

STAGE AND STRUCTURAL-DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY

Values and Worldview

Graves · Beck & Cowan · Wilber

PAPER 03 / 05

A Furtherance reference compendium on the intellectual terrain behind organisational design, executive capability, and leadership transformation.

The third camp shifts the unit of analysis from individual cognition or identity to **worldview** – the implicit set of values, assumptions, and existential concerns through which a person, group, or culture interprets the world. These models are broader than ego-development theories and weaker in empirical discipline, but they have had disproportionate practical influence, especially in management consulting, organisational change, and cultural diagnosis.

Three figures define the tradition. Clare Graves built the original empirical research programme in the 1950s and 1960s. Don Beck and Christopher Cowan codified Graves's work into Spiral Dynamics, the colour-coded system that became its public face. Ken Wilber incorporated Spiral Dynamics into Integral Theory (AQAL), a meta-framework that situates Graves alongside cognitive, ego-developmental, and spiritual stage models in a single multi-dimensional structure.

A NOTE ON EVIDENCE

The values / worldview camp is the most popularised and the most contested. It carries reputational risk with empirically disciplined audiences because of its association with management-consulting marketing. Used precisely, however, it offers vocabulary for cultural and organisational dynamics that the other camps do not address.

Clare W. Graves 1914–1986

American professor of psychology, Union College, Schenectady. A contemporary of Maslow, with whom he corresponded; Maslow later acknowledged that Graves's hierarchy was the more empirically grounded.

CORE THESIS

Graves termed his model the **Emergent Cyclical Levels of Existence Theory** (ECLET). Its central claim is that the psychology of mature human beings is an unfolding, oscillating, spiralling process marked by progressive subordination of older systems of behaviour to newer, higher-order systems as the conditions of existence change. Each level emerges in response to a specific set of life conditions and brings with it a distinctive value system, mode of cognition, and view of the self.

THE DOUBLE HELIX AND THE CYCLICAL ALTERNATION

Graves's distinctive structural claim is that the levels alternate between individual / express-self and collective / sacrifice-self orientations, each generating the conditions that elicit the next. He represented this as a double helix in which 'inner' and 'outer' tiers spiral upwards. The model is therefore not a simple hierarchy but a recurrent alternation, with each successive level transcending and including its predecessors.

GRAVES'S LEVEL DESIGNATIONS

Code	Orientation	Defining concern	Conditions of emergence
A-N	Individual	Survival	Hostile natural environment.
B-O	Collective	Safety; tribal belonging	Threatening world; need for shelter.
C-P	Individual	Power; self-assertion	Need to break free of tribal constraint.
D-Q	Collective	Order; truth; rightness	Chaos; need for stable rules.
E-R	Individual	Achievement; mastery; gain	Stable order permits enterprise.
F-S	Collective	Community; sensitivity; equality	Material plenty alongside relational poverty.
G-T	Individual	Functional integration	Complex problems unsolvable from prior levels.
H-U	Collective	Holistic synthesis	Global, planetary scope of concern.

METHODOLOGY

Graves's empirical method was open-ended written assessments – students describing their conception of a ‘mature personality’ – coded longitudinally over many years. He used these alongside longitudinal interviews and biological measures (autonomic nervous system response, galvanic skin response). The corpus is large but was never published in a unified academic form; Graves died before completing the manuscript. His unpublished writings and lecture transcripts form the raw material of the field.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

- The earliest fully developed adult-development theory to incorporate conditions of existence as a causal driver – anticipating later ecological and dynamical-systems framings.
- Largely unknown outside specialist circles until popularised by Beck and Cowan.
- **Critique:** The unpublished status of much of the primary material is a serious empirical liability. Replications and independent validations are few. The biological measurements have not held up to modern scrutiny.

Don Beck & Christopher Cowan 1937–2022 · 1945–2015

*American social psychologists; long-standing collaborators of Clare Graves. Beck was Professor at the University of North Texas; Cowan was a consultant and educator. Joint authors of *Spiral Dynamics: Mastering Values, Leadership and Change* (1996), the volume in which Graves's work first reached a popular audience.*

CORE THESIS

Spiral Dynamics is the codification of Graves's ECLET into an applied framework, with the addition of a colour-coded vocabulary intended to make the levels memorable and usable in organisational and political settings. Beck and Cowan introduced the term **vMEME** (value-meme) to describe each level: a culturally transmitted unit of value, analogous to a gene, that organises perception and action.

THE EIGHT VALUE-MEMES

Colour	Graves code	Name	Theme
Beige	A-N	Survivalistic	Stay alive.
Purple	B-O	Tribal / Animistic	Honour ancestors and spirits; protect the tribe.
Red	C-P	Egocentric / Power	Be what you are; do what you want.
Blue	D-Q	Absolutist / Order	One right way; sacrifice now for reward later.
Orange	E-R	Achievist / Strategic	Act in your own interest by playing the game.
Green	F-S	Communitarian	Seek peace within and with others; harmonise.
Yellow	G-T	Integrative	Live fully and responsibly; flexible flow.
Turquoise	H-U	Holistic	Experience the wholeness of existence.

Beck and Cowan distinguish 'first-tier' value-memes (Beige through Green) – each of which regards itself as the only correct view – from 'second-tier' value-memes (Yellow and Turquoise), which can recognise and integrate the validity of all preceding levels. The transition from first to second tier is described by Beck as 'a momentous leap in meaning'.

APPLIED WORK

Beck applied Spiral Dynamics during the political transition in South Africa (1980s–1990s), working with both the African National Congress and the outgoing National Party government on a developmental analysis of the country's competing value systems. This is the field's most documented real-world application and is cited by Beck as evidence of the framework's diagnostic and integrative usefulness.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

- Made Graves's theory legible and usable for non-specialists; produced the vocabulary now in widespread use across leadership, organisational, and cultural-change consulting.
- Beck and Cowan formally separated in 2002; subsequent disputes about which lineage faithfully represents Graves's original work persist within the Spiral Dynamics community.
- **Critique:** Empirical validation of Spiral Dynamics as such (rather than of Graves's underlying levels) is thin. The colour-coded language encourages crude application – labelling individuals or organisations with a single colour – that the more careful theorists explicitly warn against.

Ken Wilber b. 1949

American philosopher; founder of the Integral Institute. Author of approximately twenty-five books on philosophy, psychology, and spirituality. Originator of Integral Theory, popularly known by the acronym AQAL.

CORE THESIS

No single developmental model captures the full structure of human experience, because every model addresses only a part of the territory. The Integral framework therefore proposes a meta-architecture with five irreducible dimensions – quadrants, levels, lines, states, and types – within which the contributions of Piaget, Loevinger, Kegan, Graves, and others can be situated as partial maps of larger terrain. Wilber's distinctive method is synthetic rather than empirical: he aims to identify the deep structures that recur across diverse traditions and to construct a single integrative map.

THE FIVE ELEMENTS OF AQAL

Element	Definition
Quadrants	Four irreducible perspectives generated by the cross of interior/exterior with individual/collective: subjective (I), objective (it), intersubjective (we), interobjective (its).
Levels	Vertical stages of development. Wilber draws principally on Piaget for cognition, Loevinger / Cook-Greuter for ego, Kohlberg for moral, Graves for values, Gebser for cultural structures.
Lines	Distinct developmental streams (cognitive, moral, interpersonal, kinaesthetic, spiritual) that progress semi-independently. A person can be highly developed in one line and poorly developed in another.
States	Temporary modes of consciousness – waking, dreaming, deep sleep, peak experiences – distinct from stages.
Types	Horizontal typologies that cross-cut levels and lines: gender, personality type, Myers-Briggs, Enneagram.

LEVELS IN WILBER'S SYNTHESIS

Wilber adopts the Spiral Dynamics colour palette in his middle-period work (*A Theory of Everything*, 2000) and later modifies it in *Integral Spirituality* (2006), introducing his own colour scheme for stages above Turquoise. The progression Wilber describes runs roughly: Archaic (Beige) › Magic (Purple) › Egocentric / Power (Red) › Mythic (Blue / Amber) › Rational (Orange) › Pluralistic (Green) › Integral (Yellow / Teal) › Holistic (Turquoise) › Indigo and beyond.

METHODOLOGY

Wilber's method is meta-theoretical: he reviews dozens of developmental traditions and identifies the structural correspondences among them. He argues that the convergence of independently derived stage sequences across Eastern contemplative traditions, Western developmental psychology, and structural anthropology constitutes a kind of evidence in itself. This is an argument from synthesis rather than from primary empirical research, and the field's reception has been correspondingly mixed.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

- The most ambitious and widely read attempt to integrate developmental thinking across psychology, philosophy, and spirituality.

- AQAL has become standard vocabulary in integral coaching, organisational consulting, and contemplative-practice communities.
- **Critique:** Wilber's claims are not, in general, falsifiable in the scientific sense. His selection of which traditions to include and how to align their stages is interpretively driven and has been challenged on several specific grounds. His later work moves into transpersonal and spiritual territory that takes the framework outside the empirical developmental tradition entirely.

Synthesis

	Graves	Beck and Cowan	Wilber
Unit of analysis	Bio-psycho-social system	Value-meme (vMEME)	Five-dimensional architecture
Number of levels	8 (cyclical, double-helical)	8 colour-coded vMEMEs	Variable; integrates traditions
Empirical method	Longitudinal student studies	Field application; consulting	Meta-theoretical synthesis
Falsifiability	Moderate (where data survive)	Low	Low
Primary application	Adult psychology research	Organisational & cultural change	Integral practice and coaching
Distinctive contribution	Conditions of existence drive emergence	Memorable colour-coded vocabulary	Quadrants + developmental lines

The values / worldview camp is one continuous lineage that broadens at each step. Graves built a research programme. Beck and Cowan built a public vocabulary on top of it. Wilber built a meta-framework that places that vocabulary alongside other developmental traditions in a single integrative structure.

In the organisational work Furtherance does, this camp is most useful as diagnostic shorthand, not as a foundational model. Spiral Dynamics is genuinely useful for naming the value-tensions inside an organisation or between stakeholder groups. Wilber's quadrants are useful for ensuring that an analysis attends to all four of the irreducible perspectives – interior/exterior, individual/collective. Beyond those uses, the camp's claims should be held lightly.

FOR THE OPERATOR

Used carefully, this is the camp that gives you language for cultural and value dynamics. Used carelessly, it is the camp most likely to discredit the adviser using it. The discipline is to deploy the vocabulary without accepting the metaphysics.