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# OSCILLATION: A MEANING AND VALUES-CENTRED APPROACH TO THE SUSTAINABILITY OF HUMAN SYSTEMS

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## Abstract

This paper outlines a framework for the systemic understanding of behaviour in and between human systems based on the relationship between meanings, values and actions. Termed oscillation theory, it has been developed during more than twenty years' experience of organisational consultancy and research. Oscillation is related to external problems of ecological sustainability, which can only ever be as effective as individuals' willingness and ability to change themselves and their actions. At the same time, sustainability of the inner dimensions of human beings - cultural and psychological - is necessary if sustainability of the outer dimensions - social and ecological is to be achieved.

A healthy oscillation between meaningfulness ('identification' phase), its 'transformation' into expressive action ('realisation' phase) and creative 'regression' to sources of renewal is essential for human systems to remain functional and sustainable. The whole process is driven by human yearnings for satisfaction and fulfilment - the experience of 'in-needness' which underlies creativity and the formation of communities. Attempts have to be made to 'realise' the meaning and purpose of the identification phase through action and engagement with other 'meaning communities' in the system's environment. Otherwise 'identification' becomes dysfunctional. Conversely, action has to be informed by meaningful purpose. Oscillation therefore entails a feedback process between meaning and action. It helps us understand problems in human systems as emergent properties of incongruities between psycho-social representations (maps) of reality and actual relations in the world.

The oscillation process is presented as a way of understanding our normal daily experience of life so that we can take charge of our own human development in such a way that it contributes to, rather than undermines, sustainability, both externally and internally.

Oscillation theory describes a process that is necessary to the inner psychological and emotional sustainability of any person or collective. Before explaining in more detail, it is important to situate it within the context of sustainability as it is more usually understood.

## THE MANY FACETS OF HUMAN SUSTAINABILITY

The term 'sustainability' is mostly seen as synonymous with 'sustainable development' and as referring to problems of balancing economic growth and development with the integrity and viability of ecological and social relations. It is also concerned with formulating policy to support this (see, for example, Redclift, 1987). The most frequently quoted definition is the following:

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains two key concepts:

- the concept of 'needs', in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and
- the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs.

(World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987: 43).

'Needs' are seen here as economic and 'limitations' as technological, social and environmental.

Psychological and cultural factors are rarely considered in relation to sustainability. Yet, they play an important part in informing and framing the priorities and behaviour of individuals and collectives. Who could dispute that overriding priority should be given to satisfying the essential needs of the world's poor? Yet, it does not happen. Instead the world's rich become richer and what were once luxuries become 'necessities' and are imported from the world's poor who, in large part, continue to struggle for essential needs. The 'necessities' of coffee or chocolate serve as good examples. Human yearning is clearly *not* satisfied by the predominant way in which development is expressed in today's society - economic growth and the consumption of material goods. It may seem logical to look to economic processes in seeking to understand and find solutions to global inequities. But they are not the whole story. They are abstractions that do not occur apart from the actions of people and the desires, meanings and values that drive their actions.

Oscillation theory addresses connections between psychological and socio-cultural elements of sustainability. It seeks to shed light on the nature of 'need' or, more precisely, the experience of what we term 'in-needness'. This is a sense of yearning which does not disappear no matter how much is consumed, but which is projected onto 'things', material or otherwise, which are then sought after *as if* they will bring satisfaction. We shall return to this later.

Commercial and business disciplines such as marketing or economic psychology understand the centrality of individuals and psychology in generating consumption - that it is people, through making sense of and seeking to satisfy their desires and drives in material terms, who create demand for products in the market. They also recognise that no product or service will ever ultimately satisfy. It will only ever be 'good enough', sufficing for the time being before desire passes on to another coveted object (Kotler, 1988). Marketers refer to the *limited* capacity of any product to satisfy the consumer as 'satisficing'. Those of us who are concerned with promoting sustainability should take a leaf out of their book and look seriously at the psychology of consumption and desire.

We find it helpful to think of psychological and cultural phenomena (experience, meaning, values, beliefs, myths, etc) as *internal* aspects of human systems, and social and bio-ecological phenomena as *external* aspects, along the lines shown in Fig. 1.

	interior	exterior
individual	intentional subjective psychological experiential .....	behavioural objective biological material .....
collective	meaningful (inter)subjective cultural/symbolic .....	expressive (inter)objective social/ecological .....

Fig. 1: The dimensions of human beings showing qualities for each quadrant (adapted from Wilber, 1996)

The need for sustainability touches all aspects of our lives. To understand it systemically requires that we take a better look at the dynamic relations between each of these 'environments' - individual and collective, inner and outer. The perspective offered in this paper seeks to contribute to this by focusing attention on these dynamics, particularly the significance of the inner aspects (left hand quadrants).

All human systems, individuals and collectives, have inner as well as outer aspects, as shown in Fig. 1, and, therefore, both inner and outer contexts. Like all organisms, they are holonic, meaning that they are, at one and the same time, both wholes-in-themselves and parts of greater wholes; necessarily dependent on systems outside themselves but of which they are also parts. To paraphrase Koestler (1978), they have to preserve and assert their individualities as quasi-autonomous wholes, and simultaneously function as integrated and dependent parts of existing or evolving larger wholes. When a system is dependent for its survival on a larger whole outside itself, anything it may do to threaten or sustain the integrity of this larger whole - its environment - it also does to itself in the longer term.

To contribute to, and receive from, the larger whole, the system must be ready to subordinate its own purposes to those of the whole, and to depend on it. At the same time, to retain its identity, the system must be ready to defend its own boundary and perhaps to compete for scarce resources (Grubb Institute, 1984).

A system must, in other words, act autonomously for its own self-preservation but must *not* do so to a degree that threatens the systems of which it is a *dependent* part.

## THE PROBLEMATIC OF ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY

### Dependence on the physical

As already mentioned, most discussions about sustainability revolve around the relations between 'external' physical and social systems, as illustrated in Fig. 2.

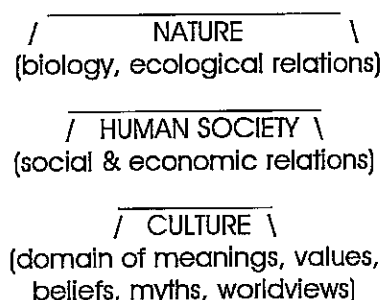


Fig. 2: Existence of the human world depends on bio-ecological relations  
(adapted from Wilden, 1990)

Fig. 2 is a picture of physical necessity. Human society is ultimately dependent on and physically sustained by natural, bio-ecological processes. (For current purposes, we use the terms 'nature', 'natural processes and 'bio-ecological processes' synonymously). Without nature we would not eat and the climate would probably be uninhabitable. Nature, however, can continue indefinitely without society. It is *not* ultimately contingent on humans, though its ability to sustain human beings amidst the onslaught of their activities may well be. To believe, however well intentioned, that a fragile nature somehow needs to be nurtured and cared for by humans is to underestimate its power and resilience, and exaggerate the physical importance and capacities of humans to the point of foolhardiness.

In the situation in Fig 2, nature would continue to sustain itself if humans became extinct. Conversely, if nature became extinct, or degenerate beyond a certain point, humans would also die. In other words, nature constitutes the (external) environment of humans, not *vice versa*. And, as Wilden (1987) succinctly states in his 'Inevitable Rule', 'the system that destroys its environment destroys itself'. Humans are immensely complex beings, psychologically and culturally (though let us not forget that these inner emergent qualities have evolved as naturally as the capacities of any other animals). They impact on their external environments by creatively superimposing on them their inner worlds of symbolic maps, meanings, values and beliefs.

## Cultural inversion and fantasy

The most striking manifestation of this creativity is the extent to which we can manipulate the environment to our will through technological innovation. Our harnessing of the sunlight energy locked up in fossil fuels has enabled us to grow physically way beyond the ecological limits constraining growth in other species - limits set by the availability of sunlight energy. Our apparent escape from this ecological 'prison of the sun' (Helton/BBC, 1992) is, of course, a dangerous illusion. It legitimises a worldview that subordinates nature to society. Our 'dependence' on fossil rather than sunlight fuel has become habitual or 'second nature', to use Bookchin's (1990) term. This, in turn, supports technology-intensive consumer lifestyles that further alienate us from the physical environment and strains its capacity to sustain us.

Ultimately, human survival and growth is inevitably limited in just the same way as for any other animal. Technological culture engenders a false sense of security that, in the imagination, inverts the real dependent relations shown in Fig. 2. It results in a sort of collective fantasy - a belief system or mythology - that nature is dependent on culture. This cultural inversion is depicted in Fig. 3.

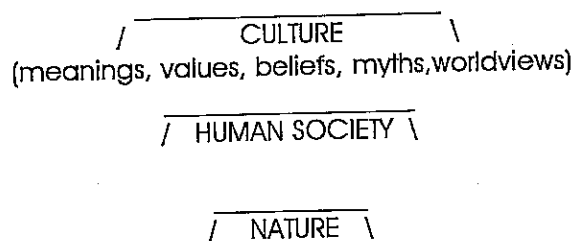


Fig. 3: Humans culturally invert dependence so that bio-ecology appears to depend on society and culture. The *condition*, not existence, of nature depends on society as expressed through culture, meaning and values (adapted from Wilden, 1987)

## THE PREDICAMENT OF SUSTAINABILITY

'Human beings cannot live on bread alone but need every word that God speaks' (Holy Bible, Deuteronomy 8.3 & Matthew 4.4).

This ancient wisdom relates to sustainability in at least two senses. Firstly, physical satiation alone is not enough to satisfy human beings. A sense of meaning and purpose is also needed. This is at the heart of oscillation theory's concern with sustainability and development at the personal level. We shall return to this later.

The second significant point relates to the effects of cultural inversion. It follows from the argument above that humans feel the effects on the external world of the maps and meanings they create in their own minds. We live according to meanings and values, as if they were exact and complete duplicates of reality. Of course, they never are, but they become people's reasons for living, the worldviews that inform their lives and actions. They become so 'second nature' that it actually seems unrealistic to see things in any other way. The

superimposition of 'second nature', or culture, on 'first nature', or bio-ecological necessity and the actions it legitimises impact on the external world for good or ill. In a very real sense, humans are the creators of their own destinies. They reap what they sow. And what they sow is the fruit of their meanings, values, priorities and myths, in other words, their chosen screen of 'second nature' through which they must view the world of 'first nature'. This screen may be supportive of first nature or destructive.

*Homo sapiens*, then, is

...a species that lives and can only live in terms of meaning it itself must construct in a world without intrinsic meaning but subject to natural law. Its most profound problems flow from discontinuities between law and meaning...There is nothing in the nature of human thought to prevent it from constructing self-destructive or even world-destroying errors (Rappaport, 1990:46).

As Rappaport suggests, cultural constructions of human-nature relations can become ecologically dysfunctional as a result of disjunctures between those constructions and what is actually necessary for human ecological sustainability. In other words, cultural constructions of nature can become ecologically unsustainable resulting in the 'self-destructive errors' that Rappaport warns about.

The world 'out there' is largely a construction of human intentionality. Future sustainability for humans is contingent upon intentions and their effects. We are currently constructing a future founded on a worldview of impossibility - that inverts physical necessity, and undermines life-support systems. The myth is so powerful that much environmental concern is also framed in a way that suggests nature is dependent on culture. Our inner worlds of ideas about necessity - even if they are based on facts and science - have become dangerously disconnected from actual bottom-line necessity in the outside world. And all through the power of human thought!

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To sum up the argument so far, all *living organisms* ultimately depend for their physical survival on bio-ecological processes. They also depend on inner resources, capacities and drives (individual and collective) to make the most of their external environments in survival terms. Plants depend on self-organising, internal processes, simple though they may be, in order to photosynthesise and respond 'competitively' and adaptively for light and nutrients. But the effects of these same internal processes, in turn, modify the external environment. Trees in a redwood forest monopolise the light, inhibiting other plants that might otherwise grow.

Humans are more complex. Our internal, self-organising processes include our capacity to be *aware* of autonomy and connectedness, to make sense of, and articulate, our experience through cultural meanings, myths, values and beliefs of our own making, and thereby create complex internal environments that are projected onto the external world and according to which we make independent decisions. Choices can be made wholly with reference to our internal worlds without any grounding in our external environments. There is therefore nothing, other than ourselves, to prevent habituated, 'second nature' worldviews from becoming maladaptive or dysfunctional in ecological survival terms. The sustainability of bio-ecological systems, *per se*, does not depend on human worldviews and their effects. *What does depend on them is the maintenance of ecological processes and conditions of a high enough quality to sustain humans.*

As Ervin Laszlo has commented,

The critical but as yet generally unrecognized issue confronting mankind is that its truly decisive limits are inner, not outer. They are not physical limits due to the finiteness or vulnerability of this world, but psychological, cultural and political limits inner to people and societies... We contemplate changing almost anything on this earth but ourselves (Laszlo, 1989).

## NEW MEANINGS AND MYTHS TO COUNTER UNSUSTAINABILITY

The outer problems of sustainability are expressions of inner causes: they are symptoms of dysfunctional meanings and values, not the malfunctions themselves. In the long-run, we cannot solve them by manipulating the world according to the same myths, meanings and motives that have led to the problems in the first place. As biologist Brian Goodwin acknowledges, 'myths are more real, more relevant, and often more permanent than what are taken to be facts. Facts are actually considerably less durable in science than you might expect' (1994: 18). That metaphors such as competition, struggle, progress, selfishness and autonomy are so potent and prevalent in neo-Darwinian science has less to do with biological fact than cultural experience. Science does not, and cannot, carry inherent meaning. Facts can never speak for themselves. To believe they do is itself a myth. On the contrary, scientific theories derive their meaning and power from being interpreted according to resonant cultural myths and metaphors, not vice versa.

As this line of thinking has gained legitimacy in natural and physical science, it has become necessary to start incorporating questions of subjectivity and quality into science. This makes it still harder to ignore that, in the final analysis, sustainability is not threatened by 'outer' limits but by 'inner' limits; by what human beings desire and how they construe their development.

This leads us back to consider the ancient truth that 'Human beings cannot live on bread alone...' . The physical essentials of life are clearly necessary, but not sufficient for human satisfaction and well-being. A sense of meaning and purpose, of inner sustainability and development, is also needed.

This is well illustrated by the dilemmas currently faced in many organisations. Managers have to be able to understand the dynamics of systems. It is key to the job. Many are far from oblivious about the ecological and social impacts they have and are increasingly thrown into dilemmas of ethical responsibility. For others, their work is experienced as losing the meaning it once held for them. We can think of both cases in terms of threats to the inner environment of the people concerned. If this is undermined, morale and energy levels are inevitably depleted and this has knock-on effects on effectiveness and performance of the organisation. Threats to personal inner environments of meanings and values, in turn, threaten, the sustainability of the organisation. The employee depends on the organisation to make their living, but the organisation also depends on the employee - as a *whole* person. New reasons for working are needed by the employee to re-energise them in their role within the organisation. These extend beyond economic rationality to social and psychological needs. The organisation as a whole would benefit from paying attention to these needs.

Oscillation theory has grown out of practical experience of working with a wide spectrum of organisations. As we shall see, it shows that the *experience of meaningfulness and the need to express it through activity* is of

critical importance in achieving sustainability at all levels of human system - ecological, social, organisational and personal.

Today's prevailing myth of development as synonymous with high material consumption - 'economic growth' in the language of most economists (Anagnostopoulos, 1994) - is just one expression of the attempt to satisfy the irresistible human drive for fulfilment and satisfaction - or 'in-needness' in oscillation terminology. But there are other possible directions for human development that would be less profligate with resources and ecological support systems. Two of the highest profile reports on sustainability - *Limits to Growth* (Meadows *et al.*, 1972) and *Our Common Future* (UN World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) were bold enough to view sustainable future development in cultural and spiritual terms, rather than material and consumerist (Ruse, 1994). Were development to shift to prioritising more 'inner' orientated activities - such as learning and education, art and music, religion and spirituality, social interaction, exercise and sport - the pressures on ecological systems would be significantly reduced.

There is evidence that such a shift is not altogether unsupported. The social trends research undertaken by Applied Futures consultants in 1987 showed that only 36% of people in Britain were 'outer-directed', ie. driven by the desire for status and the trappings of material success. 29% were 'sustenance-driven' - struggling merely to survive and feel they belong somewhere. 35% were 'inner-directed' people, the least materially motivated and driven by self-fulfilment through means such as personal and spiritual development, environmental and social care, and general quality of life (Hutchinson, 1995; 1997).

## **From predicament to resolution**

Up to now we have described the problematic and predicament of sustainability. But what can actually be done about it? Is it just a question of imposing legislation and economic sanctions? Of formulating policy to force people to behave more sustainably according to someone else's idea of what it means? This could result in a form of dictatorship for sustainability. History shows that measures limiting human development and freedom tend themselves to be unsustainable. From the oscillation perspective, current unsustainability is deeply rooted in people's search for freedom and fulfilment. Consumerism is but one expression of this. Any sustainable solution has to take account of the inner origins and drivers of the problems. *Oscillation theory* offers a way to begin doing just that. It has been developed precisely to tackle the question of how people find meaning in their lives and then set about expressing it through action. It was first articulated in *The Dynamics of Religion* (Reed, 1978) and updated in *The Psychodynamics of Life and Worship* (Reed, 1995), available from the Grubb Institute.



## OSCILLATION: A PROCESS FOR EXPERIENTIAL DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

Oscillation thinking is a social theory of the experiential process at the core of human development. It helps people take responsibility for the regulation of their own activity and development.

The discussion on sustainability left the question of how the material and commercial assumptions about development could be changed by cultural and spiritual experience which allowed for internal development. It is not sufficient to merely *identify* values which give meaning and reason for sustainable development. What is required is a process by which human beings, collectively and personally, can transform their behaviour so that their meaning can be expressed in external reality as sustainable development.

The oscillation theory traces out a natural human process. By analysing this process from an experiential perspective, it indicates how human beings can exercise choices; firstly, *how* to identify values and then, secondly, to discover how to *realise* them in the context of day to day existence. Throughout the process there is a dynamic relationship between the inner experience and the outer environment seen systemically.

The theory is built around a number of concepts. Space does not allow for expansion here, but they will, in any case, become clear when placed in the context of oscillation thinking.

The first concept is '*dependence*'. This has hitherto been used in this paper as expressing the state of *relationship observed* between two entities (see Figs. 2 and 3). Here, we define dependence differently - as a *personal experience where persons feel after someone or something on whom they can rely*. It is a natural human condition throughout life, though expressed at different times in relation to different persons and objects - the baby feels after her mother; an executive looks to his bank balance.

The second concept is allied to dependence. It is the state of '*in-needness*'. It does not refer to a 'thing' that is needed but to an experience. Human beings are contingent; wholly reliant upon their interactions with the objects which constitute their environment - air, food, shelter, other human beings, etc. In-needness brings us, and keeps us, in contact with the world around us and into relation with one another as people. It is the foundation of human relations of love, hate, trust, greed, generosity, hope, power. The actual feelings experienced depend upon whether I seek to satisfy my in-needness by working alongside others or being in conflict with them. Recent emphasis on the primacy of relationships over possessions indicates recognition of the significance of the experience described by this concept. In-needness cannot be satisfied biologically. It has a relational dimension. *In-needness is the drive behind the process of oscillation and is expressed as desire.*

The third concept is '*regression*'. Like dependence, this is a word that embarrasses us today. They both represent things to be avoided. This attitude towards them has developed because they have generally not been properly understood as states of mind. D. W. Winnicott, an authority on child psycho-therapy, states:

People who are ill (and we are all ill to some extent) have a drive to cure themselves... This means they experience a great need to feel real and they only feel real by doing something like regression to childhood dependence; to something which can hold them. This may be realised, for example, in the church or in music (Winnicott, 1958).

Winnicott (personal communication, 1974) extends his idea to everyone as a feature of normal life. We accept that, for many writers on human dynamics, regression has overtones of psychotic or infantile behaviour and use alternative terms for the process we describe (eg. Bettelheim, Ehrenzweig), but we have retained the term with other human scientists (eg. Winnicott, Hartman, Bion and Kris). The antipathy is more a reaction to the process it signifies, however described, than to its misleading associations. It is worth stating here that we consider that a major root cause of much social, political, community and other distress and unrest where human experience is involved (and therefore including ecological) - is the avoidance by people of allowing themselves to experience regression to dependence as a part of their normal existence. Untreated psychological and emotional 'garbage' is left to clog up and spill over into our interactions and relationships.

The fourth concept to clarify is '*feeling real*' referred to by Winnicott above. This is the idea that I am in touch with my contexts (or environments), both inner and outer. In-needness urges us to be constantly monitoring our own personal interaction between our inner and outer worlds. In the oscillation process, different phases shift the emphasis of attention on these worlds.

We are now in a position to define the continual movement between the essential phases of the oscillation - Realisation, Regression to Dependence, Identification and Transformation to Realisation. This is *not a circular process* but an oscillating curve, constantly changing shape and dimension as it moves through time. Like all contributions to the *science of qualities* (Goodwin, 1994), of which we consider this one, it is only possible to map oscillation in a metaphorical manner (see Fig. 4). It should be seen as a metaphor for the feelings experienced through life.

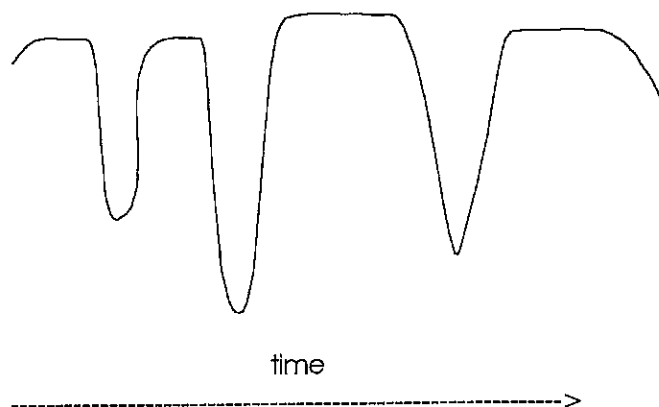


Fig. 4: Diagram of the process of Oscillation

Oscillation is both individual and systemic. The conditions of life for each person will give them an experience of oscillation which is unique to them as they are born, grow, mature and die. On the other hand, the human race has adjusted its manners of living to fit with natural rhythms such as night and day, the phases of the moon, the seed-time and the harvest, and the seasons. Both of these dimension influence the nature of oscillation for all human beings in different ways. In exploring the experience of this process, the description of the individual is given as a representative of the whole community or collective. Like a holographic plate, each part communicates the built in images of the whole (see also, Laszlo, 1996).

## The Four Phases of Oscillation

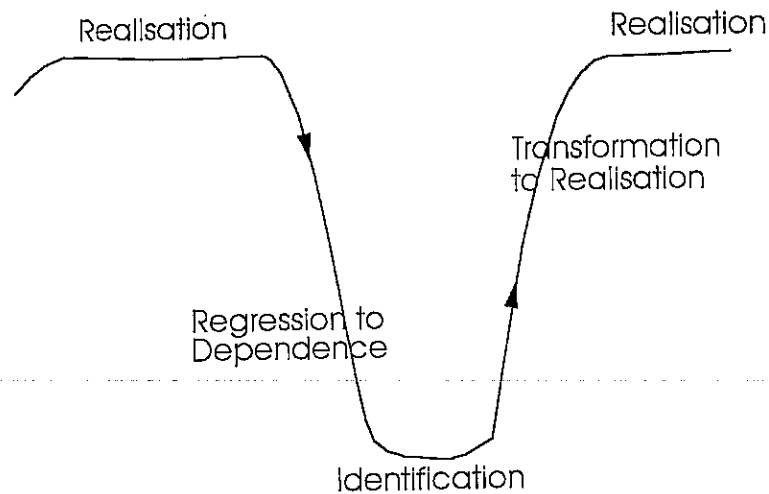


Fig. 5: One Oscillation

### 1. *Realisation phase*

This describes the experience of humans trying to express in behaviour what they consider themselves to be, or to be becoming. It is the actual outward behaviour expressing the person's inward values and capabilities in their context - a context where persons relate to one another to achieve things and to satisfy in-needness. Creative thought is realised in intentions, a picture, a poem, an opera, a home, a business, sport, in running an economy and in planning a war. Being dynamic, the experience of Realisation is affected both by variations in context externally, and questions and doubts about the inner world of the person. The effects become frayed, uncertain and slow down, often triggered off by unexpected occurrences which exhibit a new face to reality.

In Realisation, the in-needness drive in us, expressed as desire, is to feel real through the expression of the inner world of ourselves and community. We cannot avoid displaying the truth of what we *are* - every moment, in the here-and-now. Sooner or later there will be an inner feeling of uneasiness in our grasp of reality, of where we stand. Faced with this predicament, we have a choice: to deny our inner world, pretend it does not exist and defend ourselves with rationalisations and arguments; or we can choose to allow our inner world to become uncomfortable; to accept our limitations and to look for support for our weakness. This is the choice to develop and move on to work with the second oscillation phase - Regression to Dependence.

### 2. *Regression to Dependence phase*

Apart from the situation in which people feel they lack the resources to meet the challenge of the task, opportunities may be sought by people, consciously or intuitively, for Regression. They may wish to find freedom to re-enter and re-examine past experience, particularly bad experiences which hitherto could not have

been contemplated. On other occasions they may respond to predetermined times and places - congregations on hearing church bells may have been conditioned like Pavlov's dogs. This is not intended as a derogatory statement. We condition ourselves all the time in many ways. This example is one in which the person is triggered to remember - and feel - something of core importance and meaningfulness to them.

Whatever the reason, the actual regression may take various forms and may turn out to be creative or destructive, or merely to maintain the status quo. Kris and Winnicott use the expression 'regression in the service of the ego' to distinguish creative regression from the chaotic experience where the ego is overwhelmed in regression.

Functional or creative regression to dependence requires a suitable setting - a 'facilitating environment'. This could be the physical setting of a therapeutic session, the space and symbols of a religious building or the awesomeness of a mountain top. Creative regression is only possible if the individual or group of individuals is able to use the conditions provided. They require 'good-enough', satisfactory, memories of dependence in order to take the risk and tolerate the anxieties of regression. It entails a conscious act on the part of people to place themselves in the hands of others, and appreciation of the risks involved but with some hope. It is by no means an escape from stress or danger but a means of re-entering the disaster area under conditions in which there is freedom not to be defensive. However alarming and potentially overwhelming the emotional world into which a person enters, she retains somewhere an awareness of what she is up to and where she is. Winnicott refers to this unregressed element in the personality as the 'observing ego'. In regression, letting go of habitual ways of seeing the world and themselves, people begin to see the hope of a new construction of themselves and of their world.

Dysfunctional regression to dependence is where people completely lose touch with reality by regressing to a primitive state in which they make increasingly impossible demands for attention and gratification. It can be the terrifying prelude to self-destruction. Defensive regression is a failed attempt to return to the innocence of infancy. By contrast, recovery from creative regression is often accompanied by anger and mourning since, with renewed vision, people recognise more clearly the waste of previous living.

Outwardly, regression may appear controlled where there is an expectation of a dependable object but, inwardly, the person experiences an inner fragmentation of themselves into good and bad parts. The psycho-therapist, Melanie Klein, concluded that, in the mother/child relationship, the child's behaviour was affected by phantasies in which the child splits and projects both the good and the bad parts of herself into the mother who is imagined to be two persons - for example, the 'good breast' and the 'bad breast'. Hence, the evolution of the myths about god and the devil which has been extensively commented upon by Feuerbach, Nietzsche and Freud. The idea is as old as the ancient Greeks.

The search for a dependable object or person, whether myth or reality, is critical to health, well-being and for salvation. But, as well as hope, there is also the sense of failure and guilt - no wonder the gods are feared even when they are longed for.

Ritual regression by communities occurs at seasonal times where there is the outward behaviour of expressing grief and remembering the epic figures of the past. Here, the inward experience of the devotees is not one of personal pain. The regression becomes the acting out of stories, sometimes to the accompaniment of joy and exhilaration about deliverance. Rituals like this are intended to reinforce the *status quo* of the community and its culture rather than to engage with the actual life experience of individuals. Examples of this are *rites de*

*passage* (Turner, 1969), whose procedures may cover several phases of the oscillation process from Regression to Dependence to Identification and Transformation to Realisation (see below).

### 3. *Identification phase*

As explained above, Regression to Dependence is functional only if, in the midst of their chaos, pain and loss of meaning, people can get a fix on something on which to depend; someone or something which can make sense of their predicament. Those who have cultivated a richer inner world of stories - myths - may be prepared for this. They can imagine heroic figures and events which are in stark contrast with their own distressing situation and which compel them to acknowledge their own limitations.

Acceptance of this dependence on such persons or occasions involves the readiness to take responsibility for what is happening to them. However much they may blame others for their slipping into regression, or the crash out of Realisation phase, they push them away and focus on their own collusion, their guilt is accepted and not argued away. As they become aware of what and who they are looking for (in their imaginations), the values and qualities of the thing or persons they are looking to become important in giving meaning to their existence.

The dilemma is whether they are frustrated because of unreachable, desirable ideas, or whether there is a means by which they can become accessible. In human history, religions have evolved and developed to try to resolve this dilemma. Some religions have rituals which, if properly carried out, enable the adherents to overcome their guilt and be identified with the gods whose behaviour has attracted them. Other religions offer dogma which promise deliverance if believed in, where the dogma set forth the qualities of life desired by the believers.

Whatever is the nature of this process leading up to the conscious groping and grasping after these qualities, the energy of in-needness constantly drives people towards the appropriation of these values in order to find meaningful clues to their (ongoing) lives.

In this Identification phase, people experience their own real identity as they incorporate the qualities of life associated with their dependent leaders. In that appropriation they also acquire the energy, the incentives and the power of the one(s) with whom they have become one. This is the significance of the sacrificial meal in rituals, epitomised in the Eucharist of the Christian Church.

Functional identification with such figures and stories, mythical or historical, results in the personal acceptance and inward incorporation of these values by persons, groups and cultures, so that they enter a process of *transformation* in which they seek to bring their renewed meanings into realisation, or manifestation, in the outside world. The shift of emphasis in the inner world has begun to affect goals and behaviour in the external world.

Identification and Regression can be seen at the institutional level when managers experience uncertainty and panic. This plunges them and their company plans into regression. But they have nowhere to go from there unless they discover a new vision or surface the values they had hitherto taken for granted as being real. They

seek for something to depend on, a worthy object or idea on which to depend. For example, a company sees afresh the entrepreneurial genius of its founder. The test comes when that founding vision is matched against the assumption and attitude of current managers who can be threatened by it. For the moment, the feeling is one of despair, not of hope. However, when there are leaders who see the significance of the original idea, the threat drains away and managers experience hope. The test is whether that hope is sufficiently grounded so that it energises them to transform the business by accepting the responsibility to do so for themselves. This is the story of a current client of the Institute, an ongoing story where managers are beginning to take the first steps to transformation.

By contrast, with functional identification, dysfunction occurs where the only values offered by dependent leaders are designed to take the pain out of the desperate feelings of regression. There is comfort to shield the persons from the shock of facing the meaning. Remedies are given which are palliative, not healing.

The result is that renewal is not experienced. There is no sense of energy, only confrontation with the world on the same terms as prior to the withdrawal. It is like getting up after a troubled night's dreams, driven to go back to work by the passage of time (ie. by forces and circumstances in the external world). There can be a false sense of security here but the feelings inside remain.

Another dysfunctional experience is where people intellectually grasp their predicament but avoid grappling with its possible meaning, preventing its impact on their inner selves, perhaps out of fear. In the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott's terms, the experience is 'frozen' and will remain so until, in functional regression to dependence, the person(s) take full responsibility for the original difficulty. The oscillation process becomes very shallow and life something to be covered up with escapist activities and drugs.

In both cases of dysfunctional Identification, beliefs, attitudes and meanings remain unchanged and are defended even in the most distressing moments of regression. This is actually why they are dysfunctional. The person(s) become unable to respond in an adaptive manner to the changing circumstances in the outside world and end up putting inappropriate, and potentially damaging, meanings and values into practice in Realisation phase. The resulting mismatch between inner maps of the outer territory informs and legitimises maladaptive behaviour.

#### 4. *Transformation to Realisation phase*

Whereas regression is in a state of *tension*, the experience of transformation is one of *expectancy*. In the assimilation of the desired values, people experience the challenge of finding ways to express the new vision. The transformation provides the space for the appreciation of the significance of the new possibilities.

Strictly speaking, the experience of the new Identity through the incorporation of meaning is the *moment* of transformation, but this phase of the *process* of transformation provides time for taking one's bearings in re-engaging with the external world from the perspective of the new insight (a metaphorical vantage point) in one's internal world. It is like a butterfly working its way out of the remains of being a caterpillar, sunning itself on a twig to dry its wings, before launching into space.

In the Identification phase, all is symbolic and this phase provides the psychic space to learn how to express the symbols to become real in life, in the actual behaviour of the Realisation phase. The rich symbols of Identification work to the surface, the inner to the outer, so that people can become aware of the systemic dimension of the context which might now have unfamiliar features.

Dysfunctional transformation comes from confusing the symbolic with the real. Where the drive which emanates from Identification arouses awareness of power, those who confuse symbolic activity will be disconnected from the reality of human tasks and responsibility, and the pretensions of such people about their power makes them as dangerous as a loose cannon.

The meanings attributed to inner world values provide the direction for outward behaviour. If, in the phase of Identification, the values associated with sustainable development are significant, then after Transformation to Realisation these people will be driven to find ways to achieve sustainability. Extending the scope of oscillation thinking, it could be said that the deepest inner values of people are able to be contemplated and expressed in the cosmic dimensions of sustainability. It is of note that scientists who would use the expression 'love' to characterise the quality of sustainability, are matched by others who would use the same word 'love' to characterise the ultimate quality of the dependent leadership. Meaning and expression are mirror images of one another.

## ACCOUNTABLE ACTION

In this paper we have described the qualities which are intrinsic to sustainable development in the cosmos that we share. We suggest that the importance for society of sustainable development is compelling. But however much this is communicated to others or enforced by legislation and policies, it can never be enough. It is only if we who accept the arguments for sustainable development can see ourselves as key players in this drama that anything will be transformed. Our concern for outward change can only be effective to the extent that we ourselves are open to inward change in the process of sustainability.

The oscillation process is presented as a way of understanding our normal day to day experience of life so that we can take charge of our own human development. We have indicated that the qualities for a 'good-enough' society which can emerge from working with the oscillation process are similar qualities to those required for sustainable development. Work by the Grubb Institute over the past twenty years has been with people in organisational, community or personal predicaments. When such people have discerned how their experience can be plotted on the phases of the oscillation curve, it has frequently led them to understand its implications for their own behaviour. By accepting accountability and going with the flow of the process, they have contributed to aspects of sustainable development in planning their future. This is now open to us.





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