

# **SPIRAL DYNAMICS**

**mastering values,  
leadership, and  
change**

**Don Edward Beck  
Christopher C. Cowan**

 **Blackwell  
Publishing**



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# Spiral Dynamics

Mastering Values, Leadership, and Change

Don Edward Beck and Christopher C. Cowan

*Exploring the New Science of Memetics*



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BLACKWELL PUBLISHING  
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA  
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK  
550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

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First published 1996

First published in paperback 2006 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

9 2013

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Beck, Don (Don Edward)

Spiral Dynamics: Mastering Values, Leadership, and Change/Don Edward Beck and Christopher C. Cowan

p. cm.

Includes index.

1. Values—Psychological aspects. 2. Typology (Psychology) 3. Leadership—Psychological aspects. 4. Personality and social intelligence. I. Cowan, Chris.

II. Title.

BF778.B34 1995

158—dc20

95-22494

CIP

ISBN: 978-1-55786-940-1 (hbk. : alk. paper) - ISBN: 978-1-4051-3356-2 (pbk. : alk. paper)

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 10 on 12 pt Ehrhardt MT Std  
by Spartan Press Ltd, Lymington, Hants  
Printed and bound in Singapore  
by C.O.S. Printers Pte Ltd

The publisher's policy is to use permanent paper from mills that operate a sustainable forestry policy, and which has been manufactured from pulp processed using acid free and elementary chlorine-free practices. Furthermore, the publisher ensures that the text paper and cover board used have met acceptable environmental accreditation standards.

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# INTRODUCTION

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*Spiral Dynamics* presents a new framework for understanding the dynamic forces at work in human affairs – business, personal lives, education, and even geopolitics.

It is not another hard-edged and simplistic ‘types of people’ model nor a soft, ‘everybody’s beautiful’ egalitarian approach. Based on decades of research, real-world applications, and the latest findings of both organizational theorists and neurobiology, this book lays out a very specific Tool Kit for managing the deepest differences in people. These core intelligences exist like *strange attractors* below our values, beliefs, and ethical structures. By applying the right tools at this base level rather than to surface symptoms, any bright, curious human being can, quite simply, change the world.

In the next few pages I will survey the principles of Spiral Dynamics.

*Ronnie Lessem*



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# Spiral Wizardry: Managing Spiral Dynamics

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‘Spiral Wizards instinctively roam over vast landscapes seeing patterns and connections others do not notice because their old paradigm, “first tier” filters do not allow them to. They can move through the spine of the Spiral awakening, unblocking, empowering or repairing each of the ‘MEMEs (genetic or cultural codes) of an organization. Such a Wizard appreciates chaos and thinks more like a creative designer than a reengineer. The process links functions, people and ideas into new, more natural flows that add precision, flexibility, rapid response, humanity and fun to getting the work done. That is the power of new paradigm, “second tier” thinking, to constantly survey the whole while tinkering expertly with the parts. Monitoring the full Spiral is especially vital during periods of large-scale turbulence and change, like right now.’

## Introduction

This book on ‘Spiral Dynamics’ represents the culmination of forty years of research and development, aimed at global managers specifically and citizens of the globe generally. Having been initiated by an American Professor of Psychology, Clare W. Graves, in the sixties, it has since been developed by his two dedicated followers, Don Beck and Chris Cowan, based on their extensive work in North America and South Africa.

In more recent years the work of the British biologist Richard Dawkins (*The Selfish Gene*) and the Polish-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (*The Evolving Self*) has been incorporated to bring the fresh language of ‘memes’ (rhymes with themes) to what has been popularly called ‘value systems’ or ‘levels of psychological existence’ theory. The net result is one of perhaps the three major breakthroughs in approaches to managing complexity – the other two being ‘systems’ and ‘chaos’ theory – of this century.

In the course of their book, Beck and Cowan begin in Section 1 with a ‘spiral overview’ before introducing us to the intricacies of Spiral Dynamics. Within it they set the context for the different managerial minds arising out of different times, introduce us to the so-called ‘MEME (values-attracting meta-meme) systems that underlie such different managerial eras, and outline the diverse structural attributes of the Spiral mind. What biochemical genes are to cellular DNA, ‘MEMEs are to our psycho-social and organizational ‘DNA.’ In Section 2, they take us through the fascinating dynamics of spiralling human systems. These include the dynamics of change, leadership, complexity, alignment and integration.

This may be, in fact, as far as you may need to go in order to improve your ability to manage diversity and complexity. Should you want, however, to deepen your understanding of the underlying Spiral structure – that, is the individual, organization or societal ‘MEMEs themselves – you will proceed on to Section 3. Therein you will discover, in turn, the precise ‘MEMEs of *Survival, Kinship, Power, Purpose, Achievement* and *Consensus* orientations (the old paradigm), as well as *Integrative* and *Holistic* (new paradigm) orientations which personalities, companies and societies are just now undergoing. The authors project that the Spiral’s dynamics will give rise to further integrated ‘global awakenings,’ which will, in turn, lead to still more new ‘MEMEs since the process of elaborating human systems seems to be open-ended.

## Spiral Overview

### Different Minds

In the first chapter of their book, Beck and Cowan refer to the current destabilization of belief structures and loosed anchors in a diverse but not yet interdependent world. ‘Like migrating tectonic plates, several core ways of thinking – paradigms, if you will – are grinding against each other. Ancient tribal and ethnic sores are belching fire while transnational companies linked by satellites conduct their business above.’

### ‘MEME Systems

*Worldviews* In the second chapter, the two authors go on a so-called ‘MEMEhunt’. Such a ‘MEME reflects a world view, a valuing system, a level of psychological existence, a belief structure, an organizing principle, a way of thinking or a mode of adjustment. It represents, firstly then, *a core intelligence* that forms systems and directs human behavior. Secondly, it *impacts upon all life choices* as a decision-making framework. Thirdly, each ‘MEME can manifest itself in both *healthy and unhealthy* forms. Fourthly, such a ‘MEME is a discrete structure for thinking, not just a set of ideas, values or cause. Fourthly, it *can*

*brighten and dim* as the *Life Conditions* (consisting of historic *Times*, geographic *Place*, existential *Problems*, and societal *Circumstances*) change.

*Systems* The eight landmark 'MEMEs which make up the Spiral's central core and developmental process are represented in terms of different colors. The first six of these make up 'old paradigm' business, management, education, and community. The **BEIGE** 'MEME is structured in loose bands and underpinned by survival processes. The **PURPLE** 'MEME is structured in tribe-like groups and is underpinned by circular processes. The **RED** 'MEME is structured in empires and underpinned by exploitative, power-seeking processes. The **BLUE** 'MEME is structured in pyramidal form, and underpinned by purposeful, controlling or even authoritarian processes. The **ORANGE** 'MEME is structured in delegative forms, underpinned by achievement-oriented, autonomy-seeking, and strategic processes. The **GREEN** 'MEME is structured in an egalitarian fashion, underpinned by processes that are both experiential and consensual. The two 'MEMEs, finally, that constitute the beginnings of a 'new paradigm' are **YELLOW** and **TURQUOISE**. **YELLOW** is flexible, integrative, and knowledge-based, both as a structure and in its processes, while **TURQUOISE** is holistic and global in structure, flowing and multidimensional in its processes.

In Chapter 3, thereby completing their overview, Beck and Cowan enter into the 'Spiral mind', outlining the seven principles that underlie it. Firstly, human nature includes a **capacity for new 'MEMEs** to awaken without eliminating old ones. Secondly, shifting **Life Conditions activate 'MEMEs** which may emerge, surge, regress or fade in response. Thirdly, the overall Spiral is forged by a **pendulum-like alternation** between the Self-Expressive, internally controlled 'me' – 'MEMEs (*Survival, Power, Achievement, Flexibility*), and the Self-Sacrificing, externally anchored 'we' – 'MEMEs (*Kinship, Purposeful, Consensual, Global*). Fourthly, **each 'MEME comes in phases**, either in personal passage or historic epoch, like waves on a beach, **ENTERing** as a surge, dominating the scene as a strong **PEAK**, and then **EXITing** from prominence to be replaced by another. Fifthly, the emergence of thinking systems along the Spiral is from **lesser to greater complexity**. Sixthly, 'MEMEs **coexist as mixtures** such that a generally consensual **GREEN**-oriented character may activate his or her power seeking **RED** aspect in sports, and call up an **ORANGE** achievement orientation in marketing meetings. Seventhly, and finally for Beck and Cowan, the 'MEMEs **cluster in tiers of six**. The old paradigm (which the authors refer to as 'First Tier') clusters together our 'Subsistence' level concerns with starvation (**BEIGE**), of magical spirits (**PURPLE**), of aggressors (**RED**), of disruption to law and order (**BLUE**), of loss of autonomy (**ORANGE**), and of social disapproval (**GREEN**). The new paradigm 'Being' series recontextualizes the old in terms of an information rich, highly mobile, 'Global village' where all the 'MEMEs are active at

once (YELLOW) and (TURQUOISE) as they resonate with compassionate strength for the enhancement of both one and all.

## The Dynamics of Change

### Change Potential

In the five chapters that follow their overview, Beck and Cowan enter into the heart of 'Spiral Dynamics'. In Chapter 4, on Change, they refer to Clare Graves' finding that people vary in terms of their 'MEME systems' potential to change along an OPEN–ARRESTED–CLOSED (OAC) continuum. Beck and Cowan then identify the Six Conditions that have to be met if an individual or organization is to experience lasting change. Firstly, the *potential* for change must be there. Secondly, if there are still *unresolved problems* from a lower order, you cannot expect to effect change at higher Spiral levels. Thirdly, there needs to be felt *dissonance* within the current 'MEME system before change will be welcomed in. Fourthly, there needs to be sufficient *insight* into the causes of the dissonance, and awareness of alternative approaches to their resolution. Fifthly, the specific *barriers* to change need to be concretely identified, and then eliminated, bypassed, neutralized or reframed into something else. Sixthly and finally, when significant change occurs you can expect periods of confusion, false starts, long learning curves and awkward assimilation while *consolidation* of the new thinking occurs. If there is no culture of nurturing *support* during the transformation, new 'MEMEs rarely germinate, much less bloom.

When all of these Six Conditions are met, new 'MEMEs may awaken, and movement along the Spiral may occur. But you must establish where you are before setting a course for where you want to be. That leads Beck and Cowan to cite five critical landmarks which mark the Sequence of Change. Just as you probably have a mixture of 'MEMEs within, you are also likely to be at different points along the way in different aspects of your work and life.

ALPHA, phase 1, is a state where individual, organization or societal 'MEMEs are in a healthy dynamic tension with surrounding *Life Conditions*. With Phase 2, BETA, doubts arise as a person enters a new phase of his or her life or a company loses key personnel and market share. As we leave ALPHA for BETA we first try 'more of the same,' refocusing our efforts with a view to working harder and smarter. Frequently that accelerates movement into even deeper BETA. If things get bad enough we move from anxious BETA, phase 2, through degrees of turbulence toward chaotic GAMMA, phase 3. We may find a 'Reform Option' escape route and bypass the trauma. If not, things become terrible but there is seemingly no place left to go. This is the GAMMA Trap! Phase 4 heralds escape from the trap with a DELTA surge toward a new system. This vibrant phase, however is also full of dangers. Getting rid of what you do not like does not mean you have captured what



you do want. It is phase 5, the new ALPHA, which brings about the consolidation of the ideas and insights from BETA and GAMMA through DELTA. For a while, things are again in balance, congruent, and ‘all is right with the world.’

Finally, in their consideration of the dynamics of change, Beck and Cowan identify seven distinct Variations. They propose that  $\text{Change}^1 \neq \text{Change}^2$ , but instead that each Variation represents an approach which fits particular circumstances. These spread across an arc from ‘Horizontal’ through ‘Oblique’ and then ‘Vertical’ change directions. Horizontal Change of the 1st and 2nd Variations is the norm when First Tier ‘MEMEs are solidly in control during ALPHA or early BETA phases, and when only a few of the above mentioned Six Conditions for change can be met. Horizontal forms include Fine-TUNE and Expand-OUT from base systems which remain essentially the same.

The Oblique forms, Change of the 3rd and 4th Variations, Stretch-DOWN and Stretch-UP, modify the base ‘MEME systems while adding or subtracting elements of other nearby ‘MEMEs. Such Oblique change often represents a practical limit for First Tier ‘old paradigm’ thinking. In fact the quality movement is possibly the best example of such Oblique change, though halfhearted attempts at reengineering run a close second. Only Second Tier intervention makes large-scale transformation across ‘MEMEs possible.

Vertical Change of the 5th, 6th, and 7th Variations – Break-OUT, UPShift, and Quantum – involve the awakening of new ‘MEMEs, though it may also resurrect ones that were thought to be buried and gone. In any case this represents ‘change through the Spiral, which may be revolutionary (5th) or evolutionary (6th) or in multiple ‘MEMEs at once, Quantum Change of the 7th Variation.’ Vertical change entails meeting all Six Conditions and often requires a direct assault on both internal and external barriers.

## The Dynamics of Leadership

Leadership dynamics, beginning with Chapter 5, describe what Beck and Cowan term System Wizards, Change Wizards, and Spiral Wizards. System Wizards understand a given ‘MEME thoroughly, knowing intuitively how to ‘lead’ people within that particular ‘MEME’s sphere of influence. Change Wizards understand the transitional cusps between ‘MEMEs and how to move between one and the next.

Chapter 6 describes the ability to consider broad spectrum views and respond to many systems at once. This is the realm of the Spiral Wizard. Spiral Wizardry is constructed out of the Second Tier dynamics that begin with the YELLOW and TURQUOISE ‘MEMEs. The former provides the inner directed, individualistic viewpoint that connects particles and subsystems into natural sequences. The latter introduces a focus on others and spiritual reawakening that brings those things into harmony.

Spiral leadership firstly involves establishing positive relationships through three universal principles: **Politeness, Openness** and, an idea surprising to some, decisive **Autocracy (P-O-A)**. Secondly the Spiral Wizard recognizes and honors individual  $\Psi$ MEMEs at a personal and institutional level. Thirdly, effective Spiral leadership adapts different people and different situations with these different  $\Psi$ MEMEs.

In the final analysis, Spiral Wizardry involves management of the whole  $\Psi$ MEME spectrum. Taking respective account of people and work, for example, entails all of the following at once.

#### **TURQUOISE**

- spiritual bonds pull people and organizations together
- work must be meaningful to the overall health of life

#### **YELLOW**

- people enjoy doing things that fit who they are naturally
- workers need free access to information and materials

#### **GREEN**

- people want to get along and feel accepted by their peers
- sharing and participating are better than competing

#### **ORANGE**

- people are motivated by the achievement of material rewards
- competition improves productivity and fosters individual growth

#### **BLUE**

- people work the best when they are told how to do things the right way
- doing duty and being punished when failing to do so gives meaning to life

#### **RED**

- people need to be dominated by strong leadership that gives rewards
- workers will put up with a lot if their basic needs are met regularly

#### **PURPLE**

- people are ‘married’ to their group – nepotism is normal
- workers owe their lives and souls to the parent-like organization

### **Spiral Alignment – *Streams***

Spiral Alignment, Chapter 7, is a comprehensive design process that obliges managers to align future visioning, strategic thinking, long- and short-term planning into a single stream-like flow. There are ten elements in such a streaming process. First, *decide what business you are in*, asking such questions as why does your enterprise exist, what work do you do, and what do you want to become? Second, *chart big picture patterns* and flows, initially investigating downstream through hypothetical plots and movie scripts and subsequently upstream, tracking the deepest currents, the wellsprings of change. Third, *take an inventory* of resources, functional capacities and life-cycle stages. Only now, that is fourthly, are you ready to develop and

propagate a *strategic vision*, ensuring that you communicate it throughout your organization's Spiral, in all its languages, not only to yourself or your peers.

In establishing, fifthly, your specific *strategy for change* you will need to pay particular attention to the respective 'MEMES. **PURPLE** will want you to embody change in rituals, traditions and symbols. **RED** will require heroic leaders and storytellers to forge a new mythology. **BLUE** strategy will need to be 'carved in stone', in the shape of a mission statement and new rules. **ORANGE** will be looking for specific signs of 'how this is getting me ahead', while **GREEN** defines ends and means in distinctly humanistic terms. **YELLOW**'s approach revolves around keeping the whole Spiral healthy through necessary and aligned outputs. Sixthly, then, it is *connect everything to everything else*.

'Bureaucracies take care of themselves, not the flow of work.' At this seventh point, according to Beck and Cowan, you *create a hypothetical model* of your ideal organization that fits with the six elements already outlined, and that is congruent with the flow of work itself. In the eighth process, *realignment*, whereby you reshape current systems to fit the new model, managers need to pay particular attention to the forces of resistance. Change ceremonies need to accommodate **PURPLE**; change mandates, accompanied by tangible rewards, need to appeal to **RED**; **BLUE** needs to be able to espouse a new cause.

The ninth element involves the selection of *the right person for the job*. If the job is competitive and high-risk, seek out an **ORANGE**-oriented leader; if you require tough-minded, cold-blooded decisions in times of crisis, look for some **RED**; if you are needing to involve people in teams along the way, choose for more **GREEN**; if complexity and diversity is the name of the game, lean toward **YELLOW** or even **TURQUOISE** criteria. Finally, element number ten, build in an *ongoing realignment process* in recognition that change is constant, not a closed loop nor even cycles, but an open-ended Spiral requiring continuous adjustment through ALPHA, BETA, GAMMA, and DELTA towards a new ALPHA.

### Spiral Integration – *Templates*

Spiral Integration, Chapter 8, completes the dynamics of the Spiral. It incorporates what Beck and Cowan refer to as *Templates*. These templates, three of them in all, are designed to accommodate the full Spiral. Instead of being rigid, permanent cutouts, Spiral Templates are organic, living layers that fuse together, stretch, adjust and mesh, like interdependent layers of our skins. There are in fact three kinds of template.

*Workflow – the X Template* On the X Template, every variable that influences the job to be done is included in the *workflow*. Such terms as value analysis,

value chain, enterprise networking, and horizontal management are pertinent here. The intent of this template is to link together all of the variables that impinge on the job to be done so that they are handled in a coordinated and logical manner. The payoff is that the ultimate output will be clean, focused, strategic and lean.

*Management – the Y Template* People and resources operating through the Y Template support, facilitate, assist, enhance and improve X Template procedures and performance. Thereby, the healthy Y Template is flexible, apolitical, demands P-O-A, changes and reconstitutes itself as the X need arises. This is where many conventional functions of management, supervision, and strategic planning are incorporated, but always with an eye to the Spiral and its  $\forall$ MEMEs.

*Command Intelligences – the Z Template* The unique insight and wisdom of the Z Template, for Beck and Cowan, is the combination of *executive core* and *focused intelligences*. The executive core monitors the whole process like the CPU in a computer. It is a small group chosen for its competence, experience and maturity, representing a microcosm of what is required to coordinate X and Y Templates, and to maintain a lookout to enable the organization to thrive in the milieu-at-large. The second function of the Z Template is to bring Focused Intelligences to bear upon problems. Knowledge, skills and informed perspectives transcend rank in making decisions.

Some clusters drawn to Z from all the Templates may include a *wild duck pond* where bright, non-conformists can explore off-the-wall ideas; a *nursery* or development track where neophytes can be exposed to mainline functions in each of the three templates at low risk to the organization; a *war room* that displays the vital signs of the company, including models of the environment and profiles of competitors; a *play pen*, that is a loose and creative environment for renewal and change; a *crisis team* of rapid response experts who can be quickly deployed for damage prevention and control; and a *Wizard's tree house*, or periodic convention of Spiral Wizards who can scan for new trends and opportunities, and feed them into the Command Intelligences. Such Spiral Wizards, as we may recall, are able to span the full  $\forall$ MEME spectrum, in their awareness if not also in their leadership activity.

## The Spiral's $\forall$ MEME Structure

### The First Tier

In the third part of their book, Beck and Cowan provide us with a 'Spiral Wizard's Field Manual' that directly applies Spiral Dynamics to day-to-day events and experiences. It includes in-depth analyses of each of the individual

MEMEs, starting with the six that belong to the First Tier, or ‘old management paradigm’. In each case the authors are concerned not only with the MEME itself – its implications for you, for people around you, and for your organizations – but also with the way you enter, engage with, and exit from that particular MEME’s influence. As a preview, these are activated as follows:

- **BEIGE** requires subsistence needs be met in order to remain alive
- **PURPLE** is nurtured through observing rituals, finding reassurance, and by expressing a sense of enchantment in life’s mystery
- **RED** is excited by stories of company heroes, by celebrating feats of conquest, and by evidence of respect
- **BLUE** is reinforced through appeals to traditions, fair treatment for all, and by honoring length of service and loyalty
- **ORANGE** is exercised by displaying symbols of success, individuals being recognized for their achievements, and challenges for improvement
- **GREEN** is enhanced by stressing the importance of the people, responsiveness to feelings, and a caring socially responsible community

## The Second Tier

In Chapter 15 we enter the systemic, FlexFlow ‘new paradigm’ world of the Beck and Cowan Second Tier. The focus now is on competence and functionality and qualities of being, not having or even doing, within the context of flexible and open systems that can for the first time take the full Spiral into account without the ‘blindness’ of First Tier MEMEs. The prevailing worldview is information-rich, and multidimensional, part of a complex interactive system. Chaos driven subsystems interact within the physical, economic and social environments as **YELLOW** seeks to find natural ways of living that focus energies. (The reader will discover that Section 2 was an application lesson in this perspective.)

Clare Graves’ theory predicts that, with the move to **TURQUOISE** heralded in Chapter 16, the great questions first raised with **YELLOW** can begin to be answered in this new global, holistic order of being. The independent self now becomes part of a larger, conscious whole, both as individual and as organization. Networking, on a whole Earth basis, is routine as the expanded use of mind tools and competencies becomes a global reality. The focus, then, is on the good living of all entities as integrated systems. We become supremely conscious of energy fields and holographic links in all walks of work and life, using collective human intelligence to work on large scale problems without sacrificing individuality.

## Spiral Chaos – *Global Awakenings*

In their final chapter, Beck and Cowan expose us to some applications of their new Spiral Dynamics perspective to world orderliness and disorders. To deal

with the many levels of the complex ‘global awakenings’ as a Spiral Wizard, Spiral congruence is required. For example, if the culture that surrounds you is at a lower range of vMEME development, goals must be more immediate and specific; at a higher level they can be more abstract and distant. Since cultures’ vMEMEs evolve, each social universe is an interactive moving picture rather than a still frame.

### **Spiral Order – *Scanning the Environment for Patterns***

In scanning geopolitical currents, therefore, the Spiral Wizard needs to look out for:

- *FLASHPOINTS*, that is crises caused by collisions between different vMEMEs
- *HOTSPOTS*, that is areas bubbling below the surface that could soon erupt
- *DIASPORAS*, involving the spread or migration of people with shared vMEMEs
- *REGRESSIONS*, that is a Spiral downshift, due to worsening life conditions
- *HARMONICS*, that is the simultaneous movement of two or more vMEME systems
- *GRIDLOCK*, as two strong vMEME systems oscillate back and forth in conflict
- *CUTTING EDGES*, representing the first flash of new vMEMEs awakening

### **Establishing your Geo-Templates**

The Template that prevails at a given time in a given place will be determined by: the functional needs of life on Earth (**TURQUOISE**); the Spiral levels that are active in this time and place (**YELLOW**); the needs of people as a human community (**GREEN**); the prevailing spheres of economic and political influence (**ORANGE**); authority assigned through national treaties or religious dictates (**BLUE**); where the ‘big me’ leaves his personal mark (**RED**); where the spirits and the ancestors walk(ed) (**PURPLE**); and finally by the space currently occupied by a particular band of people (**BEIGE**).

### **Sounding for Geo-currents**

National and international ‘geo-currents’ can be identified in Spiral terms: **PURPLE-RED** ethnicity, tribalism, and dictatorship; **RED-BLUE** nationalism, ideology and theocracy; **BLUE-ORANGE** free market and multiparty democracy; or **ORANGE-GREEN** social democracy, communitarianism, and

egalitarian humanism. In macro-managing the planet, whether from a political or a commercial vantage point, the Spiral Wizard must necessarily adopt a Second Tier **YELLOW-TURQUOISE** standpoint. Firstly, within such a perspective, Spirals are viewed as healthy when each of the 'MEMEs is expressing itself from a positive, additive perspective. The Wizard must always ask the question 'Will this expression of a given 'MEME add to or take from the life of the Spiral as a whole and the life of each individual riding on it?' In other words, will other 'MEMEs remain free to express themselves and develop their own trajectories?

Secondly, therefore, a human Spiral is healthy when avenues are open for movement on towards the more complex bands of thinking. Forced blockages cause the Spiral to stagnate or even to implode. The trap must be unlocked and barriers broken down before all hell breaks loose! For example, for Beck and Cowan, **PURPLE** and **RED** must establish effective **BLUE** authority before **ORANGE** enterprise can sprout. **BLUE** stability and **ORANGE** entrepreneurship must be present before **GREEN** social transformation is feasible. At the same time it takes an overarching **YELLOW** to macro manage the whole process.

In quoting, finally, the work of their mentor Clare Graves from some twenty years ago, Beck and Cowan refer to his statement that 'the present moment finds our society attempting to negotiate the most difficult, but at the same time most exciting, transition the human race has faced to date'. The future presents, Graves wrote in 1974, three distinct possibilities:

- A massive regression back to our stone-age beginnings if we fail to stabilize our world's weapons and endangered resources
- A version of George Orwell's *1984*, embodied in forms of **BLUE-ORANGE-GREEN** tyrannical, manipulative government with glossed over communitarian overtones
- The emergence of a Second Tier approach to business and society which would be fundamentally different from the one we know today, equipped to act locally and plan globally while acting globally and planning locally at the same time.

The choice, inevitably they say, is ours.





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