

The following is excerpted from the forthcoming book:  
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## **Chapter Three**

### **Stages of Consciousness and Culture**

**D**uring the first half of the 19th century the Western world was captivated by the writing of the famous German philosopher Georg Hegel. While the philosophers of the Enlightenment had sought to show that the world was divinely created by pointing to the mathematical rationality found in nature, Hegel went further by demonstrating that reason and divine order could also be found in the development of human history. Despite the contradictions and chaos apparent in the historical record, Hegel showed how history unfolds through a dialectical process wherein conflict makes possible the transformation to higher states of organization. And while Hegel's influence faded in the second half of the 19th century, his prescient understanding of the dialectical structure of history began to be validated during the 20th century through research in the social sciences, and especially in the field of developmental psychology. Developmental psychology serves as an important foundation of integral philosophy because it discloses the stage-wise development of all historically significant worldview structures. That is, the structures that organize consciousness are directly related to the stages of human history. And as we'll explore in this chapter and the next, the expanded vertical perspective that can see the stages of human history within the minds of individuals is the focal point of integral consciousness.

We have all had a direct experience of the development of our own consciousness because we have all grown up from childhood. Our experience of this development includes a sense in which our values have evolved, our perspectives have changed, and our thoughts, feelings, and sense of self have become more sophisticated and complex. The great contribution of

developmental psychology has been its demonstration that this growth in consciousness proceeds through discreet, universal stages of development. And even after adulthood is reached, development continues to be governed by a series of distinct stages or waves.

The beginnings of developmental psychology can be traced to the work of American psychologist James Mark Baldwin around the turn of the previous century. Baldwin was among the first to conduct scientific research on the mental and emotional development of children and adults. In his work, he observed that the human mind develops along certain well-defined lines, which he identified as the *rational* or *logical*, the *aesthetic* or *emotional*, and the *moral* or *ethical*. Baldwin's research also revealed that this growth in human consciousness is characterized by distinct stages of development. And these same stages were encountered by psychological researchers throughout the 20th century whenever they investigated the development of human consciousness.

Although these descriptions of the developmental stages have not all been identical, there is now increasing agreement among academic psychologists that the growth of consciousness definitely unfolds through a series of cross-cultural levels or waves. Despite the objections of the materialist and postmodern schools of psychology, developmental psychology has continued to increase its sway within the larger field of psychology as a whole. In fact, some of the most famous names in psychology have been committed to the idea of progressive stages of human development. These researchers include: Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, Jane Loevinger, and Abraham Maslow.

Perhaps the most prominent living developmental psychologist is Harvard's Robert Kegan, whose work carefully incorporates over one hundred years of research in the field. Kegan's perspectives, however, are not always popular among certain of his postmodern colleagues, who continue to reject the idea that some types of consciousness are more evolved than others. Unlike horizontal psychological typologies, such as the Myers-Briggs personality type system, or the Enneagram—which merely identify stylistic differences and are nonjudgmental—Kegan's ideas about the development of consciousness are

distinctly hierarchical. Kegan, however, acknowledges the dangers of such a theory by writing that:

[Because developmental psychology] tells a story of increase, or greater complexity, [it is] thus more provocative, discomfoting, even dangerous, and appropriately evokes greater suspicion. Any time a theory is normative, and suggests that something is more grown, more mature, more developed than something else, we had better check to see if the distinction rests on arbitrary grounds that consciously or unconsciously unfairly advantage some people (such as those who create the theory and people like them) whose own preferences are being depicted as superior. We had better check whether what may even appear to be an 'objective' theory is not in reality a tool or captive of a 'ruling' group (such as white people, men, Westerners) who use the theory to preserve their advantaged position.

Now obviously, Kegan concludes that the findings of developmental psychology do pass this test and are not inherently biased or unfair. And as will become clear by the end of this chapter, the fact that consciousness develops through distinct stages is now becoming increasingly indisputable.

Developmental psychology is a field that has been pursued by many academics, but among developmental psychologists, integral philosophy owes perhaps its greatest debt to the work of American psychologist Clare W. Graves. Graves' research revealed the existence of the same familiar stages of psychological development that had been discovered by previous researchers. Graves' work, however, went farther than the other developmental psychologists in the way that it demonstrated how these sequentially emerging stages are themselves organized within a larger dynamic system. In other words, not only did Graves' research reveal distinct, cross-cultural stages of consciousness, it also showed how these same stages are related to each other in a *dialectical spiral of development*—a living system of evolution. Through his understanding of this larger system of development, Graves was able to discern how each discrete stage of development is shaped and formed by its relationships to the other stages. And it was through this understanding of the formative nature of these inter-stage relationships that Graves was able to clearly distinguish between what I'll

be calling “postmodern consciousness” and the subsequently arising “integral stage of consciousness.”

Moreover, although other developmentalists had recognized the parallel between the stages of development in the consciousness of individuals and the stage-like development of history and culture, the dialectical structure revealed by Graves’ research showed this parallel more clearly than ever before. By recognizing not only the systemic nature of each individual stage, but also how all the stages were themselves related in a larger encompassing system, Graves was able to convincingly demonstrate how these levels of development in consciousness are actually a recapitulation of the stages of human history. Just as in biological evolution, where we see a human fetus grow through the stages of the entire tree of life as it develops in the womb, we can now likewise see within the development of each human mind, a rough approximation of the evolution of human cultural history.

Following the work of Maslow, Graves studied values. He asked the subjects of his research to describe their ideal person, and after thousands of interviews during the course of over twenty years, Graves saw a clear pattern emerging—a pattern that subsequent research and experience is continuing to validate and confirm. As we’ll discuss more fully in Part II, because the Gravesian model of “bio-psycho-social” evolution reveals how each stage is a unified system that encompasses the development of values, worldviews, self-sense, belief systems, neurological activation, and a person’s overall “center of psychic gravity;” because the Gravesian model shows how the individual and the culture at large (the micro and the macro) evolve together using the same stages and structures; because the Gravesian model exhibits a conceptual and geometrical elegance that clearly reflects evolution’s dialectical method of “transcendence and inclusion;” and most of all, because the Gravesian model clearly identifies the nature, behavior, and antecedent causes of the emerging integral stage of development, his findings serve as an important foundation of the integral worldview.

After his death in 1986, Graves’ work was carried on by his colleague Don Beck, who applied Graves’ ideas in his work with the leaders of South Africa (both

black and white) during the transition out of the apartheid form of government. Beck and his colleague Christopher Cowan later wrote the influential book *Spiral Dynamics*, which served to popularize Graves' work and introduce it to a larger audience.

Now before we begin our discussion of the details of this spiral of development, I need to state a qualification. The systemic structures that populate the internal universe are subtle and complex. They are better compared to ocean currents than to architecture. The very idea of a “stage of consciousness” is something that must be held onto lightly and understood, not as a material object, but as a pattern of relationships that exhibit systemic properties. Understanding the stages of consciousness starts with the kind of discussion we are about to have, but using this understanding to help further cultural evolution involves a practice of seeing that avoids oversimplifying, pigeon-holing, or stereotyping. As you will come to see for yourself, the stages of consciousness are real; however, what follows is a description of their reality rendered at a level of generality that facilitates its usefulness. Nevertheless, after reading through this Main Narrative, I recommend that you reconsider this description of the spiral of development in light of the discussion in chapter 9 on the *Structures of the Human Mind*. Chapter 9 supplements the following description of the stages of consciousness by exploring the rich complexity of these structures and the scholarly debates that have arisen in response to their discovery.

### **The Spiral of Development**

According to integral philosophy, each stage of consciousness is a *natural epistemology*, an organic way of making meaning with its own distinct view of the world that arises from a specific set of problematic life conditions and their corresponding solutions. These stages function as living dynamic systems that organize both entire human societies as well as the minds of the individuals who participate in those societies. According to Graves:

Each successive stage, wave, or level of existence is a state through which people pass on their way to other states of being. When the human is centralized in one state of existence, he or she has a psychology which is particular to that state. His or her feelings, motivations, ethics and values, biochemistry, degree of neurological activation, learning systems, belief systems, ... education, economics, and political theory and practice are all appropriate to that state.

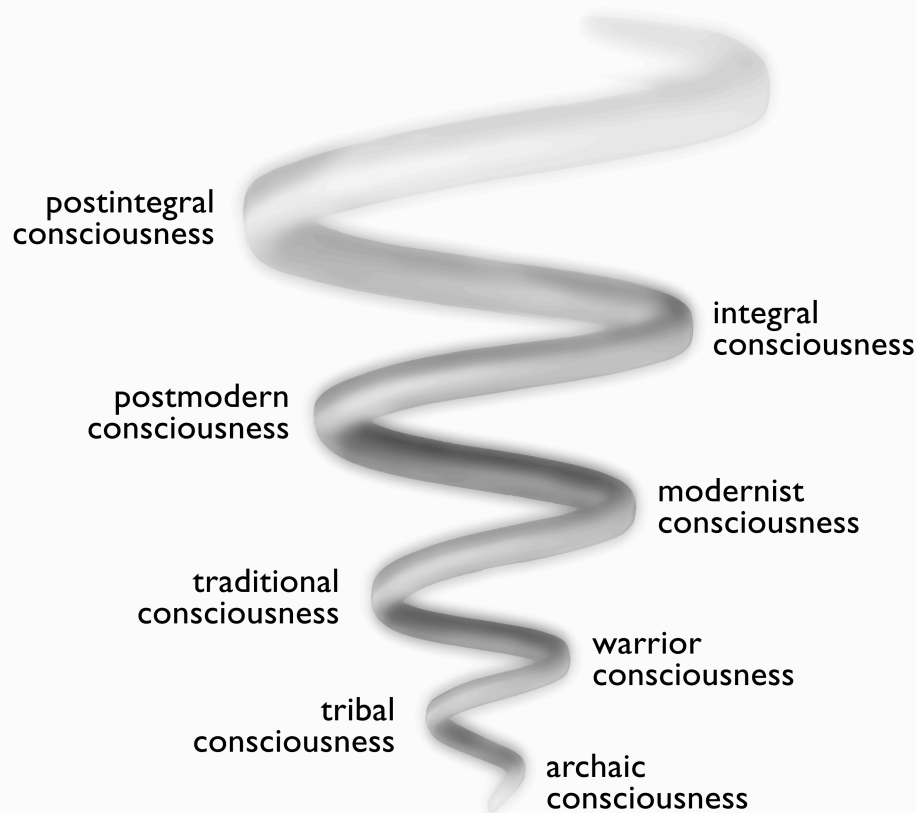
These value systems serve to organize a person's consciousness because they engender loyalty and provide identity—they nourish consciousness and contribute to its sense of self.

Each stage of consciousness arises in response to the essential problems of its time in history. Thus, for example, the problematic life conditions of primitive survival result in one stage of consciousness, whereas coping with the problems of the modern world result in others. These stages do not describe “types of people,” they describe *types of consciousness within people*. Of course, there are folks who exemplify these stages perfectly and others who defy categorization. In the developed world most people occupy more than one of these stages at different times—for most of us, these levels sound more in chords than in single notes. However, most people do find that they have a general “center of gravity” that can be identified within a specific level. As illustrated in Figure 3-1 below, the interrelationships between the stages reveal how they are each organized within a larger overall system, and this system demonstrates the unmistakable pattern of a dialectical, logarithmic spiral or helix.

The spiral's structure is dialectical because its growth exhibits the familiar pattern of *thesis*, *antithesis*, and *synthesis*. This is the same pattern of dialectical development originally recognized over two hundred years ago by Hegel. This dialectical relationship among the stages can be seen in the way that each stage arises in an antithetical reaction to the problems created by the stage that precedes it. And as the stages unfold within the spiral as a whole, we can see how the themes of earlier stages are recapitulated in later stages but with greater degrees of complexity and sophistication. As we are about to explore, the stages illustrated on the right side of the spiral tend to be more individualistic, emphasizing the *expression of the self*; whereas the stages on the left tend to be

more communitarian, emphasizing the *sacrifice of the self* for the sake of the group.

This spiral structure is not a deterministic blueprint which cultural evolution is bound to follow, but it does trace a real pattern of development, the recognition of which is backed by decades of research.



*Figure 3-1. The spiral of development in consciousness and culture*

Human cultures are not rigidly formed by the pattern, but the pattern does continue to appear in the timeline of just about all observable forms of cultural development. There are other possible ways to divide up the developmental spectrum of consciousness, but the data does confirm that these specific levels are not merely arbitrary divisions.

A good way to understand these stages is through an analogy using the spectrum of visible color: Think about the wavelengths of color we see in a

rainbow—although we can't draw hard lines between them, and although we can identify millions of subtle shades, when we look at a rainbow we do see distinct gradations and specific hues. Each color is a whole in itself, yet it is formed in the relation between its neighbors above and below on the spectrum. And we can see something very similar in the distinct stages found within the developmental spectrum of consciousness and culture.

After we examine each stage in detail below, we'll return to the discussion of the dynamics of the spiral structure as a whole, as well as the variety of research that supports it. However, this broader analysis of the entire spiral of development is best saved until after we have reviewed each stage.

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