

CULTURAL DNA

Introducing a revolutionary model of the development of consciousness and human value systems.

LIFE IS EXTREMELY complex, yet we unconsciously bring to any situation our own mental background, the accumulation of our life experience in the society we grew up in: everything we have been taught - or picked up from the media - becomes our opinion, defended vigorously. We cannot understand how anyone could possibly think differently and we label those who do stupid, reactionary or trouble-makers.

We need to fully understand why people think as they do. Fifty years ago Clare W. Graves, professor of psychology at Union College New York, was so frustrated by all the conflicting theories on offer that he resolved to get to the root of what differentiates people, why they perceive the world so differently and why their reactions to physical, emotional and social challenges are so dissimilar.

Decades of research followed, in many countries and at all levels of society. The result was Spiral Dynamics, a revolutionary model of the development of consciousness and human value systems. Understanding the progressive stages through which individuals, organisations and cultures evolve provides the key to resolving major conflicts and global problems, so many of which stem from clashes between different ways of thinking.

Spiral Dynamics is well named. Spirals are a dominant universal fractal. Human DNA is perceived as spirally wound ribbons. Spirals are powerful and multidimensional, all the whorls alive at once yet with an inner intelligence that draws them into a spiral structure of life. The forces inside human spirals push individuals and societies to evolve through higher levels of complexity. Each upward turn marks the awakening of a more elaborate version of what already exists, creating a coiled string of value systems, worldviews and mindsets, each the product of its times and conditions.

According to Spiral Dynamics, human nature is not fixed and it changes as our life conditions change. Indeed, it is human nature to love solving problems and creating new ones. When our circumstances change, we have the innate capacity to develop more complex thinking to handle new problems, and we change our psychology and rules for living to adapt to the new conditions. But the old ways of thinking do not disappear; we carry them within us and call on them when necessary.

Each level of coping with human situations is based on certain values, called a vMEME (value MEME). A vMEME is like cultural DNA, a container within which our values and

beliefs form and fit, and which attracts and repels others. Each meme contains behavioural instructions that are passed from one generation to the next, a bio-psycho-social-spiritual code that underlies every aspect of our lifestyle and culture and holds it together. Every form of cultural expression is a manifestation of it - our forms of government, architecture, language, religious expression, moral views, creative arts, amusements, sports and sense of identity.

Each meme builds on the one below, and everyone has to progress through each in turn. Not everyone within a society exists at the same level. There are 'misfits' with ideas 'before their time' and others who are not equipped physically or mentally or emotionally to 'fit in'. We cannot leapfrog a stage because it doesn't appeal to us, or lift ourselves to a higher one without experiencing and learning the lessons of the ones below. Nor, significantly, can one country impose its way of life on other countries that have not lived through the stages of similar development.

These memes become progressively more complex and expansive. Spiral Dynamics recognises a central core of eight levels. Six of these are in the first tier, or old paradigm, and two are the beginning of the next tier, the new paradigm.

First Tier

[click to view explanatory PDF \(153 KB\)](#)

1 - Beige

This is the unemotional survival level of primitive humans, intelligent animals with finely developed instincts that have atrophied in us. These are the life circumstances of a newborn child, and of people with Alzheimer's disease. Anyone can regress to this level when caught up in disaster.

Spiral Dynamics sees human evolution in seven categories. They are colour coded: 1 - Purple, 2 - Red, 3 - Blue, 4 - Orange, 5 - Green, 6 - Yellow and 7 - Turquoise.

2 - Purple

As survival needs are met, new brain connections form allowing us to become aware of ourselves as distinct individuals. We recognise danger and begin to band together for safety. We notice cause and effect. The shift is made into emotional Purple, where fear becomes our primary emotional response. We know our place in the tribe, obey the chieftain, and share our food. To allay our fears, we attribute divinity to the natural phenomena over which we have no control - sun, moon, fire and water - and placate

them with offerings. Storytellers keep inherited wisdom alive. Our world is fearful and superstitious, and the lines between reality and fantasy are blurred. This is the world of the settled tribe and the toddler. The magic word 'Mama' brings what you need. Scream if she disappears. The purple stage of parental bonding is crucial to the healthy development and self-esteem of children, and the lack of it is at the root of many of the problems of ill-adjusted and uncontrollable youth.

3 - Red

When safety and security are assured, we begin to question our leaders and reach for personal autonomy. The strongest individuals battle for limited places at the top. Losers are expelled from the herd. Audacious spirits challenge the gods. New brain connections form and we have moved into Red. And the terrible twos! Instant gratification, no sense of guilt, no worries about consequences. We do or grab what makes us feel good without regard for others. Anything that goes wrong is somebody else's fault. If we are thwarted our rage is excessive, our reactions violent. Our greatest fear is losing face, being shamed. This is the world of sports teams, sales teams and street gangs. Of warlords, Vikings, James Bond villains and our deprived inner cities. The majority of the world's population lives at this level - not because they choose to do so but because that is what their life conditions demand.

All the memes have their positive and negative aspects. For example, Red is also extremely creative. It gives us the strength to fight to defend ourselves. It gets things done, inspires heroic acts, breaks with limiting tradition and opens up new pathways.

4 - Blue

The move to Blue occurs when we become desperate for two things: order to replace anarchy, and a good reason for all our suffering. The movement that arises may be political, cultural, nationalistic or religious. It provides absolute rules and laws, severe punishment for transgression, and an allotted place for everyone in the hierarchy; and it inculcates guilt. Good versus evil. Faithful versus unbelievers. Crusades and causes. We obey. We all sacrifice for the common good. There is only one right way to think or do things and the virtuous are rewarded (in this life or the next). This is the world of the Salvation Army, Billy Graham, guides and scouts. The child learns about fair and unfair, right and wrong, and the consequences of disobedience. Also that other people have rights, that actions have consequences and that it sometimes pays to defer gratification.

5 - Orange

Those who fit this orderly Newtonian world tend to be happy, healthy and stable, and there are plenty of them in our society. Others begin to question the unquestionable, seek new and better ways of doing things, or simply rebel against the constraints. "What about me?" they cry, echoing Red rebelling against Purple. We are moving into Orange, the predominant meme in Britain and the US. Orange is all about achievement, competitiveness, technology, new ways of doing things and the good life. Success is highly rewarded. We have developed the ability to keep track of multiple interests and shift attention between them. We are dressed for success, mobile, pragmatic, opportunistic, independent and in control of our own lives, but not as ruthless as Red because it doesn't pay in the long run. We stand or fall by our own efforts and talents. If we are no longer useful, we are scrapped like out-of-date technology. Hence perhaps the appeal of media that 'spill the dirt' on the successful.

6 - Green

Eventually we observe the downside of Orange: the numbers of have-nots and the disastrous effect of 'progress' on our planet. We realise that material success and possessions do not bring happiness and that there has to be more to life. We come to Green, the top of the first tier of memes. We develop our interpersonal skills, cultivate our inner child and seek a purpose in life. We make peace with ourselves and endeavour to bring peace to society by resolving inequalities. This is the world of Greenpeace, academia, public education and anti-discrimination legislation. Egalitarian and humanitarian, we campaign for the rainforests and the disadvantaged, feel guilty about things our country has done in the past, boycott multinationals who abuse Third World employees and consumers, join groups and accept their thinking to make ourselves acceptable, decide (eventually) by consensus when everyone has had their say, meditate for peace, care for each other and enthuse about the wonderful new age we are creating.

So long as our consciousness is in one of these first-tier memes, it is quite impossible to understand the thinking of any of the others. The people in our lives we can never agree with probably have their consciousness in a different meme. Red thinks Blue is repressive. Blue thinks Reds are hooligans and that Orange is pushy. Orange regards Green as loopy. Many Greens who believe themselves highly spiritual are in fact regressing to the pre-rational comfort of Purple. Worse still, Green, thinking it has all the answers, excoriates Orange, which has produced the wealth that Green generously wants to share out. Green can't see that the drive and expertise of Orange can be harnessed to resolve the problems that Green has identified. And Green communities fail for lack of Blue to keep the accounts.

Second Tier

7 - Yellow

The shift to second-tier Yellow is momentous (and only a minute percentage of the world population has made it so far). Our ability to cope with complexity becomes greater than the sum of all the earlier six stages put together. We no longer perceive the world only from the human scale. We see it from a total or universal perspective - a radically different viewpoint. We live fully, tread lightly on the Earth, treasure the magnificence of life above material possessions, rate knowledge and competence above power and status, do more in less time. In a crisis we can see the core of the problem and start to work on it without the help of a focus group. We can see the whole picture, how each meme builds on the preceding one and how everything fits together in one enormous never-ending spiral of life. We can see what each individual, organisation or country needs to help it evolve to the next level. Red needs to be channelled, not repressed. Blue structures need to be restored. In Yellow we are seized with the urgency of fostering the evolution of human consciousness so that solutions can be found before the cumulative effects of action by first-tier memes destroy the Earth and humanity with it.

8 - Turquoise

Beyond Yellow is Turquoise, which is about global synthesis and renewal, then Coral, the ninth level, which is just beginning to appear. According to Dr Graves, this second tier also consists of six levels of complexity and there are further tiers beyond that our brains cannot yet begin to envisage.

SPIRAL DYNAMICS CONNECTS everything to everything else. We can use it to observe our own thinking and that of others, and it provides methods for building more functional families, organisations and social systems. It enables us to see globalisation through an entirely new lens, it is being used in the corporate world and local communities to assess underlying value systems, and it is being applied in youth development projects around the world. It provides invaluable tools for leaders, and probably saved South Africa from civil war by replacing racial stereotypes with an understanding of the different value systems involved.

Can we individually aspire to reach a higher level? There are no methods that guarantee that anyone will change their thinking! However transformation is more likely if we meditate and if we take an integral approach, improving the health of all aspects of our being: physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. Reading integral books like Ken

Wilber's, or just thinking about and observing how the memes manifest will help to develop our brain's capacity to handle more complexity.

It is important to remember that although our psychology and rules for living adapt to new living conditions, the older systems stay with us. We may devote the weekend to green projects, function well in a high-powered orange job, and still drive like a red road-hog, impose strict blue rules on our staff, carry a purple lucky charm and wallow helplessly beige in bed with flu.

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