves have a natural logic. Burke: “Society is indeed a contract... between those who are living, those who are dead, and those yet to be born.” The dead have a vote. The unborn have a stake.

UNIVERSAL DIMENSION

Your sketch labels Cosmology of Nature as ‘economics,’ which places the political and economic crises of modernity precisely at this threshold. The failure of 20th-century social engineering — from Soviet planning to Keynesian demand management to technocratic governance — is the failure to understand that the natural order of human cooperation cannot be designed from above by persons, however intelligent. It is emergent and has its own laws. Hayek’s knowledge problem, the Austrian theory of economic cycles, the common law tradition your notebooks return to repeatedly — all are attempts to describe the natural law layer that underlies and constrains the political layer. Exter’s Pyramid is the economic version of the same hierarchy: the upper layers (derivatives, equities) are human constructs; the base (gold) is natural.

THE CROSSING

The crossing: you stop trying to reform society through direct political action on persons and start asking what the natural law of human cooperation actually is. NB#5: “CS = acting together without being acted upon.” Civil society is the name for the natural order of voluntary association that exists prior to and beneath the political layer. Understanding it requires descending from persons to nature.

FROM THE NOTEBOOKS

“Society is indeed a contract. It is a partnership... not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.”

— NB#9 §9.3 — Edmund Burke

“Politics is downstream of culture.”

— NB#9 §9.3 — Andrew Breitbart

“Without individuals nothing changes. Without institutions nothing survives.”

— NB#9 §9.3 — Os Guinness

“Neo-Says Law — production should be the source of demand (saving & investment) — free from counterparty risk.”

— NB#11 §11.3 — Say’s Law

THE CRISIS OF NATURALISM

If nature operates by laws sufficient to explain themselves, how does it produce beings who can ask whether those laws have a source — and why does complexity keep increasing rather than dispersing?

PERSONAL ARC

At the Cosmology of Nature level, you understand the natural order: emergence, complexity, systems, the logic of evolution and economic cycles. But the deeper you go into that natural order, the more inexplicable its very existence becomes. Anderson's 1972 observation, transcribed in NB#5, identifies the limit from the bottom up: "The ability to reduce everything to simple fundamental laws does not imply the ability to start from those laws and reconstruct the universe." Reductionism fails as a constructive programme. And George Ellis locates the equal failure from the top down: "Bottom up emergence by itself is strictly limited in terms of the complexity it can give rise to. Emergence of genuine complexity is characterised by a reversal of information flow from bottom up to top down." Something is driving the system from above. Your NB#14 note captures it as a statement of wonder: "Something is emerging (and emanating) right now that has been emerging since the beginning, hasn't stopped emerging, and will continue to the very end."

UNIVERSAL DIMENSION

This perplexity is the one that turns scientists into metaphysicians and atheists into agnostics. Heisenberg's remark, recorded in NB#7: "The first gulp from the glass of natural sciences will turn you into an atheist, but at the bottom of the glass God is waiting for you." The materialist programme, at its own frontier — quantum mechanics, consciousness studies, the fine-tuning of physical constants — keeps encountering structure that cannot be explained by the level at which it manifests. Something is setting the constraints. Your NB#6 entry names what is required: "Need the death of space-time. Need conscious agents. Need conscious arena. That is intelligible rather than chaotic." Intelligibility is not a property of matter. It is a metaphysical claim.

THE CROSSING

The crossing: you stop explaining nature in terms of nature alone and ask what the necessary preconditions of nature are. This is the metaphysical question — not what exists, but what must be the case for anything to exist with the particular structure and

direction it has. Your NB#7: 'Causality: Top-down — God (unity) causes X. Bottom-up — X causes God. Middle-out — x, y, z cause God, while God causes a, b, c.' The third option is the metaphysical threshold.

FROM THE NOTEBOOKS

“The ability to reduce everything to simple fundamental laws does not imply the ability to start from those laws and reconstruct the universe.”

— NB#5 §5.16 — Complexity, quoting Anderson 1972

“Bottom up emergence by itself is strictly limited in terms of the complexity it can give rise to. Emergence of genuine complexity is characterised by a reversal of information flow from bottom up to top down.”

— NB#9 §9.16 — George Ellis

“The first gulp from the glass of natural sciences will turn you into an atheist, but at the bottom of the glass God is waiting for you.”

— NB#7 §7.37 — Cosmology & Causation, attr. Werner Heisenberg

“Something is emerging (and emanating) right now that has been emerging since the beginning, hasn't stopped emerging, and will continue to the very end.”

— NB#14 §14.5 — Evolution + Cosmology

THE CRISIS OF THE GROUND OF BEING

If metaphysical powers and limitations are real — if causation and constraint flow from a higher order — what is the fundamental substance from which that order itself proceeds?

PERSONAL ARC

This is the final and hardest crossing. Metaphysics can tell you that top-down causation is real, that higher-level logic drives lower-level events, that mind is ‘not physical yet causally effective’ (Ellis). But it cannot tell you what the ground of the whole hierarchy is. Your NB#7 Plotinus entry states the fork with maximum clarity: “Matter foundational & mind derivative, OR, Mind foundational & matter derivative.” These are not two scientific hypotheses testable against evidence. They are two ontological commitments — and all other commitments flow downstream from which one you hold. Your NB#18 Jordan Hall entry describes the experience of arriving at this threshold as a lived collapse: ‘Sitting at the collapsing point of ethics, ontology and epistemology... collapse into each other. You turn inside out and upside down... reintegrated with reality.’

UNIVERSAL DIMENSION

This perplexity corresponds to what every major religious tradition identifies as conversion, illumination, metanoia, or enlightenment — not in the sentimental sense, but in the precise philosophical sense: a reorientation of the entire hierarchy around a new understanding of what is ultimately real. Your NB#15 note records the consequence of not making this crossing: the AFF (Affect, Frame, Function) framework collapses without an ontological base. The hierarchy floats without a foundation. Nietzsche identified what happens when the ontological answer ‘God’ is removed: ‘All moral, historical, political, biographical... interpretations should lead us directly from the superficial to the complete apprehension of the single image of reality.’ Remove the single image — remove the ontological anchor — and the levels above become unmoored. Axiology becomes postmodernism. Epistemology becomes relativism. Praxeology becomes nihilism.

THE CROSSING

The crossing: you stop treating your understanding of reality as a perspective and accept that there is a single image — one reality seen from two sides, spirit and matter, subject and object — that the entire hierarchy is an articulation of. Your NB#16 Two Views entry, citing the Russian philosopher, captures it: ‘From the side of the spirit, reality is a logical

and well-ordered structure. From the side of the inverted material mind, at first the thing exists — as something indefinite.’ Both views are real. Neither is complete alone. The ontological answer is not the victory of one side over the other, but the recognition that they are two views of one reality — and that the hierarchy you have been climbing is the structure of how that reality unfolds.

FROM THE NOTEBOOKS

“Matter foundational & mind derivative, OR, Mind foundational & matter derivative.”

— NB#7 §7.42 — Plotinus & Potential

“Sitting at the collapsing point of ethics, ontology & epistemology... collapse into each other. You turn inside out and upside down... reintegrated with reality.”

— NB#18 §18.55 — Jordan Hall

“Emanation flows from selected restraints. Monotheism — various centres of causes are unified and not opposed.”

— NB#13 §13.4 — Emanence

“From the side of the spirit, reality is a logical and well-ordered structure... From the side of the inverted material mind, at first the thing exists — as something indefinite.”

— NB#16 — Two Views: One Reality

The Developmental Arc: Personal and Universal

Your notebooks, read across ten years, trace a movement from the top of the hierarchy downward — from practical failures (Praxeology, NB#1–NB#3) through value conflicts (Axiology, NB#3–NB#6) through epistemological crisis (NB#5–NB#8) through the psychology of persons and the pathologies of the collective (NB#7–NB#9) through the metaphysics of causation and complexity (NB#9–NB#14) to the ontological threshold (NB#13, NB#16, NB#18).

This is not a smooth ascent. Each crossing was forced by a perplexity that could not be resolved from within the level that produced it. The movement is spiral, not linear — exactly as your sketch depicts. You return to earlier perplexities with the resources of higher levels, and each return is richer than the last.

For contemporary people generally, the same arc applies — but modernity has an asymmetry your notebooks diagnose with precision. The dominant intellectual culture is stuck between Praxeology and Epistemology: it produces enormous technical capability (Praxeology), but its axiological pluralism (Perplexity 2) and epistemological relativism (Perplexity 3) prevent it from descending far enough to find the ground it needs. Owen Barfield’s question, transcribed in NB#10, names the result: ‘How is it that the more able man becomes to manipulate the world to his advantage, the less he is able to perceive meaning in it?’

The answer implicit in your notebooks is: because manipulation operates at Praxeology, while meaning is generated at Ontology. The perplexities between are the path. You do not arrive at meaning by thinking harder about manipulation. You arrive by allowing each perplexity to do its work — to hold the current of ideas to a definite channel, as Dewey said — until the channel carries you to the next level.

NB#11 §11.5 records the architectural law: “Higher level solutions transcend and include lower level problems (and their solutions). Do not pursue anything that should be the side effect of another/higher pursuit.” The six perplexities are an operational definition of ‘another/higher pursuit.’