

The Amazing Spiral

WE LIVE IN AN EXTRAORDINARY TIME: all of the world's cultures, past and present, are to some degree available to us, either in historical records or as living entities. In the history of the planet Earth, this has never happened before.

It seems hard to imagine, but for humanity's entire stay on this planet—for some million years up to the present—a person was born into a culture that knew virtually nothing about any other. You were, for example, born a Chinese, raised a Chinese, married a Chinese, and followed a Chinese religion—often living in the same hut for your entire life, on a spot of land that your ancestors settled for centuries. From isolated tribes and bands, to small farming villages, to ancient nations, to conquering feudal empires, to international corporate states, to global village: the extraordinary growth toward an integral village that seems humanity's destiny.

So it is that the leading edge of consciousness evolution stands today on the brink of an integral millennium—or at least the possibility of an integral millennium—where the sum total of extant human knowledge, wisdom, and technology is available to all. And sooner or later we will have, of course, a Theory of Everything to explain it all. . . .

But, as we will see, there are several obstacles to that integral understanding, even in the most developed populations. Moreover, there is the more typical or average mode of consciousness, which is

far from integral anything and is in desperate need of its own tending. Both of those pressing issues—the integral vision as it relates to the most developed and the modestly developed populations—are some of the central topics of this book. Even if we have a Theory of Everything that charitably embraces all and unduly marginalizes none, will it really benefit all peoples? And how can we help to ensure that it does?

In short, what is the status of the integral vision in today's world, both in the cultural elite and in the world at large? Let us start with the leading edge, and the many obstacles to an integral vision in our cultural elite.

FRAGMENTATION AT THE LEADING EDGE

Integral: the word means to integrate, to bring together, to join, to link, to embrace. Not in the sense of uniformity, and not in the sense of ironing out all the wonderful differences, colors, zigs and zags of a rainbow-hued humanity, but in the sense of unity-in-diversity, shared commonalities along with our wonderful differences. And not just in humanity, but in the Kosmos at large: finding a more comprehensive view—a Theory of Everything (T.O.E.)—that makes legitimate room for art, morals, science, and religion, and doesn't merely attempt to reduce them all to one's favorite slice of the Kosmic pie.

And, of course, if we succeed in developing a truly holistic or integral view of reality, then we will also develop a new type of critical theory—that is, a theory that is critical of the present state of affairs in light of a more encompassing and desirable state, both in the individual and the culture at large. The integral paradigm will inherently be critical of those approaches that are, by comparison, partial, narrow, shallow, less encompassing, less integrative.

We will be exploring this integral vision, this T.O.E., in the following pages. But it is definitely not a final view or a fixed view or the only view; just a view that attempts to honor and include as much research as possible from the largest number of disciplines in a coherent fashion (which is one definition of an integral or more comprehensive view of the Kosmos).¹

Yet the very attempt itself does raise the interesting question: can a truly integral vision exist in today's climate of culture wars, iden-

tity politics, a million new and conflicting paradigms, deconstructive postmodernism, nihilism, pluralistic relativism, and the politics of self? Can a T.O.E. even be recognized, let alone accepted, in such a cultural state? Aren't the cultural elite themselves in as fragmented and rancorous a state as ever? Perhaps the masses of humanity are bent on tribal warfare and ethnocentric cleansing; but what if the cultural elite itself is likewise so inclined?

We are talking, in other words, about the leading edge of consciousness evolution itself, and whether even the leading edge is truly ready for an integral vision. In the end we will find, I believe, that there is some very good news in all this; but first, a little bit of what I see as the bad news.

BOOMERITIS

The baby boomer generation has, like any generation, its strengths and weaknesses. Its strengths include an extraordinary vitality, creativity, and idealism, plus a willingness to experiment with new ideas beyond traditional values. Some social observers have seen in the boomers an "awakening generation," evidenced by an extraordinary creativity in everything from music to computer technology, political action to lifestyles, ecological sensitivity to civil rights. I believe there is much truth and goodness in those endeavors, to the boomers' considerable credit.

Boomer weaknesses, most critics agree, include an unusual dose of self-absorption and narcissism, so much so that most people, boomers included, simply nod their heads in acknowledgment when the phrase "the Me generation" is mentioned.

Thus, it seems that my generation is an extraordinary mixture of greatness and narcissism, and that strange amalgam has infected almost everything we do. We don't seem content to simply have a fine new idea, we must have the new paradigm that will herald one of the greatest transformations in the history of the world. We don't really want to just recycle bottles and paper; we need to see ourselves dramatically saving the planet and saving Gaia and resurrecting the Goddess that previous generations had brutally repressed but we will finally liberate. We aren't able to tend our garden; we must be transfiguring the face of the planet in the most astonishing global awak-

ening history has ever seen. We seem to need to see ourselves as the vanguard of something unprecedented in all of history: the extraordinary wonder of being us.

Well, it can be pretty funny if you think about it, and I truly don't mean any of this in a harsh way. Each generation has its foibles; this appears to be ours, at least to some degree. But I believe few of my generation escape this narcissistic mood. Many social critics have agreed, and not just in such penetrating works as Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism*, Restak's *Self Seekers*, Bellah's *Habits of the Heart*, and Stern's *Me: The Narcissistic American*. Surveying the present state of cultural studies even in American universities, Professor Frank Lentricchia, writing in *lingua franca: The Review of Academic Life*, concluded: "It is impossible, this much is clear, to exaggerate the heroic self-inflation of academic literary and cultural criticism."

Well, ouch. But it's true that if you peruse books on cultural studies, alternative spirituality, the new paradigm, and the great transformation that will occur if the world simply listens to the author and his or her revolutionary ideas, sooner or later this "heroic self-inflation" starts to get to you. Curious as to what all the self-inflation might actually mean, I researched and wrote a book about this strange affliction that seems to shadow my generation, this odd mixture of remarkably high cognitive capacity and wonderfully creative intelligence coupled with an unusual dose of emotional narcissism. Of course, as I said, all previous generations had their own imperfections aplenty; I am by no means picking on boomers. It is just that "awakening generations" often have a particularly intense downside, simply because they are so intense in general, and for boomers, it appears to be a bit of self-inflation, a love affair *avec soi* (along the lines of Oscar Levant's quip to Gershwin: "Tell me, George, if you had it to do all over again, would you still fall in love with yourself?")

I called the book *Boomeritis*. It chronicled dozens of areas and disciplines where an important but partial truth was blown all out of proportion by an overestimation of the power and importance of the self.² In a moment I will briefly outline its general conclusions, only because, as I said, this relates directly to an integral vision and its reception in today's world. The idea is simple enough: the Culture of Narcissism is antithetical to an integral culture (because narcissistic, isolated selves strenuously resist communion). And thus the point

remains: is the world ready for integral anything? If not, what is preventing it?

THE WAVES OF EXISTENCE

Developmental psychology is the study of the growth and development of the mind—the study of interior development and consciousness evolution. So let us ask: Can developmental psychology shed any light on this problem?

One of the striking things about the present state of developmental studies is how similar, in broad outline, most of its models are. Indeed, in *Integral Psychology* I assembled the conclusions of over one hundred different researchers, and, as one of them summarized the situation, "The stage sequences [of all of these theorists] can be aligned across a common developmental space. The harmony of alignment shown suggests a possible reconciliation of [these] theories. . . ."³

From Clare Graves to Abraham Maslow; from Deirdre Kramer to Jan Sinnott; from Jürgen Habermas to Cheryl Armon; from Kurt Fischer to Jenny Wade; from Robert Kegan to Susanne Cook-Greuter, there emerges a remarkably consistent story of the evolution of consciousness. Of course there are dozens of disagreements and hundreds of conflicting details. But they all tell a generally similar tale of the growth and development of the mind *as a series of unfolding stages or waves*.

Few of these developmental schemes are the rigid, linear, clunk-and-grind models portrayed by their critics. Development is not a linear ladder but a fluid and flowing affair, with spirals, swirls, streams, and waves—and what appear to be an almost infinite number of multiple modalities. Most of today's sophisticated developmental theories take all of that into account, and—more important—back it with substantial research.

Let me give one of them as an example. The model is called Spiral Dynamics, based on the pioneering work of Clare Graves. Graves proposed a profound and elegant system of human development, which subsequent research has validated and refined, not refuted. "Briefly, what I am proposing is that 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. 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 system, belief systems, conception of mental health, ideas as to what mental illness is and how it should be treated, conceptions of and preferences for management, education, economics, and political theory and practice are all appropriate to that state."⁴

Graves outlined around eight major "levels or waves of human existence," as we will see in a moment. But it should be remembered that virtually all of these stage conceptions—from Abraham Maslow to Jane Loevinger to Robert Kegan to Clare Graves—are based on extensive amounts of research and data. These are not simply conceptual ideas and pet theories, but are grounded at every point in a considerable amount of carefully checked evidence. Many of the stage models, in fact, have been carefully checked in first-, second-, and third-world countries.⁵ The same is true with Graves's model; to date, it has been tested in more than fifty thousand people from around the world, and there have been no major exceptions found to the general scheme.⁶

Of course, this does not mean that any of these schemes gives the whole story, or even most of it. They are all simply partial snapshots of the great River of Life, and they are all useful when looking at the River from that particular angle. This does not prevent other pictures from being equally useful, nor does it mean that these pictures cannot be refined with further study. *What it does mean is that any attempt to understand humanity's struggle to reach an integral embrace ought to take these studies into account.*

THE HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS PROJECT

These studies, in fact, appear to be a crucial part of any genuine Theory of Everything. If we are going to include the physical, biological, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of existence, then this important research offers us a more generous overview of the many possibilities of the psychological dimension.

In a sense, this research is the psychological correlate of the Human Genome Project, which involves the scientific mapping of all of the genes in human DNA. Just so, this overall psychological research—this Human Consciousness Project—is a cross-cultural mapping of all of the states, structures, memes, types, levels, stages, and waves of human consciousness.⁷ This overall map, as we will see, then becomes the psychological component of a possible Theory of Everything, where it will be supplemented with findings from the physical, biological, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. And, we will also see, this psychological map will help us to understand some of the many obstacles that make it hard for individuals to appreciate a more integral vision of their own possibilities.

We return, then, to Clare Graves's work, which has been carried forward and refined by Don Beck and Christopher Cowan in an approach they call Spiral Dynamics.⁸ Far from being mere armchair analysts, Beck and Cowan were participants in the discussions that led to the end of apartheid in South Africa. The principles of Spiral Dynamics have been fruitfully used to reorganize businesses, revitalize townships, overhaul education systems, and defuse inner-city tensions.

Spiral Dynamics sees human development as proceeding through eight general stages, which are also called *memes* (see fig. 1-1). "Meme" is a word that is used a lot nowadays, with many different and conflicting meanings—and many critics say the word has no meaning at all.⁹ But for Spiral Dynamics, a meme is simply *a basic stage of development that can be expressed in any activity* (we will see many examples of this as we proceed). Beck and Cowan affirm that memes (or stages) are not rigid levels but flowing waves, with much overlap and interweaving, resulting in a meshwork or dynamic spiral of consciousness unfolding. As Beck puts it, "The Spiral is messy, not symmetrical, with multiple admixtures rather than pure types. These are mosaics, meshes, and blends."¹⁰

Beck and Cowan use various names and colors to refer to these different memes or waves of existence. The use of colors almost always puts people off, at first. But Beck and Cowan often work in racially charged areas, and they have found that it helps to take peoples' minds off of skin color and focus on the "color of the meme" instead of the "color of the skin." Moreover, as much research has continued to confirm, *each and every individual has all of these memes potentially available to them.* And therefore the lines of social

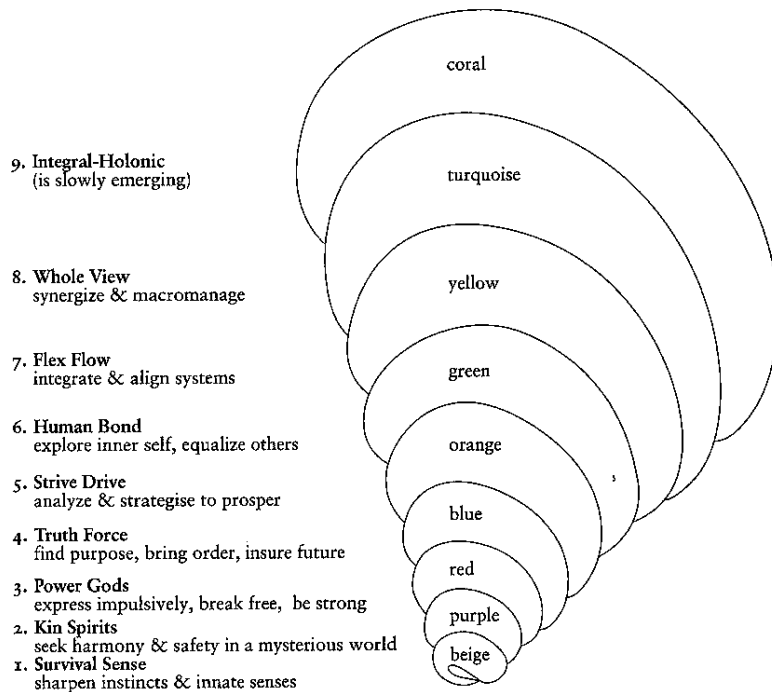


Figure 1-1. *The Spiral of Development*. Adapted by permission from Don Beck and Chris Cowan, *Spiral Dynamics: Mastering Values, Leadership, and Change* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1995).

tension are completely redrawn: not based on skin color, economic class, or political clout, but on the type of meme a person is operating from. In a particular situation it is no longer “black versus white,” but perhaps blue versus purple, or orange versus green, and so on; and while skin color cannot be changed, consciousness can. As Beck puts it, “The focus is not on types of people, but types *in* people.”

The first six levels are “subsistence levels” marked by “first-tier thinking.” Then there occurs a revolutionary shift in consciousness: the emergence of “being levels” and “second-tier thinking,” of which there are two major waves. Here is a brief description of all eight waves, the percentage of the world population at each wave, and the percentage of social power held by each.¹¹

1. *Beige: Archaic-Instinctual*. The level of basic survival; food, water, warmth, sex, and safety have priority. Uses habits and instincts just to survive. Distinct self is barely awakened or sustained. Forms into *survival bands* to perpetuate life.

Where seen: First human societies, newborn infants, senile elderly, late-stage Alzheimer’s victims, mentally ill street people, starving masses, shell shock. Approximately 0.1 percent of the adult population, 0 percent power.

2. *Purple: Magical-Animistic*. Thinking is animistic; magical spirits, good and bad, swarm the earth leaving blessings, curses, and spells which determine events. Forms into *ethnic tribes*. The spirits exist in ancestors and bond the tribe. Kinship and lineage establish political links. Sounds “holistic” but is actually atomistic: “There is a name for each bend in the river but no name for the river.”

Where seen: Belief in voodoo-like curses, blood oaths, ancient grudges, good-luck charms, family rituals, magical ethnic beliefs and superstitions; strong in third-world settings, gangs, athletic teams, and corporate “tribes.” 10 percent of the population, 1 percent of the power.

3. *Red: Power Gods*. First emergence of a self distinct from the tribe; powerful, impulsive, egocentric, heroic. Magical-mythic spirits, dragons, beasts, and powerful people. Archetypal gods and goddesses, powerful beings, forces to be reckoned with, both good and bad. Feudal lords protect underlings in exchange for obedience and labor. The basis of *feudal empires*—power and glory. The world is a jungle full of threats and predators. Conquers, outfoxes, and dominates; enjoys self to the fullest without regret or remorse; be here now.

Where seen: The “terrible twos,” rebellious youth, frontier mentalities, feudal kingdoms, epic heroes, James Bond villains, gang leaders, soldiers of fortune, New-Age narcissism, wild rock stars, Attila the Hun, *Lord of the Flies*. 20 percent of the population, 5 percent of the power.

4. *Blue: Mythic Order*. Life has meaning, direction, and purpose, with outcomes determined by an all-powerful Other or Order. This righteous Order enforces a code of conduct based on abso-

lutist and unvarying principles of “right” and “wrong.” Violating the code or rules has severe, perhaps everlasting repercussions. Following the code yields rewards for the faithful. Basis of *ancient nations*. Rigid social hierarchies; paternalistic; one right way and only one right way to think about everything. Law and order; impulsivity controlled through guilt; concrete-literal and fundamentalist belief; obedience to the rule of Order; strongly conventional and conformist. Often “religious” or “mythic” [in the mythic-membership sense; Graves and Beck refer to it as the “saintly/absolutistic” level], but can be secular or atheistic Order or Mission.

Where seen: Puritan America, Confucian China, Dickensian England, Singapore discipline, totalitarianism, codes of chivalry and honor, charitable good deeds, religious fundamentalism (e.g., Christian and Islamic), Boy and Girl Scouts, “moral majority,” patriotism. 40 percent of the population, 30 percent of the power.

5. *Orange: Scientific Achievement.* At this wave, the self “escapes” from the “herd mentality” of blue, and seeks truth and meaning in individualistic terms—hypothetico-deductive, experimental, objective, mechanistic, operational—“scientific” in the typical sense. The world is a rational and well-oiled machine with natural laws that can be learned, mastered, and manipulated for one’s own purposes. Highly achievement oriented, especially (in America) toward materialistic gains. The laws of science rule politics, the economy, and human events. The world is a chessboard on which games are played as winners gain pre-eminence and perks over losers. Marketplace alliances; manipulate earth’s resources for one’s strategic gains. Basis of *corporate states*.

Where seen: The Enlightenment, Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*, Wall Street, emerging middle classes around the world, cosmetics industry, trophy hunting, colonialism, the Cold War, fashion industry, materialism, secular humanism, liberal self-interest. 30 percent of the population, 50 percent of the power.

6. *Green: The Sensitive Self.* Communitarian, human bonding, ecological sensitivity, networking. The human spirit must be freed from greed, dogma, and divisiveness; feelings and caring

supersede cold rationality; cherishing of the earth, Gaia, life. Against hierarchy; establishes lateral bonding and linking. Permeable self, relational self, group intermeshing. Emphasis on dialogue, relationships. Basis of *value communities* (i.e., freely chosen affiliations based on shared sentiments). Reaches decisions through reconciliation and consensus (downside: interminable “processing” and incapacity to reach decisions). Refresh spirituality, bring harmony, enrich human potential. Strongly egalitarian, antihierarchy, pluralistic values, social construction of reality, diversity, multiculturalism, relativistic value systems; this worldview is often called *pluralistic relativism*. Subjective, nonlinear thinking; shows a greater degree of affective warmth, sensitivity, and caring, for earth and all its inhabitants.

Where seen: Deep ecology, postmodernism, Netherlands idealism, Rogerian counseling, Canadian health care, humanistic psychology, liberation theology, cooperative inquiry, World Council of Churches, Greenpeace, animal rights, ecofeminism, post-colonialism, Foucault/Derrida, politically correct, diversity movements, human rights issues, ecopsychology. 10 percent of the population, 15 percent of the power.

With the completion of the green meme, human consciousness is poised for a quantum jump into “second-tier thinking.” Clare Graves referred to this as a “momentous leap,” where “a chasm of unbelievable depth of meaning is crossed.” In essence, with second-tier consciousness, one can think *both* vertically and horizontally, using both hierarchies and heterarchies (both ranking and linking). One can therefore, for the first time, *vividly grasp the entire spectrum of interior development*, and thus see that each level, each meme, each wave is crucially important for the health of the overall Spiral.

As I would word it, each wave is “transcend and include.” That is, each wave goes beyond (or transcends) its predecessor, and yet it includes or embraces it in its own makeup. For example, a cell transcends but includes molecules, which transcend but include atoms. To say that a molecule goes beyond an atom is not to say that molecules hate atoms, but that they love them: they embrace them in their own makeup; they include them, they don’t marginalize them. Just so, each wave of existence is a fundamental ingredient of all subsequent waves, and thus each is to be cherished and embraced.

Moreover, each wave can itself be activated or reactivated as life circumstances warrant.¹² In emergency situations, we can activate red power drives; in response to chaos, we might need to activate blue order; in looking for a new job, we might need orange achievement drives; in marriage and with friends, close green bonding. All of these memes have something important to contribute.

But what none of the first-tier memes can do, on their own, is fully appreciate the existence of the other memes. Each of the first-tier memes thinks that its worldview is the correct or best perspective. It reacts negatively if challenged; it lashes out, using its own tools, whenever it is threatened. Blue order is very uncomfortable with both red impulsiveness and orange individualism. Orange individualism thinks blue order is for suckers and green egalitarianism is weak and woo-woo. Green egalitarianism cannot easily abide excellence and value rankings, big pictures, hierarchies, or anything that appears authoritarian, and thus green reacts strongly to blue, orange, and anything post-green.

All of that begins to change with second-tier thinking. Because second-tier consciousness is fully aware of the interior stages of development—even if it cannot articulate them in a technical fashion—it steps back and grasps the big picture, and thus second-tier thinking appreciates the *necessary role that all of the various memes play*. Second-tier awareness thinks in terms of the overall spiral of existence, and not merely in the terms of any one level.

Where the green meme begins to grasp the numerous different systems and pluralistic contexts that exist in different cultures (which is why it is indeed the sensitive self, i.e., sensitive to the marginalization of others), second-tier thinking goes one step further. It looks for the rich contexts that link and join these pluralistic systems, and thus it takes these separate systems and begins to embrace, include, and integrate them into holistic spirals and integral meshworks. Second-tier thinking, in other words, is instrumental in moving from relativism to holism, or from *pluralism to integralism*.

The extensive research of Graves, Beck, and Cowan indicates that there are at least two major waves to this second-tier integral consciousness:

7. *Yellow: Integrative.* Life is a kaleidoscope of natural hierarchies [holarchies], systems, and forms. Flexibility, spontaneity, and functionality have the highest priority. Differences and plur-

alities can be integrated into interdependent, natural flows. Egalitarianism is complemented with natural degrees of ranking and excellence. Knowledge and competency should supersede power, status, or group sensitivity. The prevailing world order is the result of the existence of different levels of reality (memes) and the inevitable patterns of movement up and down the dynamic spiral. Good governance facilitates the emergence of entities through the levels of increasing complexity (nested hierarchy). 1 percent of the population, 5 percent of the power.

8. *Turquoise: Holistic.* Universal holistic system, holons/waves of integrative energies; unites feeling with knowledge; multiple levels interwoven into one conscious system.¹³ Universal order, but in a living, conscious fashion, not based on external rules (blue) or group bonds (green). A “grand unification” [T.O.E.] is possible, in theory and in actuality. Sometimes involves the emergence of a new spirituality as a meshwork of all existence. Turquoise thinking uses the entire Spiral; sees multiple levels of interaction; detects harmonics, the mystical forces, and the pervasive flow-states that permeate any organization. 0.1 percent of the population, 1 percent of the power.

With less than 2 percent of the population at second-tier thinking (and only 0.1 percent at turquoise), second-tier consciousness is relatively rare because it is now the “leading edge” of collective human evolution. As examples, Beck and Cowan mention items that include Teilhard de Chardin’s noosphere, the growth of transpersonal psychology, chaos and complexity theories, integral-holistic systems thinking, Gandhi’s and Mandela’s pluralistic integration, with increases in frequency definitely on the way, and even higher memes still in the offing. . . .

THE JUMP TO SECOND-TIER CONSCIOUSNESS

As Beck and Cowan point out, second-tier thinking has to emerge in the face of much resistance from first-tier thinking. In fact, a version of the postmodern green meme, with its pluralism and relativism, has actively fought the emergence of more integrative and holistic thinking. And yet without second-tier thinking, as Graves, Beck, and

Cowan point out, humanity is destined to remain victims of a global “autoimmune disease,” where various memes turn on each other in an attempt to establish supremacy.

This is why many arguments are not really a matter of the better *objective* evidence, but of the *subjective level* of those arguing. No amount of orange scientific evidence will convince blue mythic believers; no amount of green bonding will impress orange aggressiveness; no amount of turquoise holism will dislodge green pluralism—unless the individual is ready to develop forward through the dynamic spiral of consciousness unfolding. This is why “cross-level” debates are rarely resolved, and all parties usually feel unheard and unappreciated.

Likewise, nothing that can be said in this book will convince you that a T.O.E. is possible, unless you already have a touch of turquoise coloring your cognitive palette (and then you will think, on many a page, “I already knew that! I just didn’t know how to articulate it”).

As we were saying, first-tier memes generally resist the emergence of second-tier memes. Scientific materialism (orange) is aggressively reductionistic toward second-tier constructs, attempting to reduce all interior stages to objective neuronal fireworks. Mythic fundamentalism (blue) is often outraged at what it sees as attempts to unseat its given Order. Egocentrism (red) ignores second tier altogether. Magic (purple) puts a hex on it. Green accuses second-tier consciousness of being authoritarian, rigidly hierarchical, patriarchal, marginalizing, oppressive, racist, and sexist.

Green has been in charge of cultural studies for the past three decades. You will probably already have recognized many of the standard catchwords of the green meme: pluralism, relativism, diversity, multiculturalism, deconstruction, antihierarchy, and so on.

On the one hand, the pluralistic relativism of green has nobly enlarged the canon of cultural studies to include many previously marginalized peoples, ideas, and narratives.¹⁴ It has acted with sensitivity and care in attempting to redress social imbalances and avoid exclusionary practices. It has been responsible for basic initiatives in civil rights and environmental protection. It has developed strong and often convincing critiques of the philosophies, metaphysics, and social practices of the conventional religious (blue) and scientific (orange) memes, with their often exclusionary, patriarchal, sexist, and colonialistic agendas.

On the other hand, as effective as these critiques of pre-green stages have been, green has attempted to turn its guns on all post-green stages as well, with the most unfortunate results. This has made it very difficult, and often impossible, for green to move forward into more holistic, integral constructions.

Because pluralistic relativism (green) moves beyond mythic absolutisms (blue) and formal rationality (orange) into richly textured and individualistic contexts, one of its defining characteristics is its strong *subjectivism*. This means that its sanctions for truth and goodness are established largely by individual preferences (as long as the individual is not harming others). What is true for you is not necessarily true for me; what is right is simply what individuals or cultures happen to agree on at any given moment; there are no universal claims for knowledge or truth; each person is free to find his or her own values, which are not binding on anybody else. “You do your thing; I do mine” is a popular summary of this stance.

This is why the self at this stage is indeed the “sensitive self.” Precisely because it is aware of the many different contexts and numerous different types of truth (pluralism), it bends over backwards in an attempt to let each truth have its own say, without marginalizing or belittling any. As with the catchwords “antihierarchy,” “pluralism,” “relativism,” and “egalitarianism,” whenever you hear the word “marginalization” and a criticism of it, you are almost always in the presence of a green meme.

This noble intent, of course, has its downside. Meetings that are run on green principles tend to follow a similar course: everybody is allowed to express his or her feelings, which often takes hours; there is an almost interminable processing of opinions, often reaching no decision or course of action, since a specific course of action would likely exclude somebody. Thus there are often calls for an inclusionary, nonmarginalizing, compassionate embrace of all views, but exactly how to do this is rarely spelled out, since in reality not all views are of equal merit. The meeting is considered a success, not if a conclusion is reached, but if everybody has a chance to share their feelings. Since no view is supposed to be inherently better than another, no real course of action can be recommended, other than sharing all views. If any statements are made with certainty, it is how oppressive and nasty all the alternative conceptions are. There was a saying common in the sixties: “Freedom is an endless meeting.” Well, the endless part was certainly right.

In academia, this pluralistic relativism is the dominant stance. As Colin McGuinn summarizes it: “According to this conception, human reason is inherently local, culture-relative, rooted in the variable facts of human nature and history, a matter of divergent ‘practices’ and ‘forms of life’ and ‘frames of reference’ and ‘conceptual schemes.’ There are no norms of reasoning that transcend what is accepted by a society or an epoch, no objective justifications for belief that everyone must respect on pain of cognitive malfunction. To be valid is to be taken to be valid, and different people can have legitimately different patterns of taking. In the end, the only justifications for belief have the form ‘justified for me.’”¹⁵ As Clare Graves put it, “This system sees the world relativistically. Thinking shows an almost radical, almost compulsive emphasis on seeing everything from a relativistic, subjective frame of reference.”

The point is perhaps obvious: because pluralistic relativism has such an intensely subjectivistic stance, it is especially prey to narcissism. And exactly that is the crux of the problem: *pluralism becomes a supermagnet for narcissism*. Pluralism becomes an unwitting home for the Culture of Narcissism, and narcissism is the great destroyer of any integral culture in general and a T.O.E. in particular (because narcissism refuses to step outside of its own subjective orbit and hence it cannot allow truths other than its own). Thus, on our list of obstacles to a genuine Theory of Everything, we might list the Culture of Narcissism.

And this is where boomeritis enters the picture.

2

Boomeritis

Bore: a person of low taste, more interested in himself than in me.

—AMBROSE BIERCE

THE DICTIONARY DEFINITION of *narcissism* is “excessive interest in one’s own self, importance, abilities, etc.; egocentrism.” Yet narcissism is not simply the overvaluing of the self and its abilities, but a concomitant undervaluing of others and their contributions. It is not simply possessing a large amount of self-esteem; it is the simultaneous devaluation of others that is crucial. The inner state of narcissism, clinicians tell us, is often that of an empty or fragmented self, attempting to fill the void with an egocentric grasping that inflates the self while deflating others. The emotional mood is, “Nobody tells me what to do!”

Most psychologists agree that, although there are many ways to look at narcissism (and many different types of narcissism), it is, in general, a normal trait of childhood that is ideally outgrown, at least to a significant degree. Development, in fact, can be defined as a *successive decrease in egocentrism*. The young infant is largely wrapped up in its own world, oblivious to much of its surroundings and most human interactions.¹ As its consciousness increasingly grows in strength and capacity, it can become aware of itself, and of others, and eventually put itself in others’ shoes and thus develop care, compassion, and a generous integral embrace—none of which it is born with.