

# Spiral Dynamics: An Overview

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Our civilizations change over time. But what about our psychologies? According to one theory of human development, despite our individual natures, we are malleable enough to become more complex people within more complex societies. And libertarians can lead the way.

F. A. Hayek understood societies to be self-organizing network processes, or “spontaneous orders.” Spontaneous orders are complex, adaptive, non-linear systems that demonstrate emergent properties. They evolve, transform, and become more complex—all without anyone purposefully organizing them.

Jean Piaget developed a similar theory of child development. That is, because human brains are also complex networks, children develop psychologically through identifiable stages that form increasingly complex psychological levels. Piaget stopped at childhood, however.

In the 1950s, Clare Graves extended Piaget’s psychology through adulthood. Don Beck and Christopher Cowan developed Graves’s model further in *Spiral Dynamics*. Graves argued that humans evolve new psychological stages in response to changing life conditions. When a society contains a critical number of people at a given stage, the society itself transforms, creating the social conditions for yet another stage of psychological development.

Because the brain is a constantly active, constantly changing self-organizing network, we should expect to see such a transformation process happening over time. And because society is a network of communicating brains, we can also expect to see social transformation as an emergent phenomenon—reflecting these psychological stages.

Two tiers comprise the stages of social-psychological orientation, or expression of self. Each stage is represented by a color. Let’s walk through these to see what we can find.

## **Tier One: Subsistence and Order**

**Beige** – *Archaic-instinctive* (Origin: c. 100,000 BC)

We share our earliest expression of self with our Paleolithic ancestors. This stage is a self-centered, survivalist mode we can all experience if our survival is threatened.

**Purple** – *Animistic-tribal* (Origin: c. 50,000 BC)

At this stage, the social-psychological orientation is sacrificed to the ways of elders and customs to become subsumed under the group. This is the level traditional cultures tend to express. At this more collectivist stage, life centers on friends and family bonds. Animism—the idea of animating spirits—can crop up in this stage, too, as tribes project the presence of friends, family, and ancestors beyond the grave.

**Red** – *Egocentric-dominionist* (Origin: c. 7,000 BC)

Following the tribe, an egocentric stage emerged. Expression of self is impulsive, based on what the self desires—free of guilt and without shame. This is more or less the mentality of street gangs, Vikings, and so on. If you have read *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey* (or have a teenager), this stage may be familiar. Humans in this stage celebrate heroic acts by certain individuals. Projections of power are revered. Heroic figures tend to lead empires.

**Blue** – *Authoritarian-mythic* (Origin: c. 3,000 BC)

The authoritarian-mythic expression of the self comes from personal sacrifice and obedience to rightful authority for the sake of some purpose. Embodied by fundamentalist religions, out of empire arises a larger-scale communitarian life held together somewhat by an authoritarian superstructure. Medieval Catholicism and the modern Islamic world are exemplars of this form. What matters at this stage is to believe in the “right things”—that is, an organizing purpose often guarded by brutal authorities, but rooted in myth.

**Orange** – *Multiplistic-scientific/strategic* (Origin: c. 1,000 AD)

At this stage one sets out strategically to reach one’s objectives without rousing the ire of others. Expressed in the Scientific Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, from this expression of self emerges a more socially minded, but decidedly individualistic, psychology. The Age of Reason and modern capitalism are orange-stage phenomena. Indeed, this social-psychological stage is what most people associate with classical liberalism. (When overlapping with the more religious authorities of the previous level, we get American-style conservatism.)

**Green** – *Relativistic-egalitarian* (Origin: 1850 on, surging early 20th century)

At the green level, one is expected to sacrifice self-interest in order to gain acceptance, group inclusion, and social harmony. 1960s relativism and egalitarianism emerge at this stage. Socialism is typical of this stage, but so too are existentialism and postmodernism. The attempt to reconcile socialism with markets created the modern welfare state. (Note: While most libertarians would like to think classical liberalism is the highest or most sophisticated psychological stage, what emerges next is a kind of balancing—one beyond atomistic individualism or authoritarian collectivism.)

## **Tier Two – Being and Order**

Spiral Dynamics involves a second tier of social-psychological expression. In this tier, the stages gradually move away from a focus on the subsistence-level concerns of tier one (how do I live and organize?), and toward being-level concerns (who am I and how do I relate?). There is no research to support two tiers, but such can serve as a guide.

Indeed, though there is not unanimous agreement on this point, most see the following stages—yellow and turquoise—as more complex versions of orange and green. The open-ended theory suggests that any new levels are currently underdeveloped and will solidify as a greater portion of society evolves toward those new stages and begins to express them.

### **Yellow** – *Systemic-integrative* (Origin: 1950s)

At the yellow stage, expression of self is not so much about what the self desires, but about avoiding harm to others so that all life benefits. Something interesting happens here: A more individualistic self understands its place within a complex, dynamic, evolutionary world. People should be understood as responsible and free, but that freedom must be reconciled and integrated within wider systems of selves. (Hayek was probably an integrationist of this stage.)

### **Turquoise** – Holistic (Origin: 1970s)

The final stage we can identify is an integrative stage that combines an organism's necessary self-interest with the interests of the communities and subsystems in which it participates. The theory is still forming, but the turquoise tend to understand the world as fully integrated, with the individual contributing to the social as the social contributes to the individual in a kind of seamless whole.

## **More Libertarian, Not Less**

Spiral Dynamics suggests continued social evolution can involve more and more libertarian thinking. While the more authoritarian levels seem to violate this general trend, libertarian-style thinking tends to scale—that is, it integrates more and more people.

With each stage of development, our sense of solidarity with others grows outward: from “fellow believers” to “trading partners” to “everyone on earth.” Now, with the kind of complex-systems thinking involved in tier two, we start to understand part-whole relationships, that is, *how and why* everyone fits together (or can fit together). Our connection and integration occur through highly individual interactions that are likely to be accelerated and deepened by commerce and connective technology.

Interestingly, while the first six levels reject other psychological stages as competitors, the yellow and turquoise are inclusive of all levels. Moreover, since tier two selves see society as a self-organizing process, they are much more likely to embrace a pro-market, anti-coercive, pluralistic worldview. In short, libertarians are more likely than ever to evoke tier two thinking and use tier two messages.

So, freedom evolves in nature—both psychologically and socially. With Spiral Dynamics, we can see why.

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