

What is wrong with Spiral Dynamics and Management Drives: a critique of Graves' Levels of Existence.

Joost van der Leij - joost@tiouw.com

Introduction

Spiral Dynamics are tools and services based upon Graves' Levels of Existence.¹ Management Drives is a Dutch derivative of Spiral Dynamics. Major proponents of Spiral Dynamics claim that Graves' Levels of Existence are scientific.^{2 3} In reality Graves has only published one article on his Levels of Existence in a scientific journal. (Graves 1970) This article itself is devoid of any scientific data. In fact the article falsely claims "The author's research referred to in this article is included in a book now in preparation." This book was never published. So while the article talks about Graves' data, this data is in effect non-existent. In fact, not having published the promised data makes Graves' article fraudulent. The lack of scientific data makes Spiral Dynamics a pseudoscience.

There are two criteria for a pseudoscience (Hansson 1996):

- (1) it is not scientific, and
- (2) its major proponents try to create the impression that it is scientific.

Both criteria are met for Spiral Dynamics. This article will be a close read of Graves' original article. For even as an unsupported theory, Graves' Levels of Existence make no sense. Graves' theory contradicts what is known about history, culture, biology and neurology. Not only in hindsight, but even at the level of knowledge a psychology professor in the sixties ought to have. This would not have bothered Graves. For at his high level of development, a person like himself would value "inconsistencies, oppositions and flat contradictions". (p. 153) Such an attitude makes Graves' Levels of Existence infallible. For every time someone points out an inconsistency or a contradiction in his theory, Graves would simply attribute such a reaction to the lower level of development of that person. Such an attitude also makes his theory fundamentally unscientific.

¹ <https://spiraldynamics.org/about/what/>

² "So while Spiral Dynamics grew out of scientific theory, " <https://spiraldynamics.org/about/what/>

³ "This book is the worldwide first summary of Graves' original studies, audiotapes and notes, as well as a complete biography and comprehensive explanation of its scientific relevance in regard to human development" as a description of Graves' work in Clare W. Graves: His Life and His Work by Germans Krumm & Parstorfer.

A short history of human existence

Graves bases his theory on his reading of the development of humans throughout history. He sees the following eight levels of development:

1. Hunter/gatherers.
2. Primitive tribes.
3. The heroism of ancient Greece.
4. Christianity.
5. Enlightenment.
6. Humanistic culture of the seventies.
7. First being
8. Second being.

To ensure that you understand that this is not only a description of the development of humans throughout history, but also a moral story where each higher level is an improvement on the lower levels, Graves calls the first six levels animalistic and a “subsistence” and only the last two true human existence. “Subsistence” is a minimal level of existence. At the level of “subsistence” one is not truly a human being. Only at the level of first and second being, is one a human being. “He is, now, for the first time in his existence truly becoming a human being.” (p. 141) Another word for beings who are not truly human, but only a “subsistence” would of course be “subhumans”. Due to the terrible history of the term “subhumans” Graves obviously does not want to use that term. Yet, nothing in his writing makes clear how beings with only “subsistence” differ from subhumans. By stating that one only at the levels of first and second being truly become human beings, one cannot escape the conclusion that at a lower level Graves thinks of people as subhumans.

Only a few men have actually achieved the seventh level, although it is obvious Graves considered himself to be one of them as we will see. In fact Graves is so far ahead of the rest of the world that in 1970 Graves is already transitioning towards the highest level. “These eight level experientialistic values are only beginning to emerge in the lives of some men.” (p.155) So Graves is, according to himself, on the cusp to achieve yet an even higher level, while almost everybody else on the planet is still stuck in the lower animalistic levels that do not even constitute true human beings. If you think I go overboard on this interpretation of Graves' work, please see Tribute Speech for Dr. Don Edward Beck, the associate of Graves who developed Spiral Dynamics. Self proclaimed “evolution leaders” praise Beck as follows:

“A Superpower Vision-Holder driven relentlessly to serve, you have seen a way for potential possibilities to manifest. You have known that as we find ways to bring balance into the world, this will co-create a unique situation where humanity can evolve... ultimately into its full potential rooted in Love.”⁴

⁴ <https://www.thehaguecenter.org/tribute-speech-for-dr-don-edward-beck/>

As you can see, true human beings of level seven and eight, steer human evolution at a planetary level, rather than the self centered animalistic “subsistences” that the rest of mankind is.

In short, the whole of Western civilization leads up to Graves. A common mistake that many thinkers have made.

A short history of human development

The next step that Graves makes is that he states that not only can you find his levels of existence in history, but you can also find them in the development of an individual. As we become older, we move through his levels of existence until the moment when we get stuck at the level we’re currently at. As personal development Graves’ Levels of Existence become:

1. Imprinting.
2. Associative or Pavlovian learning.
3. Instrumental learning.
4. Reasons.
5. Science.
6. Community.
7. Knowing.
8. Understanding.

For each of these levels Graves not only thought that there were specific sets of values, but that there were also underlying neurological correlates that would still be turned off if one did not reach that level of existence yet. Graves believed in the nowadays disregarded idea that currently only parts of our brain work and that if you develop yourself you will activate so far unused parts of your brain to gain higher powers. Powers that enable you to face “existence in all its dimensions, both those which seem to be known and those which are unexplained”. (p.153) It looks as if the paranormal is only misunderstood so far, because we have not yet been able to activate so far hidden neurological structures. Yet, no such structures have been found by neuroscience.

Furthermore, while imprinting, associative learning and instrumental learning do exist, they start functioning the moment one is born. Splitting normal brain functions into distinct levels of existence that can only be reached if you are able to breakthrough to a higher level, is a complete mistake. Just because different brain structures have different functions, doesn’t mean that these functions are only activated if you reach a certain level. What’s obvious in both his historic levels as his psychological levels is that Graves simply projects his own hierarchy of values onto history and mankind. That he uses his system to divide people into subhumans and true human beings, is a division that seems to fly in the face of his own humanistic values. Yet, it also seems that he was not aware of this glaring inconsistency. It would be a challenge, even for Graves, to ignore this inconsistency with an appeal to being a true human being functioning at a higher level where he values such inconsistencies.

Real world problems

One might wonder why this matters. If some group of people want to feel good by appointing themselves to be an “evolution leader”, why not let them at it? But Spiral Dynamics is used every day to “discover” at which level an organization or an individual is stuck. Graves thinks that “In our world of past and present there are societies and people at all levels”. (p. 155) Given that Graves’ Levels of Existence for both organizations and individuals are false, people are coaxed into believing in these falsehoods. If one were only to have to believe in general theory, that would be of limited harm. But one has to apply these falsehoods to one’s own life. Language has a hypnotic influence. Words are powerful. (Nash 2008)

By applying Spiral Dynamics or Management Drives to your own life, one can’t escape the conclusion that your current values are inferior and that you must strive to better yourself and adapt the values of the next level as described by Graves’ Levels of Existence. Although Graves calls his system amoral, in reality if you are stuck at one of the first six levels, you are not a true human being. There might not be an explicit “ought” in Graves’ system, there sure is an implicit “ought” to move up in his levels of existence. If you do not wish to be a “evolutionary leader” yourself, you are a bad person. In fact you are subhuman. Only by buying Spiral Dynamics courses one can become a “Spiral Wizard” or a “Meshweaver”.⁵ While even the insane can be successful for a short period of time, believing in nonsense increases the probability that real harm comes your way.

Close reading Graves’ Levels of Existence inconsistencies and flat contradictions

A fair warning before we delve into each level of existence. If you are old, you are doomed. Because according to Graves moving up a level is only possible for “energetic youth”. (p. 145)

Level 1 & 2 men don’t perceive causality. Again, reality contradicts this. Our brain produces a folk physics so that from a very early age, if not birth, we perceive what we think are causes and effects. Even though our folk physics is mostly wrong, evolutionarily it gives us an advantage as our wrongly attributed causes and effects, still make us behave in such a way that we move out of harm’s way.

Graves indicates that level 1 is such a primitive level that in reality no-one can really exist at this level. It is more of a theoretical level. (p. 144) Yet, at the same time Graves also claims that in the present there are people at all levels, including level 1.

Level 2 man lives in a magical world. But Graves overlooks the fact that magical thinking is a way of attributing causes and effects. Magical thinking attributes cause and effect to entities of which we doubt that they have a real existence. Given that Graves thinks that one can unlock new powers in the brain that enable you to face existence in all its dimensions, even

⁵ <https://www.thehaguecenter.org/tribute-speech-for-dr-don-edward-beck/>

those that are unexplained, it seems weird that Graves thinks of magic as only being at level 2. For being able to face unexplained dimensions of existence, sounds like magical thinking.

Level 2 man “lives in a primaeval world of no separation between subject and object”. (p. 137) This is the objective of many Hindu and Buddhist meditations. Yet, Graves calls Nirvana, this meditative objective, part of level 4 man. (p. 148) Graves reads a Christian salvation value in Nirvana, thus also introducing a Western cultural superiority besides his “true human beings” superiority. His description of Eastern self-sacrifice flies in the face of for instance Tantric yoga.

Level 3 man becomes self-aware, but one can only reach level 3 if “three conditions come to exist”. (p. 138) But one of these preconditions is “insight”. (p. 138) Yet, insight is already pretty much self-awareness. So Graves is simply presupposing here what he thinks is happening. According to Graves insight leads to intentionality and instrumental learning. Instrumental learning is Skinner’s operant conditioning. (Skinner 1953) But Skinner denies intentionality. The whole concept of intentionality is quite problematic. (Stich 1995) Yet, more importantly it contradicts instrumental learning. While Graves has somewhat of an explanation of how one moves from level 1 to level 2 (mostly due to level 1 being impossible to actually live like that), from level 3 onwards there is no longer any explanation whatsoever. Graves simply posits that such transitions are possible and in fact do happen. But no data or even reasons are given.

Level 4 man is a Christian, even if he’s not a Christian, because Graves thinks that all religious systems are about salvation and self-sacrifice, no matter whether they are Western or Eastern religions.

Level 4 man cannot move on to the next level until he perceives his next set of problems. (p. 149) This next set of problems is “that he cannot have enjoyment in this life so long as he is at the mercy of an unknown world, so long as he is the servant of the universe rather than its master, so long as he does not express his independence from pre-determined fate.” (p. 149) Here we run into rhetorical tricks. “Perceiving” creates the presupposition that whatever you perceive actually exists. Yet, the description of the problem is completely metaphorical and does not really exist. Furthermore, again Graves presupposes the values of the higher level as a precondition for reaching that higher level.

Level 5 man also comes into existence without any explanation whatsoever. If you perceive the above problem, you become a level 5 man. Graves uses the word “Thus” here, although no logical conclusion could be drawn on what he wrote before the “thus”. (p. 149) Again Graves posit a transition from one level to another without giving any explanation as to how and why. Remember that this transition also involves the activation of neurological circuitry inside your brain that until now has been turned off, but by transitioning to the next level is turned on. No such activation of neurological circuitry is ever witnessed by neuroscience.

Level 5 man embraces both rationalism and empiricism. But Graves is oblivious to the contradictions between rationalism and empiricism. Furthermore, he then adds pragmatism on top of that, again ignoring the contradictions one gets when one wants to combine,

rationalism, empiricism and pragmatism all in one. Graves' contradictory rational, empiricist and pragmatic worldview leads to the value of "equality of opportunity". Unfortunately, Graves doesn't give us an explanation of how rationalism, empiricism and pragmatism lead to egalitarianism. As everywhere it seems much more that Graves is simply projecting his own values into his theory to uplift his particular values to values that are to be understood in the light of the general development of mankind.

Level 6 man is the bridge between animals and humans. Not a true human yet, but almost there. Comparing humans and animals was an important activity of philosophical anthropology in the nineteenth century. Philosophers stopped trying to compare humans to animals as it turns out it is a very empty and fruitless comparison. Trying to find reasons why humans are not animals, tells you very little about humans.

Level 6 man "values authority ... of those contemporaries whom he values". (p. 150) This time Graves is not inconsistent or contradictory, but he uses circular reasoning. Basically level 6 man values who he values. It is an empty phrase that doesn't tell us anything.

Level 7 man has crossed the line between animals and humans and now no longer has any needs in common with animals. Unfortunately, Graves did not specify these needs. So one can only speculate as to what kind of needs Graves was referring to. Fortunately for Graves one reaches level 7 if one is "triggered by this revelation", this revelation being the unpleasant picture of the human condition being revealed. (p. 152) Revealed by whom you might ask? By Graves of course. Insight in Graves' Levels of Existence transitions you to level 7. So it is a good thing that Graves published his Levels of Existence. For without it, in his version of reality, one would be unable to reach level 7. So his own work is a fundamental part of reality, without which we could not be true human beings. It also explains why Graves is so sure that he himself has reached level 7 and is on the cusp of level 8. How could he otherwise have known about level 7, given that the picture painted by Graves' work is the key to unlock level 7?

Level 7 man "seeks a foundation for self respect which will have a firm base in existential reality". (p. 152) So how do we get this "firm base"? By being "truly rooted in knowledge and cosmic reality". First of all, it is weird to make distinctions between different kinds of reality. If it is real, it's part of reality. If it's a fantasy or magical thinking, it's not part of reality. "Cosmic reality" sounds like magical thinking. It is the appearance of the paranormal, which of course will be unlocked by turning on so far unused brain circuitry. Trust Graves. If enough men reach this level "an amazing process will be uncovered". Which is weird to be published in a scientific journal for given that so far in the history of mankind, not enough people have reached level 7, how can Graves know that an amazing process will be uncovered? Is this the "knowing" of the mystic? Not according to Graves. Graves claims that he has actual data on this event, the unfolding of level 8 man. Unfortunately, "space does not permit the development of this part of my data" because otherwise we would have had data coming in from the future! (p. 153) Talk about being paranormal!

Level 7 man values democracy above all else. (p. 154) Even though "If the situation calls for authoritarianism then it is proper to be authoritarian". (p. 152) So much for democracy being

valued above all else. Level 7 man values “that which brings good to him and all the universe.” (p. 154) Unfortunately, Graves doesn’t mention what level 7 man would do if something would be good for him and most of the universe, but not all. For instance, it would be quite bad for the existence of the asteroid we would be mining, even though its material would bring much joy to the rest of the universe. Is one still allowed to eat meat? Eating meat doesn’t seem to be good for some parts of the universe, namely those parts that get eaten. But even a vegan lifestyle would still hurt the plants that one would eat. Are we supposed to live off sunlight at level 7 as some “paranormal” people claim they do?

Here we see in the extreme the biggest issue if one focuses on values. One might have values, but one might not act and not know how to act. Level 7 man could have the best values of the world if there were to be such a thing, and still do nothing with his life and actually waste his life. Values sound nice, but don’t necessarily produce desired behavior.

Level 8 man is not here yet. But if we ever have a level 8 man “there will be no bowing to suffering, no vassalage, no peonage”. (p. 141) “There will be no pointing of the finger at other men, no segregation, depredation or degradation in behavior.” Good to know. Unfortunately, Graves only tells us what will not be the case, but forgets to make explicit what will be the case. Notwithstanding Graves’ “unpublished” data from the future, there is little else that Graves can say about level 8 man.

Conclusion

By now it is clear that Graves’ Levels of Existence are an unsupported illusion of grandeur. There is no data to support his ideas. There is no historic, developmental or logical progression from one set of values to the next. Graves has only compiled a list of his values. There are many other value sets that differ, but are at least as important. For instance, the do it yourself values of the punks, the you only live once values of the millennials or the America first values of the MAGA crowd.

Furthermore, Graves is unable to show how values translate into action. To have values is one thing, but if you are not able to turn values into concrete actions, claims about one’s values is empty rhetoric.

Does this matter for Spiral Dynamics and Management Drives? Yes, it does. First of all, as long as proponents of Spiral Dynamics or Management Drives continue to claim that there is scientific basis for their ideas, Spiral Dynamics and Management Drives are still pseudosciences. Yet, even if these proponents would stop doing that and admit that there is no scientific foundation for Spiral Dynamics and Management Drives whatsoever, they still would have the problem that if they base their ideas on the unscientific ideas of Graves, that Spiral Dynamics and Management Drives are a mess. Garbage in, garbage out.

Would it help if proponents of Spiral Dynamics and Management Drives would distance themselves from Graves his work? That can be strongly doubted. Without the illusion that there is a historic, developmental and logical progression from one level to the next, all that is left, is basically a limited number of sets of values. Many more value sets can be dreamt

up and proponents of Spiral Dynamics or Management Drives would have a hard time to explain why their sets of values matter and other value sets could be safely ignored. Without Graves' work it is impossible to justify the use of Spiral Dynamics or Management Drives.

Literature

Graves, C.W. (1970) Levels of Existence: An open system theory of values. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 10(2), 131 – 155

Hansson, Sven Ove, 1996. "Defining Pseudoscience", *Philosophia Naturalis*, 33: 169–176.

Nash, Michael R., and Amanda Barnier. *The Oxford Handbook of Hypnosis Theory, Research and Practice*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

Skinner, B. F. (1953) *Science and Human Behavior*. Classics of Medicine Library Division of Gryphon Editions,