

A brief history of Spiral Dynamics

For nearly two decades, the theory of Spiral Dynamics has been used to dynamically model human evolution and information systems. In that time, however, many different versions and applications of the model have emerged. This article will diachronically trace the history of Spiral Dynamics, from the foundational theory of Clare Graves to its initial introduction by Don Beck and Chris Cowan and subsequent adaptation by Ken Wilber. A brief exploration of the various camps and their competing interpretations of Spiral Dynamics will permit some critical analysis of the model itself.

THE GOAL OF THIS ARTICLE is to provide a historical overview of Spiral Dynamics, including its background and history, its creators and their differences, and the ways in which it has been and is being applied in the world. To do this coherently first requires an explanation of what Spiral Dynamics actually is – in brief, a system that describes conceptual models that humans use to explain the world around them – as well as attention to the various forms that have emerged over the course of its evolution.¹ Furthermore, as Spiral Dynamics is not without its critics, the article discusses several major objections that have been raised.

1 Given the differing interpretations of Spiral Dynamics, in some cases it seemed best to let the authors speak for themselves. Sources included their books, articles on the subject, and interviews that are publicly available on the internet. My goal is to present a critical and neutral, if cursory, appraisal of the system. I have not personally received teaching or training in Spiral Dynamics.

Origins of the system

In 1952, Clare W. Graves (1914–1986)² began work on something he called the ‘Theory of Levels of Human Existence’. Its goal was to explain why people’s reactions and motivations are so varied. Fourteen years later, he published his first version of a seven-level thinking model. With the continued collection of data over the next decade, there were significant changes in this model. By 1973, Graves was conducting mind–brain research in terms of mental development shaped by neurological structures and networks, chemical agents and external phenomena.

In many ways, Graves’ real contribution was his focus on the collection of data and its application; his system was not merely theoretical, but based on over thirty years of close observation of subjects. The data collection methods that Graves used might be viewed as quite controversial by today’s standards. For instance, he used his students as test subjects, but without telling them that he was doing so, and he spied on them through two-way mirrors and tape-recorded them without their knowledge (Rice 2014). Ethical considerations notwithstanding, Graves (1974) finally published an eight-level system that consisted of two tiers; six levels in the first tier (subsistence) and two in the second (being):³

- 2 Archives of Graves’ work can be found at a website dedicated to his life and research (Graves 2001–5).
- 3 Because the definitions given here express the codes of what will later become Spiral Dynamics, I do not repeat them again later. Although very basic, they should also provide a sufficient foundation for the reader to understand what the different levels represent. See also figure 2. For an in-depth presentation, see Beck and Cowan 1996.

1. Automatic (A-N): motivated by survival and physical imperatives;
2. Tribalistic (B-O): seeking social stability, use of totems and taboos;
3. Egocentric (C-P): individualism and the use of force to acquire objects of desire;
4. Sainly (D-Q): recognition of the value of rules, marked by focus on religion;
5. Materialistic (E-R): authoritarianism, dogma is trumped by pragmatism;
6. Personalistic (F-S): concern with belonging, concern for others;
7. Cognitive Existence (G-T): on threshold of true humanity;
8. Experientialist Existence (H-U): beyond animal needs, drive to make life stable.

To identify these levels, Graves used a lettering system with two helices – Helix 1 identifying ‘life conditions’ and Helix 2 denoting ‘awakened capacities in the mind’ – respectively represented by the ranges A-H and N-U. These form the basis of the eight-level system of Spiral Dynamics. More than forty years later, this letter system continues to be used, with people reporting that it helps keep in perspective the relationship between people and the culture in which they are embedded.

Just as Graves’ work fundamentally informed what would later be known as Spiral Dynamics, he himself was influenced by others in the field of transpersonal psychology. In particular, one can find parallels between his system and Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, which uses a five-level pyramidal structure to map the evolution of people’s needs: physiological ones, safety, love and belonging, esteem and, finally, self-actualization (later replaced by ‘transcendence’). In Maslow’s system, people are continually evolving, moving from one level to the next. Graves and Maslow’s relationship was not so simple, however. In true academic fashion, they strongly debated the merits of Graves’ system; Maslow reportedly argued for eight years before adopting it himself. The bone of contention – the nature of the ‘ultimate state’ of being – was actually very significant in terms of the future form of Spiral Dynamics. Maslow was deeply committed to the idea of humans developing in an ‘open’ way with no limitations. In his words, it was a matter of ‘non-interfering receptive perception versus active controlling perception, enlarging consciousness, the ineffable experience’ (Maslow 1962,

cited in Graves 1970: 155).

What did ‘open’ mean in practice? Observations of people who had made it to the highest level in Maslow’s system (self-actualization) suggested that that state may not be the pinnacle of development after all. In other words, further attainments and yet higher modes of functioning remained. For this reason, it was important to be able to introduce new categories (Graves 1971). Graves integrated this approach in his system, not only formulating the eighth level of H-U (called Turquoise in Spiral Dynamics) as a further expansion of consciousness and reflecting the ability of humans to attain new coping mechanisms by means of new thinking systems, but also proposing the potential existence of even another level (I-V, or Coral) that represents a third tier of development. This last level was purely theoretical when Graves’ students Don Beck and Chris Cowan wrote the first seminal book on Spiral Dynamics in 1996, and that ‘mystery meme’ still remains mysterious today. Purportedly, very few people appear to be demonstrating the attainment of such an evolutionary state, making it difficult to describe even what characteristics it may possess. An important point, however, had been made: the system needed to be open – like a spiral.

Spirals and rainbows

In *Spiral Dynamics: Mastering Values, Leadership and Change* (1996), Beck and Cowan use a number of wonderful examples grounded in nature – fractals and seashells, ribbons of DNA and galaxies – to explain why they named their system after a spiral: ‘Behold the eloquence of the spiral. Consider the internal integrity, the elegant architecture.’ And, ‘Spirals are alive, magical, powerful, and multi-dimensional’ (Beck and Cowan 1996: 26). Spirals can be said to reflect the nature of thought, sometimes returning to the same place but eventually progressing. Being ‘expansive, open-ended, continuous, and dynamic’, the spiral is a model that both visually and functionally represents the evolutionary development of consciousness.

It is likely that Graves himself lent inspiration to the name Spiral Dynamics. This is suggested by his own description of the nature of his work:

The psychology of the mature human being is an unfolding, emergent, oscillating spiraling

process marked by progressive subordination of older, lower-order behavior systems to newer, higher-order systems as an individual's existential problems change. (Beck and Cowan 1996: 28; Wilber 2000: 5)

Perhaps more important than the person who gave the name, however, is the way in which the system was interpreted to also represent the evolutionary development of groups. Graves' work was extended beyond the individual to the collective, resulting in a much more rich interpretation of the spiral model and a quantum leap in its potential applications.

In this way, Don Beck's description of the spiral would build on that of his mentor:

A spiral vortex best depicts the emergence of human systems, or memes, as they evolve through levels of increasing complexity. Each upward turn of the spiral marks the awakening of a more elaborate version on top of what already exists, with each meme a product of its times and conditions. And these memes form spirals of increasing complexity that exist within a person, a family, an organization, a culture, or a society. (Beck 2002: 9)

The use of the term 'meme' (Dawkins 1976, Csikszentmihalyi 1993) was a conscious decision here, evoking the scientific language of evolution and the cultural language of information transfer. To accurately convey Graves' emphasis on values, that word was abbreviated in the Spiral Dynamics system and appended to make 'VMEME', defined as 'the magnetic force which binds memes and other kinds of ideas in cohesive packages of thought'; extended further, VMEMEs 'structure the thinking, value systems, political forms, and world views of entire civilizations' (Beck and Cowan 1996: 30). In this way, Beck and Cowan mapped their grand theory of VMEMEs directly onto Graves' theory of levels of human existence, following his eight-level model of evolution. But they chose not to represent the different VMEMEs with numbers. From the very beginning, they were cautious about creating a hierarchical structure in which 'higher' automatically meant 'better'. Instead they used colours.

Over the course of its history, the face of Spiral Dynamics – that is to say, its colour scheme – has changed a number of times, from black-and-white to

different colours to those of the rainbow. While each such change has had its own logic, they have not been without controversy.

During the earliest stage of the theory, the different levels of development did not have any colours at all. Colours were supposedly first introduced when Chris Cowan was making slides to be used as teaching materials. He claims that colours were merely a design element, being better than black-and-white to illustrate the different levels.⁴ Accordingly, he says, they had no metaphysical significance, nor were they based on the colours of the Indian seven-chakra system.⁵ In fact, a conscious choice was made to not make them match the spectrum of the rainbow.⁶

But that is exactly what Ken Wilber would later do. Integrating the eight VMEME levels as 'altitude markers' of 'waves of consciousness', he specifically followed the 'natural' colour progression of the chakras, which resembles that of a rainbow (Wilber 2006a: 66).⁷

Such a radical change of palette did not go unchallenged, and it serves well to illustrate the types of contention that were introduced as Spiral Dynamics evolved. For instance, Cowan was very critical of the move; 'Because Wilber tries to apply but doesn't actually understand Gravesian theory, he confuses the levels/colors like a novice. He doesn't know Green from Orange or Yellow' (Spiral Dynamics 2001–12b). The issue was not just about colours, of course. The colour scheme underlines a much deeper issue that

- 4 As will be seen below, this statement contradicts Cowan's adherence to the original colour scheme as having great significance.
- 5 The assignment of colours to the *chakras* is sometimes attributed to Western influences. However, while they certainly feature prominently in New Age interpretations of the subtle energy body, their original appearance dates back to Buddhist and Hindu tantric texts in India. Cf. *Guhyasamāja-tantra*, *Kālacakra-tantra*, and *Cakrasaṃvara-tantra*, which are more than a thousand years old; see also the sixteenth-century *Sat-cakra-nirūpana* and the *Pādukā-pañcaka*, translated by Sir John Woodroffe (pseud. Arthur Avalon) as *The Serpent Power* in 1919.
- 6 See Cowan and Todorovic's NVC Consulting website Spiral Dynamics (2001–12c). For the sake of convenience, quotes taken from that site are attributed to Cowan himself.
- 7 It is also worth noting the respective value differences of the *chakras*: 1) food, sex, power; 2) heart and communication; and 3) psychic and spiritual.

Cowan had with Wilber's synthesis. In his view, by picking and choosing different elements, changing names and focusing on 'types and categories,' Wilber loses sight of the essence of Graves' primary quest: 'the engine that drives human emergence – why we are and what leads us to change to be something different' (Spiral Dynamics 2001–12d). The degree to which this is true is a matter of debate – and to be sure, it is extensively debated online – but what is clear is Cowan's attachment to typologies and being faithful to Graves.

Cowan further criticizes changes to the original colour scheme as 'paintballing,' ignoring the thought that went into it. This does appear to be the case. The colours used in Spiral Dynamics are much more than just a design element. They alternate between 'deny-the-self' cool (even numbers) and 'express-the-self' warm (odd numbers), and there is a logic to the colours themselves (e.g. Beige represents the savannah where early survival-focused hominids lived, Red evokes the colour of blood and violence, Turquoise is the colour of Earth seen in a holistic way from space). For his part, Beck continues to use the original colour scheme. He also refers to the alternation in terms of warm (I/ME/MINE) and cool (WE).

Differing interpretations

As already seen above, Spiral Dynamics would end up taking different forms. Generally speaking, one can speak of three dominant interpretations, all of which continue to be propagated today, based on the teachings of the two followers of Graves and Wilber.

Although the work of Clare Graves was also picked up by others (e.g. Hughes and Flowers 1978, Lynch and Kordis 1989), it was developed and promoted the most by a pair of social scientists: Don E. Beck and his graduate student, Christopher Cowan. They first met Graves in 1975, and their co-operation continued until his death in 1986. Beck and Cowan worked on the theory for another decade before publishing *Spiral Dynamics: Mastering Values, Leadership and Change* (1996). It

was during this twenty-year period that they developed the colour scheme and shifted to VMEME terminology, and although their mentor was not with them the entire time, they had his blessing to make such changes. As Beck notes, 'While Graves supplied the original blueprint, he cautioned me on numerous occasions to continue the research, to branch out far beyond what he could imagine, and pursue "the never-ending quest"' (see Beck's website, Spiral Dynamics Integral).

For Beck and Cowan, the research quest meant applying the theory on the ground. Between 1981 and 1988, Beck made more than sixty trips to South Africa. He and Cowan are credited with helping Nelson Mandela to change the consciousness of South Africa – bringing about a peaceful end to apartheid – when much of the nation's population was bent on revenge against its former oppressors. As seen in the movie *Invictus* (2009), Mandela devised the strategy of using a rugby game to transcend racial and class

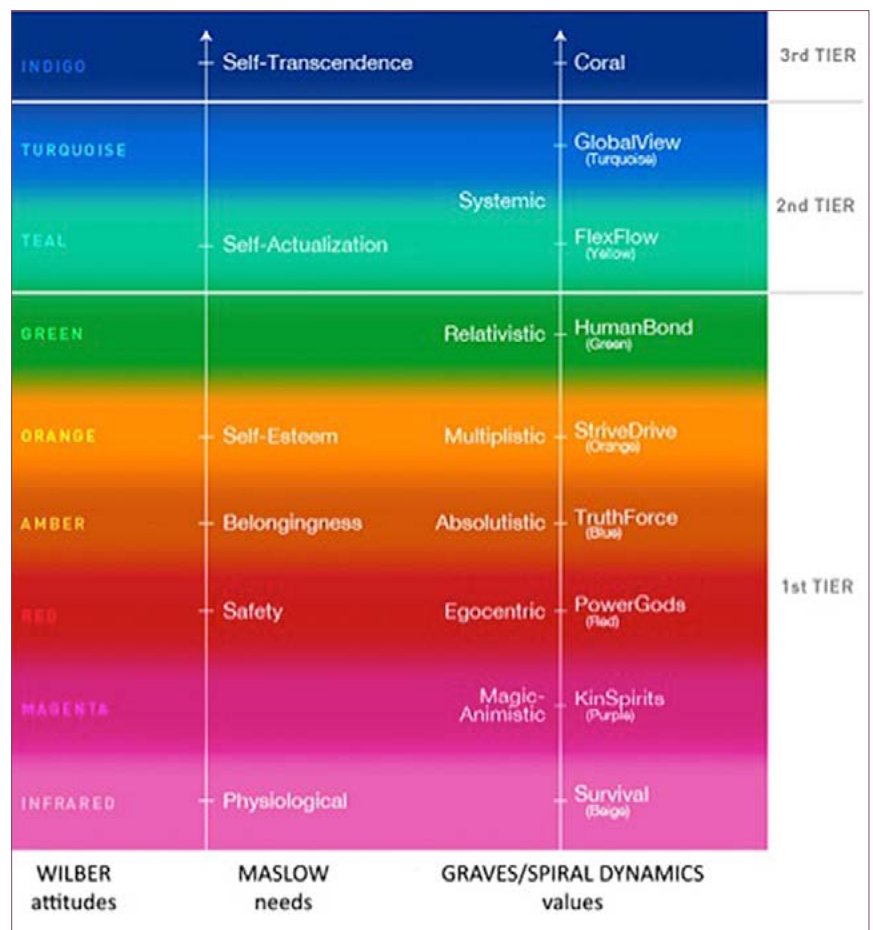


Figure 1. Levels and colour schemes. Modified with permission from PiALOGUE <http://pialogue.info/definitions/Integral_Altitude.php>.

identification and unify the country. In actuality, this was Spiral Dynamics being used, not to alter peoples' value systems, but to highlight and bring into focus a value system that was already there.

In 1999, Beck and Cowan ended their professional relationship. The bitterly contested issue between them was apparently Cowan's decision to register and trademark the Spiral Dynamics name, while Beck wanted to keep it open for academic use. A further point of conflict was Chris Cowan's decision to join forces with Natasha Todorovic (formerly a stock market trader, with a degree in business administration) to create NVC Consulting, which made further collaboration difficult.⁸ Cowan's new partnership led to an edited book of Graves' papers, a welcome contribution given the vast body of material that Graves produced but never published (Cowan and Todorovic 2005), and until July 2015, Cowan and Todorovic offered training in Spiral Dynamics® at their Santa Barbara headquarters and around the world.⁹ As a result of this work and further study of Graves' writings, Cowan found 'glaring errors in previous renditions of [the book] Spiral Dynamics which we are trying to address' (Spiral Dynamics 2001–12d). After his recent death, however, the current status of this project remains in question. Yet it is important to note that from Cowan's perspective, there is not ultimately such a divide between Graves' theories and Spiral Dynamics; some of the terminology may have changed, but the core remains the same. By thus positioning himself in relation to the Graves' canon, Cowan was able to level a critique against heterodox interpretations.

Treating the system more diachronically, Don Beck divides the development of Spiral Dynamics into three phases: 1) Graves technology (1975–95);

8 Personal communication with Don Beck (interview via Skype, 29.7.2015). It is worth remarking here that the main developers of Spiral Dynamics were all white males until this point. A discussion of gender in relation to Spiral Dynamics, both historically and in relation to the system itself, is unfortunately outside the scope of this article, but represents an important area for future research.

9 I wrote to Christopher Cowan in June 2015 for the purpose of this article. I received no reply, but in August I received an email from his partner Natasha Todorovic, wherein she informed me that he had tragically just passed away. I also wrote to Ken Wilber through his publisher and his websites, but received no reply.

2) Spiral Dynamics proper (1996–2001), including a relatively brief period after his split with Cowan; and 3) Spiral Dynamics integral, or SDi (2002–).¹⁰ In creating this new iteration, he cited the influence of Ichak Adizes and John Peterson. Most importantly, he was drawn to the work of Ken Wilber, whose *A Theory of Everything* (2000) presented an eight-level system with four quadrants (4Q/8L).

In a statement announcing their partnership, Beck showed clear appreciation of what Wilber's integrative work could bring to Spiral Dynamics. In particular, he cited the ability of the All Quadrants/All Levels/All Lines (AQAL) model to 'further extend the functionality of Spiral Dynamics on personal, organizational, and societal levels.' The two systems share a quantitative systems thinking approach with an emphasis on openness and evolution, and in this sense they were ideally suited to complement one another. Beck was also appreciative of the way in which 'this relationship with Ken and his vast following has created a quantum leap of interest in Clare W. Graves and Spiral Dynamics and, more than any other influence, has projected this conceptual system onto the global screen' (Integral World nd). Such exposure had financial benefits, to be sure, but connecting with Wilber's wider network also meant potential synergy with other thinkers and meetings with global power brokers: the White House, leaders in Congress, and 10 Downing Street.

It did not take long for tensions to arise, however. The first signs of disagreement between Beck and Wilber already appeared in 2002. As Beck stated in 2008, 'While I did some work with Wilber, that all began to wane six years ago because of his constant distortion of the Spiral Dynamics/Gravesian model'. A further example of the differing worldviews of Beck and Wilber is found in the former's interest in continued scientific research of Graves' theory, including fMRI studies.¹¹ Beck notes that this was a clear point of divergence between him and Wilber: 'My friend Ken wouldn't even talk to me about it because he had such adversity to anything that is not spirit based' (Beck 2008).

10 See Frank Visser's extensive website dedicated to Integral theory, Integral World nd.

11 For a detailed study of fMRI on Graves' value theory (that subjects react more swiftly to stimulus words in alignment with their worldview than those that are not), see Caspers *et al.* 2011.

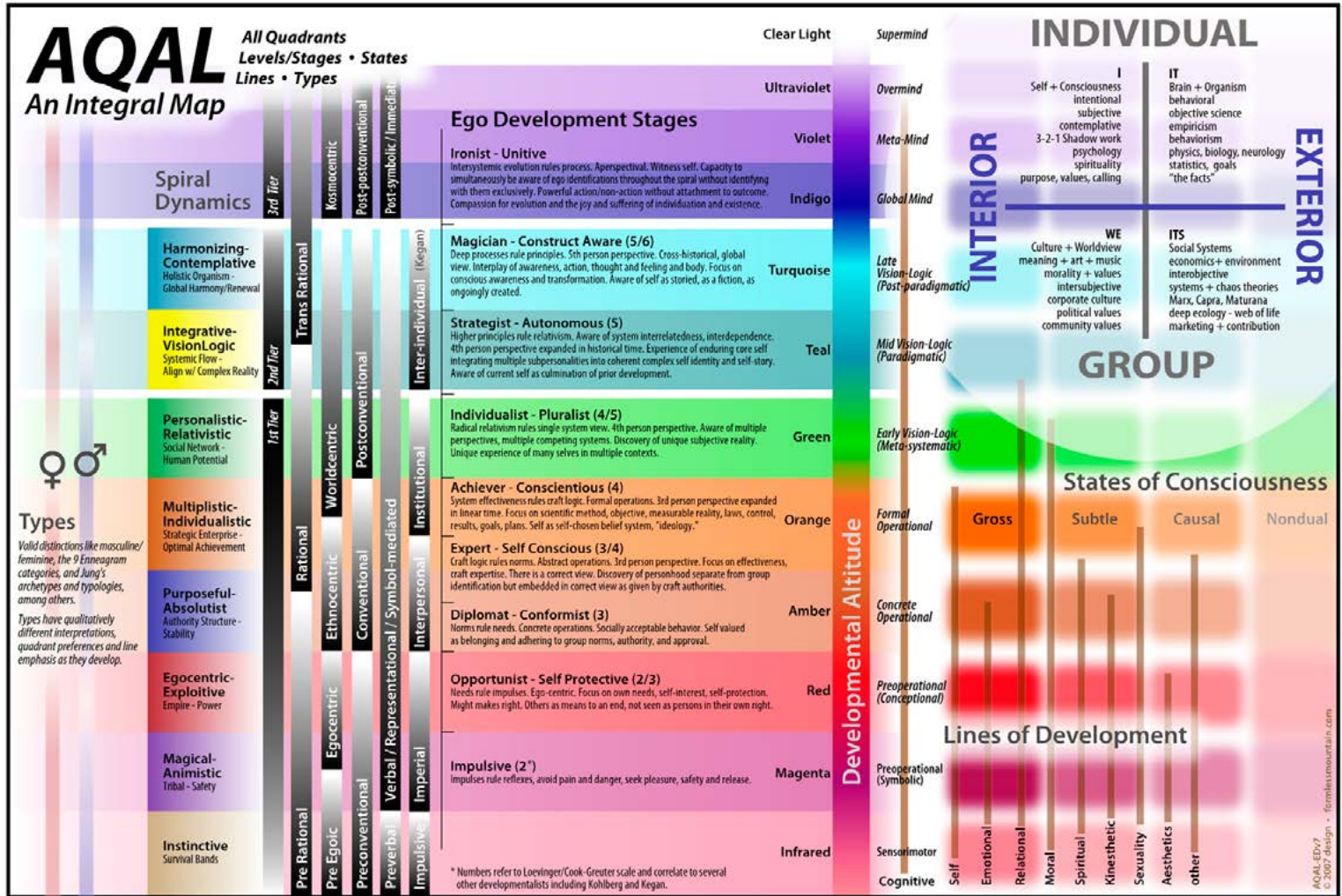


Figure 2. SD and the AQAL Model. Formless Mountain <<http://www.formlessmountain.com/aqal.htm>>.

The two were now on clearly separate paths: Beck founded the Center for Human Emergence in 2004 and Wilber established the Integral Spiritual Center in 2005.¹² They both continued to teach Spiral Dynamics in relation to Integral Theory, but in different ways. Wilber's *Integral Spirituality* (2006) simultaneously redefined and marginalized Spiral Dynamics while also outlining its limitations for spiritual application:

Here's the point: you can sit on your meditation cushion for decades, and you will NEVER see anything resembling the stages of Spiral Dynamics. And you can study Spiral Dynamics till the cows come home, and you will never have a satori. And the integral point is, if you

12 Wilber would have much greater commercial success, but he has never provided compensation for his use of Spiral Dynamics. Beck confesses some resentment over what he sees as Wilber's exploitation of the system. Personal communication with Don Beck (interview via Skype, 29.7.2015).

don't include both, you will likely never understand human beings or their relation to Reality, divine or otherwise. (Wilber 2006a: 38)

The relationship of Wilber's integral/external and internal/social four-quadrant model to Spiral Dynamics is a tricky one. For Wilber, Graves' levels belong in the lower-left 'WE' quadrant (cultural development) and correlates appear in the upper-left 'I' quadrant (psychological development); Integral Theory by and large integrates – or assimilates – Spiral Dynamics within these two.

This divergence of interpretations can serve to illustrate an important difference in approaches to transformation: 'inner-directed' (more focused on the individual) versus 'outer-directed' (more socially focused). Wilber's work clearly falls into the former category. This is evidenced, for example, by his psychological and spiritual attention to consciousness (and interest in Eastern religious traditions), if not by his use of first-person pronouns to define the quadrants in his model. Although personal

transformation is included in Beck's presentation of Spiral Dynamics, his model is more interested in social structures and cultural values.¹³

Cowan completely rejects this positioning on the basis of Graves' theory actually 'integrating' them all. Given the distance between his camp and that of Wilber, this type of contest (i.e. whose level of 'integration' is greater) and functional disconnect is not surprising. Cowan is not a fan of Wilber's interpretation of Spiral Dynamics in the first place. Indeed, he states that his criticism of Wilber is primarily based on what he perceives to be a misrepresentation of that system, such that followers 'have been led down a rabbit trail into a labyrinth of all quadrant, all level nonsense. For the people who really know the Gravesian theory, reading it is a cringe a minute' (Spiral Dynamics 2001–12d).

Beck's response is very different – and, well, integrative. Even years after his self-declared distancing from Wilber, he still sees the value of Spiral Dynamics and Integral Theory being used together. He is still committed to SDi. Positioning remains an issue, but in this case a logical argument is made for why the spiral should occupy the centre of the quadrants of the AQAL model instead of being partitioned inside them. According to Beck (2012), having the spiral span the four boxes helps to remove the concept that they are self-contained entities, and it shows the movement taking place between them. After all, the spiral is not static, but dynamic.

Wilber's response to all this has been to belittle Spiral Dynamics and its creators. In his infamous 'June 8 rant' in 2006, he would state 'I personally love SD as an intro model (seriously), and we will definitely continue to use it...'. This is followed by an *ad hominem* attack on both Cowan and Beck: 'And what do you make of the fact that the two guys who developed SD, nobody really wants to work with?—and in fact, they even refuse to work with each other, as if to put an exclamation mark on the point' (Wilber 2006b).

This remark does raise an important question. Given the emphasis on personal evolution in Spiral

Dynamics (as well as Integral Theory), why so much contention? The overall impression one gets is of an extremely intelligent set of people sharing the motivation to advance the world yet still enmeshed in very human (and not 'second-tier' human) dynamics. While the system is described as being very applicable to external situations and patterns in the world, how is the outside observer to measure its success in terms of personal growth?

A spiral soteriology?

There has been integration of Spiral Dynamics and religious systems, despite the fact that Spiral Dynamics does not in and of itself consist of a religious or spiritual dimension, other than as a tool to describe various belief systems in relation to the VMEMEs. Grounded in empirical research, it is not a belief system in and of itself. From the outset, Clare Graves did not appear to have a spiritual agenda. As noted by Cowan:

Dr. Graves probably couldn't have meditated himself out of a paper bag and was not especially interested in the esoteric consciousness studies that fascinated many of his humanistic and transpersonal-oriented peers. His curiosity was more as to why they were so fascinated, how they thought about psychological health and the mature human being, and whom transpersonal approaches might help and why. (Spiral Dynamics 2001–12d)

Nor did Beck and Cowan add a religious layer when they adopted Graves' model. If anything, Cowan's sense is that doing this – using Spiral Dynamics as a 'spiritual ladder' or 'grading scale to assess apostles and sort the elect and deserving from the rest of the herd' – is cultic and should be avoided (Spiral Dynamics 2001–12e). It is not clear whom Cowan is talking about, but cases do exist. For example, as one Christian author writes: 'By virtue of the fact that you reading this book, you are somewhere on the upper levels of the spiral' (Meier 2009: 4).

Over time, Spiral Dynamics would come to inform a systemic rethinking of Christian mission and community. Over the years, dialogue has been achieved, and to some extent this process has been facilitated by the founders. Although Chris Cowan was an atheist and his attitude primarily scientific, he saw value

13 The distinction between these approaches to transformation is helpfully presented by Ronnie Lessem in his presentation of a new modality that combines the two, which he calls Integral Dynamics. Lessem's system also addresses the linear nature of Spiral Dynamics. See Lessem *et al.* 2013: 8–9.

in the way that Spiral Dynamics outlines how religious matters tend to be approached by people at different levels. Ken Wilber has shown interest in engaging with Christian leaders on the topic of Integral Life, which includes Spiral Dynamics. Don Beck has been much more active with faith organizations (as demonstrated by his willingness to give workshops at the progressive Unity Church of Dallas, Texas or the Northbrae Community Church in Berkeley, California).¹⁴

Despite his academic background in theology and Koine Greek, Beck's interest in religion is not about religion *per se*, but 'memetics'; by this he means the value systems that undergird religion and are expressed in rituals. In his view, Christianity is in need of resuscitation, and Spiral Dynamics can help illuminate the crisis in which value systems are being lost in the modern world. To use an example, he finds that children today are not being presented with challenges of sacrifice and discipline (aspects of Purple and Blue). Lacking the neurological equipment at that age to make subtle nuances of judgment about values and ethics, until they learn the code of obedience at the Blue level, there's no chance that they will understand the globally integrated level of Turquoise. In Beck's view, the recruitment of people into fundamentalist organizations (e.g. ISIS) reflects the type of vacuum that arises when people's needs at the level that they are at are not being met.¹⁵

To further contextualize the way in which Spiral Dynamics can be applied to spiritual modalities, it is important to note that it differentiates between the things that people think about and how they think about them. The former is comprised of objects of analysis, while the latter involves the mode of analysis itself. Thus, Spiral Dynamics locates atheism and theism on the Blue (D-Q) level, both of which include 'true believers' whose worldviews are absolutist. Religious expression is exhibited in other modalities as well. For example, aggressive proselytization can be seen as a Red attitude, in contrast to Green's ecumenical pluralism.

As Christianity today faces multiple crises of identity and attrition, and contemporary Christians

struggle to make sense of their faith, some churches have also turned to Spiral Dynamics (e.g. Integral Christianity, The Emerging Church, Seventh-day Adventism). The system is being used to provide people with a broader perspective of Christianity and, more specifically, their relationship with it. The system can even be used as a lens to be turned on God – or constructed belief systems vis-à-vis different types of divine presence and agency. As an example, one can point to Bruce Sanguin's readings of Christ through the lens of Spiral Dynamics: the traditional Christ as Scapegoat (Blue); the modern demythologized Christ, as seen in the work of Bultmann, or Christ the successful leader (Orange); the egalitarian or post-modern Christ (Green); the cosmic Christ as the 'pattern that connects' (Yellow), as seen by Teilhard de Chardin; or the mystical Christ (Turquoise), in which the entire universe is perceived as the body of God. This is not a theological overview as much as a comparative reappraisal of Christian teleology, which has potential consequences for Christians and the nature of their faith. This becomes apparent in Sanguin's own story of transformed understanding: 'When I was introduced to the map of Spiral Dynamics, I began to see the Christ as metaphor for the spiritual, evolutionary impulse itself, which is expressed differently at different stages of development' (Sanguin 2014). If it sounds like Sanguin has forsaken a traditional form of faith for Spiral Dynamics, it's because he has. On his personal website, he announces that after 27 years he has resigned from congregational ministry (Sanguin nd).

Critiques of Spiral Dynamics

Criticism has been directed at Spiral Dynamics on a number of levels. Some criticisms are largely academic, but much more serious allegations have been brought as well. Is it a cult? A money-making scheme? A hierarchical system designed to control the masses?

One charge brought against Spiral Dynamics is that its language lends itself to people not being aware of the context in which it arose and operates, at least not in a way that influences are explicitly represented on its map. Are other meanings implicit in the mapping? More specifically, does Spiral Dynamics support outdated colonialist attitudes, such as associating the primitive Beige level with the savannah (i.e. Africa)? Beck's past work in South Africa provides a potentially rich case study to examine these questions.

14 This relationship has matured to the point that all of the ministers in its Kansas City seminary are trained in Spiral Dynamics.

15 Personal communication with Don Beck (interview via Skype, 29.7.2015).

His current work on increased racial polarization in the United States, however, can be seen as a reflection of his deep concern for issues of race and power. Ultimately, he argues, ‘Race is not about race – it’s about value systems.’¹⁶

In terms of those value systems, it is impossible to deny that Spiral Dynamics uses a hierarchical model, yet it is critical to stress here that Spiral Dynamics is not just about ascending the ‘ladder’. Each level has a shadow aspect – or what Wilber calls a ‘mean’ side – of unhealthy manifestations, and each level has its own set of challenges to be worked through. Spiral Dynamics attempts to tackle the issue of hierarchization by locating it as a human tendency, both overall and arising within the system itself. For example, one of the dangers explained by teachers of Spiral Dynamics is the tendency of people to climb to the Green level and then think that they are above or ‘beyond’ others. A related problem at this level is reductionism that seeks to deny hierarchies! When power structures and educational systems are viewed through the lens of Spiral Dynamics, different types of discourse are highlighted in terms of their respective values. The keywords associated with Green – pluralism, multiculturalism, etc. – are used by a number of academic disciplines (e.g. cultural studies) to lump things together. Wilber problematizes this as the ‘Mean Green Meme’ of the cultural elite (Wilber 2003, 2006a), but he is careful to stress that there are also healthy aspects of Green (e.g. the civil rights movement, feminism, environmentalism). In short, there are two aspects to every level, healthy and unhealthy, and a method of hermeneutical self-reflexivity is used in order to identify where the latter may be expressed in the system itself.

From the point of view of comparative philosophy, the epistemology of the system may be called into question. As Bonnitta Roy notes, Spiral Dynamics and Wilber’s structural view (e.g. AQAL framework) use Western modalities of thought that can ignore process-oriented understandings of reality.¹⁷ In brief, the danger involves trying to impose rigid categories and language on a dynamic state of affairs. Beck responds to Roy by inviting her to examine how Spiral Dynamics works in practice (for example, in

Palestine) (Beams and Struts 2011). Whether or not this criticism is valid deserves further discussion (especially considering Graves’ express intent for the system to be open and the emphasis of his successors on its ‘dynamic’ nature), but it requires an understanding of Roy’s process model as informed by Herbert Guenther’s writings on the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of Dzogchen (*rdzogs chen*). Such a discussion will have to wait.

The writings of the researcher Michel Bauwens include some of the most scathing criticisms of Spiral Dynamics to date, despite the fact that they are almost a decade old. Bauwens begins by declaring that Spiral Dynamics is being used as a cloak for ‘neoconservative interpretations of reality’, quoting Beck as having praised George W. Bush as a ‘great leader’ (Bauwens 2005). In fact, the involvement of Wilber and Beck with politicians extended to Bill Clinton and Al Gore as well as Bush (and his brother Jeb) (see Wilber 2000: 83).¹⁸ Furthermore, in Spiral Dynamics, conservative ideology is identified with Blue values and liberalism with higher values; on this basis alone, it is difficult to believe that Beck or Wilber would be championing the former.

Yet Wilber has expressed dismay with liberalism, finding it internally flawed and self-contradictory for its denial of the stages which led to it. For this reason, he has seen American politics to be ‘a sick version of a higher level versus a healthy version of a lower level’ (Wilber 2000: 88). It is important to note, however, that he is not satisfied with that state. Ideally there would be a healthy version of the higher level. But Bauwens continues:

More generally, SD operates as a business, aggressively defends its sole use of terminology ... ; and is marketed to business and political leaders as a means of social manipulation. Now imagine the world vision of someone using SD in that fashion: he moves through the world as a superior being, seeing poor sobs [*sic*] around him, in need of enlightenment, knowing that only a tiny few have the potential to become like him. Just like Ken Wilber, who has decided a priori that the Hindu-Buddhist Advaitic

16 Personal communication with Don Beck (interview via Skype, 29.7.2015).

17 For a full treatment of this topic, see Roy 2006: 118–52.

18 A discussion of political orientations and Integral Politics extends far beyond the scope of this present paper. However, for Ken Wilber’s discussion of a trans-partisan ‘Third-Way’. See DeVos 2008.

non-self doctrine is the final word in spiritual evolution, this making interreligious dialogue in fact impossible, quite a few Beck supporters hold similar but more secular views about the a priori superiority of their form of being in the world. Unbelievably (at least to me), I have even encountered SD-influenced people, who maintain that the poor people in the Third World 'have a right to experience hunger and poverty', as it corresponds to their developmental level! (Bauwens 2005)

To take these points one by one, it is certainly true that Spiral Dynamics does have a business model. People engage in training sessions, they are certified, and they pay for this. This is true for both Spiral Dynamics® and SDi, as well as enrolment in Wilber's Integral programme. It may be noted, of course, that many types of specialized training involve financial investment and trust.¹⁹

The 'superior being' critique again raises the issue of hierarchization. After all, it is perhaps impossible for values not to be attached to a system. Recognition that large segments of the world's population are still at relatively rudimentary levels of evolution – to put it in terms of Spiral Dynamics, moving from Purple, Red or Blue into Orange – is described as being necessary in order to help facilitate that evolution. From the perspective of psychology, working with people where they are at does not automatically entail an attitude of superiority. The goal of Spiral Dynamics is, in Wilber's words, to 'transcend and include'. The fact that lower VMEMEs do not understand and may be in conflict with higher VMEMEs does not mean that the higher ones are antagonistic towards the lower ones. And while it is always possible that a Spiral Wizard dictator could try to use Spiral Dynamics to rule the world, Graves' initial work suggests that those who have evolved to have tier-two (Yellow and Turquoise) values have only increased compassion and concern for those in the first tier.²⁰

19 These training programmes support a broader application of Spiral Dynamics in the world, from HR and executive management training to organizational system reform to nation building.

20 If one pauses briefly to see what activities the founders of Spiral Dynamics are engaged in, there is an impressive list: Beck and Cowan worked extensively in Africa (as mentioned above), in 2007 Beck spoke at the United Nations on the topic of its Global

Furthermore, one reads again and again that the gradation of the spiral is only part of the process. Cowan clarifies that 'this is not a hierarchy of wisdom or decency or even intelligences, much less happiness and worth' (Spiral Dynamics 2001–12a). When goals are provided for the different eight VMEMEs, they are horizontal within each level; rather than asking people to evolve out of where they are located, practical solutions involve growth in that very level.²¹ For example, those with a predominantly Purple VMEME should aspire to protect tribal ways and rituals, honour traditional festivals and ceremonies, preserve the sacred places, protect the bloodline and propitiate the spirits of the ancestors by preserving the ways of the folk (Beck and Linscott 1991: 14). When Beck uses such language as 'cleaning up the spiral', not even remotely does it mean a cleansing of people at different levels of development (akin to racial cleansing) or even dispensing with those levels. Rather, it refers to applying focus to them and shifting their expression from negative to positive aspects in order to promote movement and evolution. A concrete example can be seen in terms of demagoguery (Red or Red/Blue), which prevents people from moving to new levels, versus Red's concern with freedom and being able to explore. How is the impasse of the negative expression to be broken? Beck explains that it is the task of Yellow – being integrative – to help facilitate the shift.

It is important to clarify, however, that the task belongs to the Yellow VMEME rather than 'Yellow' individuals (Beck 2011). Just as Buddhism paradoxically seeks to effect awakening through the recognition of non-self, Spiral Dynamics puts emphasis on human nature rather than a reified identity. Examples used to describe the different levels sometimes do combine personification (both archetypal and actual) with strong language – Beck (2011) identifies Qaddafi with Red/Blue, for instance, but correlates of the system's relationality with individuals in the world can be argued to be a helpful device. At the end of the day, real people provide the data that informs the system!

Emergence Plan and travelled to the Middle East to present an alternative to conflict between Israel and Palestine, and Wilber has most recently been focusing on conflict resolution.

21 This is an important part of the theory that has not been discussed. For a detailed discussion of the transformation of VMEMEs, see Beck and Cowan 1996: 34–47.

Conclusion

As its title admits, this article merely presents a brief introduction to Spiral Dynamics. That said, the general model and the dynamics between the major players have hopefully been laid out in sufficient detail that those who are drawn to delve the system more deeply may do so in a way that best matches their interest.

The future of Spiral Dynamics depends on such interest. Its champions are of an older generation, and the loss of Chris Cowan will certainly have an impact on its diffusion. Students of Spiral Dynamics are found all around the world, however, and many of them have been working with it for several decades. As a mature system, perhaps the most difficult phases of schism and sectarian rancour have passed. In discussions today, for example, personal attacks are discouraged. Finally, Spiral Dynamics is not just a theory. By being applied in practice, whether in corporate training sessions or political and religious contexts, there is every reason to believe that Spiral Dynamics will continue to become more established and grow. ■



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