

SS2. A Brief History of the Past Two Thousand Years ---DRAFT 1/12/11, update

10/17/15

Excerpted from “*The DoRight Leadership Corps Curriculum and Program Guidebook*”—by Scott Beall

If you have been learning about the current state of our world and the condition of the natural systems that support life, our civilization, and of course, our economy (we hear a lot about that these days...), chances are you might wonder, how did we get here? What led to this situation? Understanding the answer to these questions is the first step toward understanding a central aspect of what it will take for society to create a more sustainable future.

People’s behaviors, their decisions, their approach to solving problems, and the rules they make, are all defined by what we call *mental models*. Mental models are representations of reality that people use to understand and move through the world, what people take to be “the truth.” They are formed and reformed over time. They are often not particularly accurate representations, but they provide people with a comfort level that gives them a solid basis to move through life. **Mental models are so important for people to feel comfortable that when they learn of something that contradicts their mental model, they will often convince themselves it is false, even when there is overwhelming evidence that it is true.** This results in a certain priority for many people that feeling comfortable or secure is more important than living truth. As a result, it becomes difficult for society to learn and adapt appropriately to changing circumstances regarding global sustainability.

Some mental models that seem to drive unsustainable behaviors and the design of our civilization stem from larger worldviews about our relationship to nature and values, or what we might call the “good life.” Some examples of these types of mental models are presented below:

1. Having a big house, expensive car and material wealth is the route to happiness and satisfaction.
2. The purpose of nature is to serve people and civilization and provide resources for their development.
3. My responsibility is to myself and my family. I will take care of us and you take care of you!
4. Science and reason derive the highest form of knowledge and truth.
5. Human beings are superior to all other forms of life; they are at the top of the evolutionary chain.

Do you know any people in your life that live with these models of reality? If so, where do you think these mental models came from? How did these people adopt these models?

Mental models such as the ones above, and many others in our current era, are in part the result of a worldview that began to develop almost a thousand years ago toward human individualism, scientific world view and what we call “Modernity.” We will discuss modernity a bit later, but if you observe the timeline diagram you can see that in the 21st century we are currently moving beyond Modernity into a “post modern” era. Post modernism contains the elements of modernity while integrating wisdom from the pre modern era. We will discuss this later, but to begin, we must first understand Modernity and how it evolved.

The Great Chain of Being

Before modernity, between the birth of Christ and 1000 AD or so, reality was viewed by all the great wisdom traditions through a model known as the Great Chain of Being (a fact brought to light by Huston Smith, a great scholar of comparative religions). The diagram (fig. 1-1) depicts the relationship between the elements of the great chain—matter, life, mind, soul, and spirit—and the branch of knowledge associated with each. In pre modern times the great chain was completely integrated in that each level of existence was contained within the other. The most basic level of the great chain starting with matter, then moving up to life (life being higher than just matter but *including* matter), then moving up to mind (mind being higher than life but *including* life and matter below it), and so on up the chain, in a nested fashion. In pre modern times these levels of existence were fully *integrated in experience and culture*, all of existence being contained within the highest realm of soul and spirit.

One way of thinking of the emergence of Modernity is the breaking apart of the great chain of being, where the parts began to stand alone and lose connection to each other. In fact, modernity was the first historical movement to reduce all of the higher levels to the lowest level—matter and physics, where mind is viewed as a machine, chemicals are responsible for love and emotion (serotonin) and all reality and phenomena can be explained as physical, chemical and/or mechanical events. This began a new era of “scientific materialism.” It became the dominant official philosophy of Modernity, reducing all phenomena to the function of an “it”--matter and energy, operating as a machine. In this reality, “spirituality” is relegated to the unreal, the stuff of fairy tales and myth, and values and morality take a back seat to more concrete scientific “truths.” This may sound stark, but don’t look down on modernity just yet. We will find that modernity has been a great help to society, while actually creating some of its greatest problems as well. It has been a necessary step toward an exciting new era emerging in the 21st century.

The Cultural Value Spheres

The great contemporary philosopher Ken Wilbur reveals another way of viewing the emergence of Modernity in his book *The Marriage of Sense and Soul*. He models the “big three” components of human civilization as three “value spheres,” art, morals and science. In this model art represents the realm of the self and self-expression, morals

represents the realm of relationships to others (values and culture), and science represents the realm of the physical world (nature, a form of pure truth). These cultural value spheres have been expressed in different ways by different cultures as shown below:

Art	I	self	the beautiful
Morals	we	culture	the good
Science	it	nature	the true

In pre modern times the value spheres were fully integrated, as were the levels of the great chain of being. In the pre modern world with integrated value spheres, the idea of a “self” (art) apart from the collective “we” was not valued. Reality, or pure truth (science) was a melded blend of religion and cultural tradition. Science as we know it did not exist. An individual was part of the collective spirit, dogma, or world system; individuals could not freely express original truths from their personal observation, reflection, and deductive reasoning. Examples include the following:

1. Galileo could not look freely into his telescope and report the result because art and morals and science were all fused under the church—the morals of the church defined what science could—or could not—do. The Bible implied that the sun went around the earth and that was the end of discussion.
- 2 Musicians could not play tritons or parallel fifths without being killed or imprisoned.
3. Artists could not paint “ideas” from their imagination, artistic content had to be only that of the collective reality, that of the church.
4. Individuals could not freely choose a lover or spouse. The Troubadorian concept of romantic love did not exist. Marriages were arranged and had a social function.
5. Human rights as we know them did not exist. Democracy for all was not yet even considered.

Differentiation of the cultural value spheres—Modernity is born

Moving into the second century AD, the value spheres began to differentiate and separate from each other. This differentiation empowered humans with the idea that they could use their rational minds to define reality for themselves, as opposed to the church or social collective. This was the birth of the scientific method and the age of reason and marked a period when science began to diverge from morals (religion). Objective knowledge was born. The concept of individual rights emerged and great forms of art were born from the concept of individual freedoms that allowed people to paint ideas from their imaginations. Indeed, this spawned the Renaissance and the philosophical and mathematical thinking of Rene Descartes, who led a scientific reductionism that was able to see reality in its component parts. The differentiation of the value spheres was a form of freedom and emancipation for humanity that spawned many of the great benefits of modernity that we enjoy today: liberal democracy and

individual rights, scientific thinking, technology and medical science, values of equality and freedom, the end of slavery, secularism and much more. Modernity arrived, and indeed, at this stage of development, it was good.

Dissociation of the value spheres

The differentiation of the value spheres created a momentum that kept on rolling. Why would anyone want to stop it? Humanity became intoxicated with its new empowerment.

Leading into the 20th century, the spheres proceeded to *dissociation*, where they became not only separate and independent, but often oppositional as well. The scientific view of reality became the official worldview of modernity, and in many circles, God was dead, and hyper secularism took over. Today we still feel this tension in the battle between science and religion, faith over reason, etc. So with the benefits of modernity came some problems, which are at the root of the mental models we started this discussion on.

The dissociation of the value spheres was propelled with the thinking of the great philosopher and mathematician Rene Descartes. Descartes believed that all of nature could be viewed as complex machine, and that higher understanding came with dissecting reducing everything into measurable individual parts. This propelled the concept of scientific reductionism, leading to an official break with nature, where all of life, and emotion and spirit for that matter, could be considered an “it,” a mechanically based interaction of things and matter. Science and the resulting technology became the “god” of the day, because with science defining reality instead of religion, humanity viewed nature as less than sacred, a chaotic mess of mechanical objects that needed to be “tamed”, a commodity to be used for human benefit. A focus on interrelationships and interdependence was lost. With this break with nature, and with the forgetting that humans in fact *are* nature, a new set of mental models emerged--the mental models that would lead to designing unsustainable systems for all aspects of our technological infrastructure—agriculture, energy, transportation, industry, supply chains, land use and much more. The beginning of the 20th century and the industrial revolution represents the height of how the value sphere dissociation and modernism manifested in the formation of western civilization. Some examples:

1. Schooling—students and the process of education viewed as machines, assembly line factory efficiency models applied to the education of human beings, human considerations lost in emphasis on efficiency, skills and knowledge bits emphasized over thoughtfulness and development of the whole child,
2. Medicine—human body viewed as a machine and doctors overly specialize, loss of systems perspective (interdependence of elements), doctors trained not to feel emotions so as to not interfere with scientific objectivity, degradation of doctor-patient relationships, no consideration of mind-body relationships
3. Over secularization of society—battle between science and religion, or faith-based knowing and reason.

4. Materialistic values—dissociation of morality cultural sphere from other aspects of life leads to emphasis on the material gratification over higher virtues of integrity, spirituality, and social contribution. Spiritual malaise and loss of meaning result.

5. Environmental degradation—loss of interdependent perspective, hyper consumerism (material gratification), and disconnection with nature, view of self as separate from nature.

Reintegration of the Value Spheres in the 21st century

Ken Wilbur notes that every growth process follows a fundamental cycle—from integration (unified whole), to differentiation of parts (specialization), and finally, to reintegration (unified whole enriched from the specialization). He notes that for any organism (or system) that does not complete all three stages of growth to reintegrate the value spheres, pathology will result. The system will become dysfunctional and struggle. We can witness this process with the growth of a child in the womb. In the first stage of development the child is a collection of unspecialized stem cells, all the same, completely unified. As the child grows, the parts begin to specialize, organs form, teeth, hair, blood, nerves, and different systems. When the child enters the world, all of the separate parts integrate and work as a functioning, interdependent whole. If reintegration does not occur, the will diet, or be born with deformities.

Indeed, the task for humanity in the 21st century is to complete the third state of the growth process and reintegrate. This process has moved from an integrated pre modern world to a highly specialized modern world (value spheres differentiated followed by dissociation from each other) back to a society that reintegrates the value spheres. The lack of integration of the value spheres we have seen is a type of dysfunction that Wilbur refers to. In a human body, such dissociation of elements is disease, such as cancer. In society, dissociation that does not reintegrate threatens to lead us toward an unsustainable future that threatens the well-being of all.

The exciting news is that the 21st century is bringing the dawn of a new era, the era of reintegrating the value spheres. The beginnings of this reintegration began at the end of the 20th century. This integration is not a return to “olden days” or a regression, but a new and elevated wisdom that contains all the wisdom before it—the scientific insights from modernity with the metaphysical and spiritual insights of ancient traditions. This era can be thought of as a modernity that has become mature—one that has left adolescence to enter adulthood. What does it look like? What is the evidence of this? The following developments have all emerged over the past 30 years:

1. Schooling: Interdisciplinary curricula vs. isolated subject areas, integration of learning with real life action, social emotional considerations in teaching, emphasis on whole child, move to involve local communities in education, expanded views of intelligence (e.g. Howard Gardner)

2. Business management: Move from command and control hierarchical structures to more holistic models with local decision-making, adoption of triple bottom line (incorporating values) and social responsibility departments.
3. Science and technology: Sustainability science expansion, biomimicry, rethinking of supply chain design for systems efficiency, development of renewable fuels, emphasis on systems theory—the science of relationships between parts (moving beyond the rigidity of scientific reductionism), mind-body interrelationship discoveries.
4. Medicine: Alternative forms of treatment, consideration of nutrition and prevention by doctors as opposed to fixing broken machines, consideration of psychological and spiritual elements on healing the physical body, changes in medical school programs toward this direction.
5. Agriculture: Farms as ecosystems vs. monoculture factories, emphasis on organic methods and stewardship of nature, shift to local agriculture and economies.
6. Psychology: Jungian psychology, mind body interaction research data, transpersonal studies, consideration of spiritual dimensions in psychotherapy.
7. Values and spirituality: Expansion of interfaith organizations, push to soften hyper secularism, voluntary simplicity over consumerism.

We can see that all of these developments demonstrate various forms of science merging with values and individual orientation (the “I”) and moving toward awareness of the whole (the “we”/culture). It's interesting to consider how this era is integrating various levels of the Great Chain of Being—particularly notable with scientific communities accepting the “truth” of soul states of consciousness through research on mind-body connections. It would seem that the great French mathematician Blaise Pascal openly accepted the soul and spirit levels of the Great Chain in his comment: “Reason’s last step is to recognize that an infinity of things surpass it.”

Conclusion—A new era for humanity and a new calling

So what can we do with this information? How does this knowledge help us create a sustainable future? A quote by Albert Einstein says it all: “We cannot solve the great problems of the world using the same level of consciousness (thinking) that created them.”

Indeed, a shift in consciousness will be necessary for us to reinvent how we relate to each other and our planet. Without a doubt, the creation of a sustainable future cannot be confined to technological fixes and designs; it must be equally directed toward raising consciousness of the holistic and interdependent nature of our existence.

Today, in the dawn of the 21st century, we have the opportunity to fully transform our consciousness, worldview, mental models, and in turn, our behaviors and actions. Indeed, we have the benefit of being part of a global trend toward such transformation. After extensive research on the topic, world renowned environmentalist Paul Hawken has found that there is a “new form of community and a new form of a story” emerging

around the globe that shared by literally millions of organizations working for social justice, a sustainable future, and new way of thinking about living together on our shrinking planet. The shift has already begun. We simply need to plug into it.

The shift to greater awareness of our interdependence with each other and the natural world has the result of increasing caring and compassion for others. It has been said that one will only work to save what one loves, so it may be that such love, caring, and compassion should become a focal point of our efforts. Indeed, love is contained in the higher levels of the Great Chain of Being and is part of the consciousness shift that can move us beyond purely technological ways of relating to problems. This idea is beautifully expressed in a statement made by Teilard de Chardin:

“Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves,
the tides and gravity
We shall harness
The energies of love and then,
For a second time in the history of the world,
Man will have discovered fire.”

It is not an exaggeration to say that in the 21st century humanity is entering the most profound era our species has ever known. Our global population is already beyond the carrying capacity of our planet, rendering it impossible to sustain our way of life over the coming century unless a wholesale redesign of how we live is undertaken. The good news is the redesign is underway; the path we have been on throughout history has been leading to this moment of growth—a coming of age—growth beyond adolescence to full adulthood for humanity. Such a development is not only possible, it is imminent, but only if we take seriously the effort to raise consciousness as part of the call to “go green.”