

# Social Evolution and the Planetary Crisis

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## Abstract

*This article provides perspective on today's planetary crisis by seeing it as a transition within the larger picture of human social evolution. There are certain ground qualities that were present at the beginnings of our social evolution - natural living, belonging, vitality, community, equality. Over the span of human history certain emergent qualities have developed to give us greater power in the world - technology, social organization, rational thinking. However, in developing these qualities we have suppressed the ground qualities, at the expense of our health and wholeness and now leading to a profound crisis. The next step in social evolution is to take conscious charge of our future by integrating the ground qualities with the emergent qualities.*

*This article presents a model of social evolution that explains how the present planetary crisis has emerged through the natural flow of historical trends and how understanding these trends can shape the transition to a better world. In nurturing this transition, if we comprehend these evolutionary forces, we can align with them and use them to create a healthy world future. These ideas developed in much more detail in the author's book, *Transforming Human Culture*. (Earley 1997)*

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## Synopsis of the Model

At the start of social evolution, human beings and societies exhibited certain qualities, which I call *ground qualities*:

1. connection with nature
2. sense of belonging and richness of experience
3. egalitarian community

As time went by, human population continually grew in a world of limited resources, and groups and societies threatened each other with war. Therefore

over the course of human history we were forced to develop other *emergent qualities* in order to survive, giving us more conscious choice and power over our environment, other peoples, and ourselves:

1. technology
2. reflexive consciousness
3. social structure

These emergent qualities helped free human beings from the vagaries of weather and climate and threats from predators. They allowed us to grow more food and harness more energy, to coordinate increasing

numbers of people. They gave societies the military power to protect themselves. They gave people a way of understanding themselves and the world and the advantages of civilization and higher culture. In time we had the opportunity for education and personal development. We can examine these qualities in more detail by dividing them into three realms.

*The Material Realm.* The *material realm* refers to how human beings deal with physical reality, especially technology and the natural world. In this realm, the ground quality is *natural living*, which means living in harmony with the biological world, using processes which work *with* the natural flows of the earth. This may be due to the virtual absence of technology as in the Stone Age when people had no choice but to harmonize with nature. In other cases, it can mean using technology that is aligned with natural process, following the existing patterns of biology whenever feasible and disrupting as little as possible, for example, technology designed to minimize consumption of energy and resources and to reuse wastes.

The *emergent quality*, technological living, means using both artifacts (especially machines) and specialized techniques in the material aspects of life. Today technological living emphasizes complex and sophisticated machines with an aim to maximize productivity and labor efficiency. It has given us much in the way of power, comfort, and protection, but this has come at the cost of alienating us from our roots in the natural world.

Over the span of social evolution, the material realm has evolved from hunting and gathering, through horticulture and agriculture, to the industrial revolution and today's computers and biotechnology.

*The Social Realm.* The *social realm* refers to social structures of all kinds, from the family to corporations to governments and economies. The ground quality, *community*, characterizes a society whose people feel connected to each other and to the whole, where each person is valued and there are shared traditions and mores. Power is relatively equal and the community takes responsibility for the well-being of its members.

With the emergent quality, *social structure*, transactions are organized and mediated primarily through social roles and institutions rather than direct personal contact. Thus interactions can be influenced by status, rules of conduct, money, vested power structures, or other means. With increasing social structure, society becomes differentiated into various sectors with occupational specialization, and coordinated through institutions such as a government and an economy. Today's social structure tends to be impersonal and oppressive, though it also has its positive side. Some kind of social structure is absolutely necessary for coordinating larger associations of people; this can't be done through personal contact alone. Larger social structures have also brought together people from different cultures and traditions, thereby enhancing the possibility of intercultural understanding and appreciation.

Over human history, the social realm has evolved from families and bands, to villages and chiefdoms, through states and empires, to today's nation states with market economies and some democracy. It is moving toward a global society and economy.

*The Consciousness Realm.* The *consciousness realm* refers to our inner life of thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and spiritual experience. *Participatory consciousness* is the ground quality. It is characterized by a sense of belonging to the world and an aliveness and immediacy of experience. In this mode, people relate to the world primarily through instinct, emotion, the body, and the immediate present. Reality is experienced as animate, organic, and spiritual. We are fully alive in the present; our experience of life is not dulled or blocked. We experience our senses, our bodies, our emotions, and our spiritual attunement in a full and vibrant way.

*Reflexive consciousness* is the emergent quality. This means the ability to understand ourselves and the world through the mediation of images and ideas. It means being able to step back from and reflect on how we experience the world. Rather than simply experiencing, we can also conceptualize and analyze our experience as a way of seeing and understanding it more clearly. In the current stage, reflexive con-

sciousness means using logical operations on abstract concepts. This can grant more objective understanding and allow us to make conscious choices about how to act. It enhances our ability to take control of our environment and plan for the future. Reflexive consciousness also enables the development of individuality.

Over the span of social evolution, the consciousness realm has evolved from magic and animism, to mythology, through the higher religions and philosophies, to today's science and individualism.

In Earley (1997), I describe five specific stages of social evolution and examine how the ground and emergent qualities in each of the three realms evolved during each stage.

*The Current Crisis.* The ground and emergent qualities are complementary qualities, not opposites. Though they have tended to oppose each other historically, it is possible to integrate them. As social evolution proceeded and the emergent qualities became increasingly pervasive, a split developed between the ground and emergent qualities with some groups representing the emergent qualities and others the ground qualities. The emergent qualities have often been represented by men, the middle and upper classes, the developed nations, whites, Europeans and their descendants, corporations, and urban people. The ground qualities have usually been represented by women, oppressed classes, the Third World, people of color, communities, and rural people. This dissociation between the qualities occurs psychologically within individuals and also socially as groups take on one quality or the other exclusively. All of us have the potential for both qualities within us, but most of us have split off one quality or the other.

In addition to this dissociation, the emergent qualities have come to dominate and the ground qualities have been suppressed and devalued, causing us to lose our original vitality and wholeness, as societies and as individuals. We have become alienated from the natural world, from each other, and from ourselves. Our economic system emphasizes material growth at all costs. Our technical power and our population are so large that we are acting in

ways that threaten our ecological well being and perhaps our very survival.

1. We have developed technology and destabilized our environment.
2. We have gained understanding and lost vitality, meaning, and empathy.
3. We have developed social structure and lost equality and community.

*The Next Stage of Social Evolution.* This is a dialectical model of social evolution, and today is the time in history for synthesis. Now that we are beginning to be aware of the problem with the suppression of the ground qualities, we have an opportunity to consciously redress it by reclaiming them. These qualities haven't disappeared; they have been held by the above mentioned groups of people and societies, and they exist in each of us as well, though sometimes unconsciously.

However, it is not enough to focus on regaining the ground qualities. The emergent qualities are also valuable for a healthy society. Our difficulties at this time are *not* because the emergent qualities are too pervasive or because they are innately destructive, but rather because we have suppressed the ground qualities. The suppression and devaluing of the ground qualities has caused the emergent qualities to become distorted. It is these distorted versions of the emergent qualities that are threatening our society.

At this time in human history we need integration - integration of conscious power and organic vitality. We must have both sides of our nature now. We are called on to practice this in our personal lives and to embody it in our institutions and our culture. Then we will have:

1. ecological technology
2. integrated mind and heart
3. social structure that promotes community and equality

This can help us create a global society that is natural, loving, democratic, pluralistic, and dedicated to the good of all human beings and the earth.

*Integration.* It is especially important to recognize the need for integration. Too many progressive thinkers, seeing the destructiveness

of the current versions of the emergent qualities, believe that the ground qualities are all-good and the emergent qualities all-bad. They praise the wonders of emotions, intuition, and spirituality (ground) and warn of the dangers of rational, linear thinking (emergent). They speak of the beauty of nature (ground) and the evils of technology (emergent), the joy of community (ground) and the dangers of the market and multi-national corporations (emergent).

While much of this is true, this kind of split thinking throws the baby out with the bath water. While nature, emotion, and community *are* beautiful, technology can be enormously beneficial, rational thinking is essential for much that we value, and some form of large scale social structure is necessary in coordinating a world of billions. Even people who understand the value of both qualities often subtly slip into an attitude of devaluing the emergent qualities. This model attempts to clarify this problem and restore balance and integration to our understanding of the human qualities needed for a healthy resolution of the current crisis and advancement into the next stage of social evolution.

I believe that this integration of the ground and emergent qualities is a natural dialectical movement of social evolution. However, it is one that requires a conscious choice on the part of people and societies. We must recognize that the dissociation and suppression of the ground qualities is destructive and consciously develop an *integrating structure* - a social structure that integrates the ground and emergent qualities. Such an integrating structure has already been forming for a few hundred years in the realm of societal power dynamics; it is called "democracy." At this time in history, integrating structures are beginning to be needed in the other realms, and therefore proposals and experiments are cropping up in a wide variety of areas. In Earley (1997), I describe the general form of these integrating structures in many different arenas, including governance, economics, ecology, gender, culture, values, and consciousness.

## Other Works

Most other works on social issues focus their attention primarily on one dimension of society. Some social critics focus on spiritual development (Ferguson 1980; Harman 1988), some on science and knowledge (Capra 1982), some on power (Bookchin 1982; Schmookler 1984; Eisler 1987), or the environment (Anderson 1987; Berry 1990), or community. (Bellah et al. 1985; Peck 1987) Many social critics do not have a historical perspective, or they only look at the medieval and modern eras. (Berman 1984; Harman 1979)

Those theories that specifically deal with social evolution also tend to focus in one area exclusively - technology (Harris 1978; Harris 1980; Sahlins and Service 1988; Lenski and Lenski 1987) or social structure (Parsons 1966; Johnson & Earle 1987) or consciousness (Jaynes 1976; Kahler 1956; Gebser 1986; Wilber 1983; Elgin 1993). Most works on social evolution tend to be academic and not explicitly oriented toward solving today's planetary crisis. The model presented in this paper is broad in scope, covers the entire course of social evolution, and relates directly to the current crisis.

Many studies of social evolution focus only on the emerging trends and not on what has been lost or suppressed in the process of evolution. A few (e.g. Bookchin 1982; Eisler 1987) take the opposite stance, focusing only on what has gone wrong and not on our advances. I believe that social evolution has produced both pluses and minuses, and that our problems today are because of dissociation and imbalance. Some recent authors are taking a similar perspective. (Johnston 1984; Tarnas 1991)

The following authors have developed models that are either similar to or have influenced my own theory.

*Johnston.* Charles Johnston (1984) has developed a general abstract model of evolutionary and developmental processes, which he has applied in a number of areas, including social evolution. This Creative Model was an inspiration for my work. He uses a dialectical approach in which a creation is being brought into form during the first phase of develop-

ment. The process then reaches a transition point where the creation becomes dissociated from the its ground, and finally there is a phase where it integrates with the ground. In applying his model to social evolution, Johnston sees today's crisis as the transition to the integration phase.

*Elgin.* Duane Elgin (1993) presents a fascinating model of social evolution based on the evolution of consciousness, which is congruent in many ways with mine. Elgin conceives of a linear progression of stages, each one characterized by an increasing degree of perspective and detachment from the experience of the previous stage. This is similar to my emergent quality of reflexive consciousness, but his model doesn't include any deep recognition of the dialectical nature of our evolution. He does mention that humanity is now at a point of "evolutionary inflection" where an arduous process of withdrawing from nature makes a decisive shift toward an equally demanding journey of returning to live in harmony with nature." (Elgin 1993: 256) However, his model doesn't contain any theoretical constructs such as my ground and emergent qualities which explain this dialectic.

Wilber. In *Sex, Ecology and Spirituality* (1995), Ken Wilber extends his spectrum model of consciousness to include general and evolutionary systems theory in creative new ways, and relates it to the planetary crisis, especially gender and ecological issues. This book contains major new insights that influenced my model. He is very lucid about the advancement of consciousness, and he recognizes that the primary problem with Modern society is dissociation.

Wilber's model is dialectical, but in a different sense than mine. He assumes that the evolution of consciousness moves in a straight line up the Great Chain of Being, and his model only allows for a dialectical process and dissociation within each stage of evolution. Each stage transcends the previous stage and then is able to take the previous structures of consciousness as objects that can be perceived and operated on. Thus there is an emergence and then an integration through reflexive consciousness. If this emergence goes too far and the integration

doesn't happen, then it becomes a dissociation, producing problems.

This far I agree with him. However, he doesn't seem to consider the possibility that there could be a cumulative and increasing dissociation involving many stages of evolution, which is what I believe has actually happened. As a result of this, Wilber doesn't sufficiently recognize the fundamental importance of reclaiming and integrating the ground qualities in surmounting the current crisis. He mentions our current problems with dissociation, but seems to be primarily interested in the advancement of the emergent quality, reflexive consciousness.

### Emergence through Mediation

What do the emergent qualities - technological living, social structure, and reflexive consciousness - have something in common. Human beings were originally embedded in our biological nature, and we have gradually emerged and separated ourselves from our primordial environment. This includes not only emergence from the natural world through technology, but also emergence from the unconscious through reflexive thinking, and emergence from the biological bonds of community through complex social structure.

*Emergence<sup>1</sup>* has two aspects - separation from embeddedness in a biological ground and the development of a new mediated relationship with that ground. Here I mean *mediation* in the broadest sense of the term - being an intermediary between two parties. To mediate between two entities is to join them, to come between them, to facilitate their interaction in some way. Thus a common thread among the emergent qualities is that they all involve a differentiation and organization of reality through mediation. Technology mediates between human beings and physical reality, roles mediate between people, and concepts mediate between people and our inner experience, as shown in Figure 1.

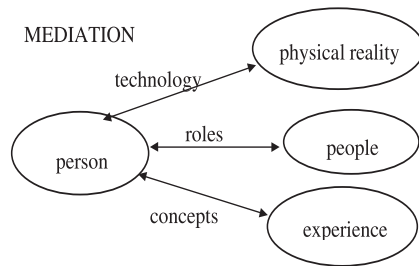


Figure 1

In psychology, the word emergence has been used in a way that is similar to my use here. Robert Kegan (1982) describes how a process of "emergence from embeddedness" is initiated by the maturing of the child in interaction with the world at each stage of development. He shows how this notion is implicit in the work of Jean Piaget (1977). This works as follows: At first children are embedded in a certain way of perceiving and living because they do not see it. Therefore they can't understand it or include it in their thinking. There is a certain aspect of the world or their way of relating to the world that is invisible to them. Then they emerge from this embeddedness and develop a concept for it. The emergent concept mediates between them and their experience of the world. They now see what was once invisible, and this endows them with a wider vision and greater cognitive functioning.

*Wholeness and Mediation.* The ground qualities are all part of our biological heritage; it might be fair to say that they are characterized by *organic wholeness*. This is obvious with natural living - it is defined in terms of ecological harmony. Community is also built into our genes. Human beings evolved biologically into our current form under the social conditions of hunter gatherer bands, so we are biologically adapted to that social arrangement. Community is a way of organizing society based on the organic nature of personal relationship and the wholeness of group connection. Participatory consciousness, the world of direct experience, is also a biological given and has a natural, unitary quality.

The ground and emergent qualities therefore represent two different ways of perceiving

and organizing reality. The ground qualities do this in an integrated, organic way. The emergent qualities do it in a differentiated, mediated way.

*Power and Vitality.* Another way of understanding the essence of the emergent qualities is that they have the effect of increasing our *power* in the world. They all give human beings and societies greater ability to make the world the way we want it. Technology gives us power to control the material world. Social structure gives a society greater power to control its own people and to compete with other societies. Reflexive consciousness gives us conscious choice over our own actions and a method of understanding reality that facilitates our ability to control it. This is opposed to participatory consciousness, which helps us understand reality in a way that encourages communion, not control.

If the essence of the emergent qualities is power, the essence of the ground qualities is *vitality*. With participatory consciousness, there is an aliveness to experiencing life directly without our heads getting in the way. There is an unfolding vividness to living in harmony with the earth, and there is an interpersonal vitality to the contact and connection of community.

Let's summarize this overall perspective on the model as follows: *Over the course of social evolution, as human beings have emerged from embeddedness in nature and organized ourselves and the physical world through mediation in order to gain power, we have lost vitality and disrupted our organic wholeness. Our great task at this time in history is to integrate these two sides of ourselves.*

## Social Evolution and the Nature of Reality

We can look at this model of social evolution according to the degree of alignment between the evolving societies and the underlying nature of reality. Viewing reality as a whole, including human, social, and material reality, I believe that it has certain intrinsic properties. *Reality is an integrated organic, systemic whole*

*that is participatory, vital, and meaningful.* These are deep philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality that probably can't be proved or disproved. They must be taken as fundamental assumptions. However, this view of reality is consistent with that of many scholars today. (Johnston 1984; Wilber 1995; Harman 1988)

Reality is an *integrated whole* because its parts are related and connected to each other, and it contains sub-wholes (and they contain sub-wholes, etc.) that are also integrated. The physical world has been shown to be integrated by subatomic physics, ecology, and General Systems Theory (von Bertalanffy 1968), and the science of Complexity (Waldrop 1992). The social world has always been integrated at the level of community and is now becoming more and more integrated through social structure at the world level.

The world of life is *organic* in that it is organized according to the principles of biology. Ecosystems, organisms, and human communities all have a natural, alive, flowing kind of order to them that is different from that of a machine or bureaucracy. Even the non-living world and the sub-worlds of chemistry and physics have a *systemic* inter-relatedness that transcends machine models.

Reality is *participatory* in that all parts participate in the whole, and no one can be a completely separate observer. When observing the non-human world, we can achieve a certain amount of objectivity, but atomic physics has shown that even this is limited. When it comes to the human and social world, a pretense of complete objectivity can lead to serious misunderstandings.

Reality has an intrinsic *vitality* and aliveness, and it is *meaningful* in a spiritual and emotional sense, rather than simply being a mechanism. I believe that meaning is not just something that we humans attribute to reality but an intrinsic quality of it. Moreover, the meanings we give reality arise from it in a natural way, since we are part of reality, not separate observers.

All these properties I have attributed to reality are also ground qualities in this model. They are the qualities of society in its early

stages when it is completely embedded in biology. Thus early societies were naturally and unconsciously aligned with reality because it has yet to emerge from embeddedness.

*Emergent Control.* During human social evolution, to better control reality for our well-being and security, we emerged from being embedded in it and made relatively objective observations and analyses of it. We differentiated it and organized it through mediation. We did this in two ways, by conceptually dividing reality into various pieces and analyzing the relationships among them, and by actually carving up reality so that it became more differentiated materially and socially.

Human beings emerged from nature, divided it into parts, and analyzed the parts and their interactions with each other. We built tools and machines to change the world to our liking. We created an entire artificial environment in which to live, and we organized this world according to mechanical principles.

We emerged from our original communities and created large societies. We differentiated social reality into sectors and fields and professions and occupations, into finer and finer pieces as each person became a specialist or a cog in the social machine. In order to allow such fragmented societies to function, we organized these pieces according to the principles of bureaucracy and monetary exchange.

*Unsophisticated Emergent Quality.* We have emerged from organic embeddedness in naturally aligned societies and created societies with our minds and our technology. However, our understanding and our methods of creation were unsophisticated, and still are to a great extent. Modern society analyzes reality in mechanistic, fragmented ways that ignore the connected organic nature of things. Our technology and our social structure are also largely immature. We aren't yet sophisticated enough to recognize the actual nature of reality, which is the basis for the ground qualities of natural living, community, and participatory consciousness. Therefore we not only fail to understand these qualities in the design of our societies, we also undermine them through the changes we make in reality, and so our world seems to lack them.

However, we can't fully destroy them, because these ground qualities are built into our nature and the nature of reality. We imagined that our unsophisticated view of reality captured the truth and that we could fully control things. As our power to control reality has grown in scope and depth, we have tried to organize more and more of reality for our own ends with our unsophisticated methods. We have taken over more of the earth and more of genetic and sub-atomic reality. Now we are incurring massive and unprecedented side effects, consequences that we didn't intend but are occurring because of the interconnected, organic nature of reality. Nature is organic and integrated, so when we treat it as a machine, we generate ecological breakdown. Human beings need community, so when we treat our institutions and societies as machines, we foster social breakdown. We also need vitality, creativity, and intimacy, so when we perceive ourselves as isolated, passive thinking and pleasure machines, we engender psychological breakdown.

The emergent qualities aren't intrinsically at odds with the underlying nature of reality, only our current unsophisticated, dissociated versions of them. Earlier in our history, when our methods were even less sophisticated, we weren't able to control much of reality, so we couldn't do as much damage. In the future as our methods become more sophisticated and tuned to the real nature of things, we won't cause harm. In the meantime, to modify an old saying, "A medium amount of knowledge is a dangerous thing."

*Integration.* To evolve further, we need to integrate the emergent qualities with the ground qualities, or to say it another way, the emergent qualities need to evolve further to become more sophisticated in their recognition of the nature of reality. We must recognize that we are participants in a larger whole, not completely separate observers, so in studying reality we must become participant-observers. We need to understand the organic, connected nature of reality, and differentiate and organize it in a way that respects this. We must structure our societies in a way that respects the human need for community and equality. We need to design our technology in a way that respects the organic quality of nature. We must exercise power that is governed by an understanding of the deeper meaning of life. When we exercise power over nature and society and over our own bodies and minds, we must do it with goals that are informed and motivated by the vital and meaningful nature of human life and the earth.

However, this is not just a moral issue. It is a matter of understanding the true nature of reality; it is the only approach that makes sense. As our emergent qualities become more sophisticated and accurate, they will naturally turn toward the ground and integration.

## Conclusion

By reclaiming our ground qualities integrated with more sophisticated emergent qualities, we can resolve the current planetary crisis and advance to the next stage of social evolution.

Ground Qualities	Emergent Qualities	Unsophisticated & Dissociated Emergent Qualities
vital, meaningful	instrumental	control hubris
participatory	emergent	separate observer, objective
organic, systemic	organized, mediated	mechanistic, bureaucratic
integrated	differentiated	fragmented



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## Note

1. In biology and in the study of complexity in general, "emergent properties" are those properties of a system that are apparent when the system is looked at as a whole, but are not properties of the parts of the system. This meaning of emergence is related but somewhat different from my use of the word.

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