Introduction

It appears that humanity is at a critical juncture—a time where our choices may determine the survival of our species and of many planetary life forms. Our historical moment has been described in terms of the successes and failures of modernity, and what comes before and after modernity. Modernity in this context refers to dominant (or dominating) cognitive and cultural, social, and technological processes driven by abstract logical thinking, individualism, capitalism, democracy, and material "progress." The significant achievements of modernity, as well as its potentially catastrophic manifestations (aggregated into the so-called "meta-crisis"—Williams, 2016; Stein, 2019, p. 18) will be familiar to most readers. Our predicament is often described in terms of increasing complexity. It is now practically a platitude that "we live in a complex and fast-changing world," a VUCA world (of Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity), requiring humanity to step up to the challenge by increasing the complexity of our thinking and collaborative problem solving. In this narrative, complexity must be met with complexity.

This dominant narrative about increasing complexity, building momentum over centuries and perhaps millennia, has perennially called forth a counter-narrative, appearing in waves within cultural movements such as romanticism, traditionalism, post-modern critique, and new-age culture. Though some aspects of these counter-narratives add complexity by taking a critical meta-perspective (e.g. to deconstruct underlying assumptions), for the most part they point to less complex forms of being. The contrasting narratives critique sophistication, complication, progress, expansion, and power, and aim toward simplicity—suggesting slowing down and looking inward; going "back to the land," orienting toward matters of holism, spirit, and soul; emphasizing simple acts of care and selflessness; and the humility of not knowing or beginner's mind. In this chapter we use a developmental lens to look closely at how complexity and simplicity are understood and misunderstood in certain narratives on the human condition.

Metamodernism is often described in terms of the cultural tensions between modernism, traditionalist appeals to return to pre-modern ways, post-modern critiques that analyze the problems of modernity without offering solutions, and new-age movements that are a confusing combination of naive utopian vision and back-to-nature regress that ignores pragmatic givens (Vermeulen & Van Den Akker, 2010; Turner, 2015; Abramson, 2015; Cooper, 2018; Freinacht, 2017). The emerging metamodern mindset or culture can be defined in terms of a synthesis that seriously considers the post-modern critique, does so without jettisoning the positive contributions of modernity, and re-integrates, rather than regresses to, aspects of the human condition that were exorcised by modernity. Though metamodernity originally was a descriptive
term tracking cultural trends, our focus here is on the more prescriptive orientations to metamodernism. Neither describing nor achieving that emergent synthesis can be adequately accomplished though simple processes of pruning, mixing, oscillating, and balancing the simple vs. the complex, or the modern vs. the non-modern. To understand this terrain one must look deeply into the dialectical relationship between complexity and simplicity in human development. Developmental theory is primarily the study of learning as increasing complexity in human thought, and by extension, culture. It offers important conceptual tools for understanding the dynamics related to metamodernism. Yet, it can have even more explanatory and emancipatory power that it has thus far. Here we will argue that developmental approaches must be supplemented with more rigorous treatments of simplicity as well as complexity, and in particular must consider processes of unlearning and releasing complexity.

Though themes of complexity and simplicity permeate narratives about our moment in history, the relationship between complexity and simplicity is often misunderstood. Complexity is a theme central to thinking about development, evolution, learning, problem solving, and transformational change. Simplicity is a common theme in diverse areas including spirituality, pragmatism, ethics, embodiment, romanticism, and ecological living. Approaches drawing on theories of human development and evolution often invoke a quasi-teleological notion of "simplicity"—the emergence of a "simplicity on the other side of complexity," borrowed from the study of complexity and self-organizing systems in nature. I will argue that in the domains of human ideas, abstractions, and plans, as opposed to "natural" systems, learning and growth do not progress through a pure "simplicity" that "transcends and includes" the best of prior forms, but rather that it inevitably introduce elements of shadow, demi-reality, contradiction, and/or trauma into psychological and social systems. Thus, again, any theory of human development must explicitly include processes for release, unlearning, healing, and/or "shadow work" in addition to modeling complexity.

To address the dilemmas and apparent paradoxes within the meta-crisis and contemporary culture wars it is imperative that we turn around problematic trends of increasing human-systems complexity, abstraction, and dissociation, and re-orient to fundamental (perhaps "simple") values of care and integrity. But this must be done through a wisdom that does not pit simplicity against complexity, nor goes by a simplistic model that believes simplicity is approached easily through complexity, nor that sees the issue merely in terms of balance and harmony within a polarity. Our developmental framework is summarized by "Wisdom Skill = Complexity Capacity + Spiritual Clarity," where Complexity Capacity is growth in hierarchical complexity, Spiritual Clarity is related to depth, unlearning, simplicity, and releasing complexity, and wisdom skill is related to ego development and meaning-making maturity.

These pages contain only a brief summary of a more extensive treatment found in Murray (2020, in press; and 2020, in progress). Along the way I hope to remedy common confusions about the relationship between transcendence and embodiment, and between ascending and descending metaphors of psycho-spiritual growth. These distinctions are important because ascending (towards developmental/evolutionary complexity) and descending (towards involutionary release, re-rembering, and simplicity), while both critical, are distinct cognitive or transformational processes, achieved after overcoming distinct motivational and social challenges, and matched to distinct types of resultant capacities.

Preliminaries
On the importance of complexity. Though this chapter focuses on elaborating negative consequences of complexity, we should ground the narrative by noting its positive significance. The dynamics of the evolution of the cosmos and of living systems can be described in terms of hierarchically emerging levels of complexity, in which, as Ken Wilber puts it, each level transcends and includes (or embraces and transcends) the prior, resulting in entities that are more than the sum of their parts (Wilber 1995; Koestler, 1967). Emergence is not predictable or guaranteed, and in fact is a barely understood process, yet complexity science has become a powerful tool for understanding reality (Stacey, 1995; Bar-Yam, 2002; Allen et al., 2014). Here we focus on complexity in human systems and human cognition, including the capacity of cognition to make sense of a complex reality.

Critiques of complexity (and of development or hierarchy) often ignore the importance of foundational strata. It is easier to critique than to propose a practical solution—easier to dismantle than to construct—because crafting sustainable reality-based solutions requires understanding and honoring how each level builds upon prior structural levels. For example, many "radical" critiques of modernity don't acknowledge that the intelligence to craft a good argument, the political freedom to critique the status quo, and the technology used to disseminate critical perspectives, rely directly on those structures that the radical critique proposes to tear down—for example, educational systems, democratic political systems, and technological tools forged in the cauldrons of capitalism. Applying this theme to cognitive and ego development, we can note the importance of healthy foundational levels of cognition and culture. "Traditional" values of honor, respect, teamwork, appreciation, and gratitude speak to the importance of sturdy foundational strata. Expertise born of experience is also a form of complexity, and attitudes that devalue expertise in favor of bottom-up power or egalitarian consensus, though well intentioned, risk ultimate failure. Though radical transformation and deconstruction is indeed necessary for humans to survive the meta-crisis, most revolutionary or radical proposals to dismantle existing structures do not understand what is lost in regression into social or cognitive chaos.

Development is largely the study of how knowledge and skill builds upon prior knowledge and skill—that is the essence of hierarchical complexity. Many believe that the territory of complexity and depth implicit in metamodern cognition necessarily includes at least an informal intuitive understanding of how developmental factors pertain to the human condition. Hanzi Freinacht's seminal book on Metamodernism (The Listening Society, 2017) describes a developmental approach to metamodernism, basing its model on Common's Hierarchical Complexity Theory. Our treatment here expands on Freinacht's treatment of developmental "depth," which he says "is a person's intimate, embodied acquaintance with subjective states" (Chap. 14). Rather than base depth on states, we integrate development with a descending or involutionary movement that involves releasing complexity as an essential component (following Roy, 2018; Roy & Trudel, 2011). We agree with Freinacht's notion that depth is "a kind of existential or spiritual wisdom" but believe that it is not well described in terms of state experiences, but rather using processes of deconstruction, shadow-work, and insight-generation that we call "spiritual clarity"—but more on that later.  

Some problems of complexity, and the importance of simplicity. In natural processes of evolution, development, and emergence, complexity simply happens, and it is not something one can or should critique per-se. But in the domain of human consciousness and culture, actions and

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1 As a self-referential corroboration of our framework: the basic ideas being proposed here are not very complex. Most of this text aims at deconstructing common beliefs and concepts. Similarly, in projects to re-imagine capitalism, or citizenship, health care, etc., the main effort is in getting people to unlearn extant assumptions and mental models.
beliefs can be judged as right/wrong and true/false (as ethics and propositions are among the newly emergent properties of the human life domain over the animal life domain). Within the human realm of beliefs, ideologies, egoic choices, invented technologies, group conflict, and hierarchical regimes of power, increasing complexity is a mixed bag of benefits and disasters.

Cognitive complexity, i.e. learning and belief formation, can contain what Roy Bhaskar calls "demi-reality"—explicit beliefs and implicit assumptions that do not correspond to reality. Demi-reality refers to people's disconnection from others, nature, and self, in forms such as deception, denial, grandiosity, oppression, alienation, and fragmentation (Bhaskar, 1975; 2017; Collier, 1994), and is related to Carl Jung's notion of individual and collective shadow. The contemporary "meaning crisis" in human sense-making stems from our inability to see and eliminate forms of demi-reality (Vervaeke et al., 2017). Demi-reality can also be embedded within social, economic, and political systems, in how their supposed purpose is at odds with their actual effect. For theories of human development and complexity to be maximally relevant to our times, they must have something to say about demi-real complexity and knowledge, i.e. about the moral implications of hierarchical complexity.

Clearly, increasing complexity in cognitive, cultural, political, and technological domains is not guaranteed to produce "good" ends. Complex thinkers and geniuses can be malevolent or oblivious to the needs of others. Complex technology can be used to harm. Complex laws, policies, and bureaucracies, though sometimes seemingly necessary, are, at best "necessary evils," and at worse oppressive, inefficient, and extractive. The paradox is that, to understand and address complex problems one must reflect upon them fully and deeply, which, by definition, must be done from an even more complex vantage point. (As in Einstein’s well-known adage that “we cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking complexity that created them.”)

One might think that the resolution to this paradox is that somehow it is "good complexity" that is used to understand and reduce "bad complexity." But this principle is flawed because of another paradox, captured by the adage that "every solution creates new problems." We cannot predict the complex outcomes of introducing new complexity.\(^2\) The downsides of increased complexity are usually unintended and rarely anticipated. (Though all too often, through human greed and haste, potentially negative outcomes are conveniently ignored and denied.) Even with the best of intentions it is not possible to predict or avoid the negative consequences that will accompany any positive outcomes of increased complexity.

We are born into ("thrown into") families and cultures that inculcate us with forms of learning and complexity that we do not choose and cannot predict. Thus simply avoiding the negative outcomes of complexity will not do, but we must also identify and release complexity, i.e. dismantle structures and unlearn beliefs and habits, when they are revealed as problematic. Above we have touched on how external forms of complexity tend to create negative externalities, and later we will show how internal complexity, i.e. cognitive hierarchical complexity, also leads inevitably to demi-realities. For a variety of reasons, intentionally releasing complexity seems much more difficult than adding complexity. Again, our suggestion is the regular reflective practice of assessing, undoing, unlearning, or releasing complexity, at many levels of human systems. Doing so involves skillful means, which implies that one must have a "theory of

\(^2\) Cunha & Rego (2010) describe the "unintentional complexity" that accumulates in man-made and man-inhabited systems. For example, the "cumulative by-product of organizational changes, big and small, that over the years weave complications (often invisibly) into the way work is done [and] creates organizational inefficiencies, lack of response capacity or organizational inertia, as well as a focus on the inner reality of the organization" (p. 86).
change." But we should not forget moving is this direction is also a matter of virtue and moral will.

Usually in these fields people think that "higher is better." But, following developmental theory and its emphasis on built-up strata of complexity, one could argue that the earlier or "simpler" levels are, in a sense, more important than the later more complex levels. Just as the structural integrity of a building's foundation is more important than the structural integrity of the top floor, the health and robustness of foundational layers of the psyche (or of social systems) is of utmost importance. Calls to "meet complexity with more complexity" miss the fact that often complexity is part of the problem, not the solution, and that the real culprit is weak or misshapen foundational structures. For example, members of a dysfunctional (maladaptive) family or organization will adopt complex coping mechanisms, and sometimes there is an escalating "arms race" of complexity when each member tries to out-strategize the other to get their needs met. Resolution or healing for such a system requires releasing complexity in individuals and their strategies. For example, psychotherapeutic modalities can strengthen safety, self-worth, trust, and empathy at foundational levels, leading to less complex and more fluid interactions and less need for complex strategies or bureaucratic rules.

As noted, many narratives respond to the potential dangers of hierarchical growth and increasing complexity with calls for simplicity or recovering foundational psychic assets. Spiritual and contemplative discourses refer to concepts such as letting go, purity, emptiness, and stillness. Psychotherapy points to uncovering, and transforming early schema. The ethical gestures of forgiveness and acceptance are also types of release. Spiritual growth in the many religions includes processes of purgation or purification, and Buddhist meditation orients to deconstructing, dismantling, cutting-through, dis-integrating, or eradicating mental "impurities." Psychological/spiritual growth is sometimes understood as a healing processes of removing psychic injuries or shadow material, and is sometimes described in terms of disidentification and the tearing down, dissolution, de-composition, or releasing of boundaries; and at other times in terms of loss and death of parts of the self. Psychological/spiritual maturity is said to involve "waking up" from the "cultural trap" or "consensus trance," and seeing through conditioning and laying bare deeper truths. All of these terms form a conceptual cluster that has a very different (descending) felt-sense as compared to terms used in positivist discussions of (ascending) hierarchical complexity, growth, and advancement. Even sentiments such as "be here now," and "accept what is" are about releasing complexity—in this case of beliefs and mentations that occlude experiential reality.

As another example of the importance of simplicity, consider how scholars, professing on abstract theoretical aspects of important issues, inevitably must respond to audience questions that include "so what can one do concretely to implement these ideas?" In my experience, the vast majority of such answers are rather mundane, in that the principles of concrete action boil down to simple aphorisms and perennial truths and values: show love, compassion, forgiveness, gratitude, tolerance, self-control, curiosity, perseverance, etc.; know thyself, love yourself, let go, think for yourself, speak the truth, accept what is, follow your dreams (or bliss, or gut...), be open to grief and loss, act locally (clean your room)...breathe!

The desire for simplicity comes in part from the fact that, as we will elaborate later, human development and learning is never ideal—it does not simply "transcend and include" in a purely additive and transformative sense, but rather it inevitably leaves things behind as it moves forward into new territory. Everyday observation shows us that, without exception, people leave things behind as they mature from childhood into adulthood. One can lose playfulness, innocent curiosity, earnest honesty, hopefulness, openness, trust of others, self-acceptance, perceptual
clarity, an affinity for the natural world, fluid imagination, dedication to the values of one's tribe, trust in logic and science, etc., at different junctures on the developmental path into maturity.

These foundational capacities are primitive psychic capacities that need to be recovered or remembered, more than built anew. Regardless of how complex our world becomes, our survival and happiness depend in large part upon the simple forms of wisdom and truth that, because of the nested structure of development, sustain all later levels. It is self-evident that these resources are sorely depleted in modern life and one could argue that the urgent problems of organizations and societies are caused more by the atrophy or shunting of these foundational capacities than by a dire need for more complex thinking. These early modes of being are critical psychic resources needed to endure hardship and balance negative emotions (from both real and concocted negative and stressful experiences) in any challenging or complex context. The essentials of trust, love, playfulness, curiosity, forgiveness, etc., don't need to be understood metaphysically as essential truths or principles that must drive and permeate all life—this risks turning them into idealizations and ideologies—rather we argue that we need robust access to these modes of being to balance and complement other capacities, and that not having the skillful means to access them greatly diminishes resilience, robustness, well-being, and sanity.

Patternings such as psychological shadow, denial, and repression all fall within the rubric of what we will call occluded/occluding knowledge and skill. Occluded cognitive structures are those left behind, hidden, rejected, forgotten, or distorted through the imprints of later (occluding) experiences and structures. Occlusions are not necessarily negative, and can serve important purposes in an individual's (or group's) survival, coping, or thriving during specific conditions. Also called "lacunas," they can be useful during one period and become undesirable under a new context. One sometimes needs to push prior ways aside or beneath to make room for the new, as when one becomes disgusted with one's family's "old time religion" and its contradictions. But what was rejected can latter be re-integrated, when the time is right—as in when one realizes there was important gold in the dross that was rejected.

Perhaps the most extensive occlusions come through modernity's adoration of abstract/rational thinking as it pushes much of the "magical" strata of the psyche into the inaccessible unconsciousness (Donald, 1991; Hutson, 2012; Jung, 1968). That strata of cognition is (practically) always active (see Brown, 2002), yet all too rarely listened to. It operates unreflectively through associations, at a level of processing that does not clearly separate self from other, imagination from sensory reality, or impulse from action. This magical strata of mind produces images, associations, and feeling states—often vivid, pregnant, or disturbing—that point to deeper truths about one's being, sometimes called the imaginal realm. To the extent that modernity has inhibited this layer of information and processing, we miss vital truths, perceptions, and intuitions. One aspect of metamodern cognition or consciousness is the "re-enchantment of the lifeworld," i.e. maintaining an open channel to information and experiences from the lower strata of the psyche. While modernity rejected this information as fanciful or emotion-laden, it can and should be understood as having a type of truth and validity on its own terms, within its own domain.

By now it should be clear that our notion of "simplicity" is often about recovering developmentally earlier or structurally prior modes. They are simpl-er in that they are prior to structures built after and on top of them, which, by definition, are more complex. But they are not simple per se. The unconscious, including processing at the perceptual and magical strata, is quite complex of course. The child learning to walk or talk is complex beyond our understanding, and even a cell contains complexities beyond comprehension. Futher, primeval aboriginal
cultures practice sophisticated modes of perception and hold complex wisdoms that modern man has long forgotten and desperately needs.

**Pathologies of simplicity.** Having argued on the side of simplicity, we must now caution against simplistic approaches to simplicity, and re-engage the theme of complexity. Above we argued against a type of simplistic thinking that ignores the role of the foundational strata of the psyche. We have also noted that regressive appeals to return to earlier states (or stages), and anarchistic appeals to deconstruct ("blow up") existing structures are inherently naive, though they may arise from valid concerns. Also to be avoided are progressive forms of simplicity, including: hippie romanticism (e.g. the literal interpretation of "all you need is love"), new-age ideology (the unexamined metaphysics of misplaced concreteness, as in the "law of attraction"), so-called bleeding heart liberalism or "idiot compassion" (that can feel deeply but cannot act wisely to impact positive change), and "spiritual bypassing" (confusing state experiences for wisdom and using spiritual ideas to avoid concrete realities). All of these approaches, if held too tightly or exclusively, contain a regressive naïveté on the practical complexities of life that prohibit them from serving as the basis of successful actions in a complex world.

The simplicity we are championing is not about regressing to earlier modes of being but rather recovering lost psychic resources which are "simple" in that they originally develop in childhood, and, in their pure or original form, are not complicated by the machinations of abstraction and reflective problematization. These resources are to be recovered and re-integrated into later action logics, where mature forms of sense-making are operational. In other words, romantic injunctions to return to states of emotional intensity, simple living, and natural beauty are important when they point to the need to recover and integrate these resources, but are naive and dangerous when they suggest a return to modes of consciousness associated with the magical and mythical strata of the mind. Regression means that one accesses an earlier developmental level without keeping "on line" the reflective and regulatory functions of later more complex levels, so that the more primitive levels dominate decision-making. One can release higher level functions temporarily, to open to non-ordinary states or healing experiences, but usually one is supported by others who temporarily take on the higher order "executive functions" of the situation.

The positive functions of the simplistic mind and heart are salient to romanticists, who often ignore the disturbing parts of the magical world of the infant—the impulsive, the narcissistic, and even the proto-psychotic and hallucinatory. On the flip side of openness and wide-eyed awe is the terror of magical forces beyond one's control; on the other side of blissful oneness is codependent merging and weak personal boundaries; and on the other side of hugging the cute puppy is the unbridled rage or terror of upsetting events (see Hutson 2012; Murray, 2019, p. 144). The early action logics are dangerously pre-ethical—arising from that strata of mind that knows undifferentiated connection, but cannot take perspectives. During non-ordinary state experiences in which one is resting openly in the expanded magical or mythical strata of consciousness, one is open to manipulation as well as love; rage as well as rapture (as they say, "set and setting" is key). The universe might seem blissful and oceanic until someone gets in one's way or disagrees, and then the expansiveness collapses into suffering unless one can readily access rational functions, such as objectively analyzing the situation, and taking multiple perspectives to reason with others. The romantic's plan to live into simplicity rightly banishes cruel complexity, but there must still be "an adult in the room" (or in the presidency, etc.).

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3 The later-forming mythical strata of the psyche is a place of archetypal personalities who can both delight and manipulate us; and of imaginative and hopeful narratives, often unfettered by logic, empirical truths, or empathic reciprocity.
To prioritize or choose among options requires a higher developmental level than understanding the choices in isolation. For any given context there is likely to be conflicting directions implied within our list of important resources at foundation levels (respect, playfulness, etc.). Thus, once one removes barriers or blind spots and gains access to foundational psychic resources, there is still the more complex task of discerning when and how to apply or embody what one encounters there, which might include both intended and unintended emanations.\(^4\)

The paradox of desiring simplicity while acknowledging Einstein's principle (that one needs additional complexity to understand a situation) is resolved in understanding that untangling a knot might require a moment of additional complexity (a meta-perspective) to figure out how to release the problematic complexity, but once complexity serves that purpose it can be put aside, rather than built up. For example, a problem at complexity level 4 may require a level 5 analysis, but the goal of that analysis can be to reduce the whole system to a level 3 complexity, or to make levels 1, 2, and 3 more healthy and robust so that level 4 operations function better. Note that for many problems the level 5 meta-view is only required by a few leaders or influencers, who can then guide other stakeholders. For example, when members of an organization do not trust each other, arcane and complex interaction patterns can emerge. A skillful intervention might be to remove complex-thinking narcissistic individuals and complex bureaucratic systems, and then realign organizational systems toward supporting participants in resourcing the foundational capacities of trusting self and other, orienting to perception over analysis, and eliminating complex barriers to communication (see Roy, 2016). A leader or leadership team might accomplish this intervention without needing the majority of participants to understand the system at the level of complexity that the leaders do.

All of this is does not discount the often important and marvelous outcomes of hierarchical development or the value of theories of hierarchical development. But caution is warranted, especially for those oriented exclusively to ascending paths and progress into later stages.

**On Developmental Theory and Dangerous tools**

**Developmental models and complexity.** In the Preliminaries section we summarized the contours of a ubiquitous tension between complexity and simplicity, closely related to the tensions between modern and romantic movements that post-modernism reveals and critiques, and metamodernism aims to resolve. We spoke to the detrimental and pathological manifestations of complexity, as well as its importance. And we spoke to the importance of acknowledging foundational structures. We emphasized that the recovery of early psychic structures should not be a regression, but a release (ablation) of occlusions to regain access to lost resources, which can then be evaluated and re-integrated by more mature cognitive functions as needed.

But these distinctions and principles are too crude to address the significant problems we face. Developmental models can bring us closer to an adequate understanding of the complexities involved. They help us move away from a simple bi-polar or linear understanding of simplicity vs. complexity, or rationality vs. non-rationality, etc., which tends to limit us to considerations of choosing, mixing, oscillating, balancing, or harmonizing, and allows for a more nuanced, dialectical, and dynamic nonlinear understanding of these relationships, showing how simplicity

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\(^4\) Jon Elster (1999, p. 11) has a wonderful analysis of how any popular proverb admits to an equally valid opposite. For example, we have "like attracts like" and "opposites attract each other;" we say "absence makes the heart grow fonder" and "out of sight out of mind."
and complexity entwine and co-emerge. Developmental models paint a detailed spectrum of unfolding strata of cognition and consciousness.\(^5\) They use principles from dynamic systems theory, which were designed to characterize different forms of complexity and explain how complexity arises from simplicity.\(^6\) Developmental theories allow us to measure strata of hierarchical complexity to a resolution of about a dozen levels, or even dozens of sub-levels, depending on the context and theory.\(^7\) They explain factors in how skills grow horizontally and vertically/hierarchically, what drives growth, and what inhibits it. Our interest here is with the general principles that operate all along the developmental spectrum, rather than with descriptions of each level.

Developmental theories explain the growth of cognitive complexity and sophistication in any area, and most importantly, they help explain the challenges to manifesting personal happiness and a just and compassionate society in a modern world profuse in diverse belief systems and life-styles (Kegan, 1995; Cook-Greuter, 2004; Kohlberg, 1973; Habermas, 1990). Applied broadly to human meaning-making, these theories describe the journey from black-and-white, narcissistic and impulsive, us-vs-them, short-sighted, shallow, and simplistic "action logics" (worldviews or modes of meaning-making) into more complex, nuanced, expansive, layered, flexible, adaptive, reflective, empathic, multi-perspectival, and/or pro-social action logics. Developmental complexity has also been used (though somewhat less empirically or rigorously) to describe the evolution of cultures—including their systems of values and ethics; their modes of communication and commerce; and their technological achievements (Beck & Cowan, 1996; Hall, 1990; Zak & Knack, 2001; Freinacht, 2020). In this short text we will assume that the reader has at least a slight familiarity with some adult developmental models (e.g. by Kegan, Torbert, Cook-Greuter, O'Fallon, Fischer, or Commons; with many such models summarized in Wilber, 2000), as our goal is to renovate how they are interpreted and used.

**Development as building upon prerequisites.** The central contribution of developmental theory is in the meticulous mapping of prerequisite skills. That skills build upon each other seems an obvious fact, but the full implications are surprisingly absent from most analyses of social, political, or cultural phenomena. Developmental principles help us avoid asking, expecting, or wishing that people would do or understand something when, in fact, they lack the developmental prerequisites. For example, we often judge people too harshly for not seeing systemic patterns in their cultural context, or for blindness to contradictory aspects of their personalities or beliefs. But these reflective skills are usually achieved through a privileged access to good education and mentoring, and to safe opportunities to practice and make mistakes. And some that have acquired such skills live in highly stressful or oppressed contexts that tend to "downshift" one's cognition into simpler operational states ("shadow-crash" in Barta, 2020; "fallback" in Torbert, 2020; "amygdala hijack" in Goleman, 1995). Developmental principles can be essential in gauging expectations and discerning amongst intervention approaches (e.g. in balancing assistance, education, patience, authority, empathy, and dialogue). For instance, adult developmental factors are rarely taken into account in scientific studies and policy decisions about reducing crime or

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5 Note that "level," "stage," and "strata" are relatively synonymous in our discussion. Strata best emphasizes that these are always-present layers of processing that build upon each other, as opposed to categories that one moves into after exiting a prior stage.

6 Dynamic systems theory makes use of non-linear processes and concepts including differentiation, integration, self-reference, self-organization, emergence, chaos, scale-invariance, bifurcation, dissipative structures, sensitivity to initial conditions, etc. (Lorenz, 1963; Prigogine, 2018; Sapolsky, 2017; Luhman; 1995; Bar-Yam, 2002).

7 In these theories hierarchical coordinations, applied iteratively level by level, "produce a scale of [about 14] levels that increase in complexity and integration [producing an] interval scale for assessing the dynamics of development and variation" (Fischer et al. 2003, p 497; and see Stein & Heikkinen, 2008).
addiction, improving parenting skills, conflicts related to immigration and migration, or installing democracies into developing countries.

We often want people or social structures to change, but fail to take a close look at the assumptions made about abilities such as the abilities to: consider the perspectives of multiple stakeholders during problems solving; look beyond surface-level symptoms and short-term factors into more systemic causes; or appraise how one's own history, feelings, and hidden motivations bias one's beliefs and actions. Developmental research has rigorously mapped out sequences of prerequisite cognitive and socio-emotional skills in such areas, showing that most people are "in over their heads" as they try to live up to typical but tacit expectations imposed by society (Kegan, 1994). Put bluntly, any plan or intervention that fails to consider the actual vs. desired (or assumed) developed skills of its target population would likely fail.

**Dangerous tools.** The developmental lens on complexity is important because the problems of today are "problems" largely because of their degree of complexity. Sometimes the issue is a lack of resources or malign intention, but more often the underlying issue is the large number of factors, non-linear relationships, and unknowns. One promise of developmental theory is that it might give us a map of the level of skill complexity needed to tackle a problem (if we can estimate the level and type of complexity presented by the problem). Of course, tackling real problems requires much more, but developmental theories have proven to be powerful tools for understanding certain human dilemmas. And therein lies another problem—their power is seductive. Developmental theories are actually quite complex in and of themselves, and are easy to overgeneralize and misapply.

**Ideas are tools** (Menand, 2001), and the history of ideas shows us that, like the history of technology, tools at a certain level of complexity require a corresponding level of cognitive complexity to invent them, but once invented, individuals and communities at lower levels of developmental complexity can appropriate them—often to hazardous ends. The classic examples are tools of warfare such as the atomic bomb and gene manipulation, invented through modern/post-modern levels of complexity, but now procurable by developmentally "tribal" or ethnocentric cultures and individuals (and see the discussion in Berge, 20xx). Similarly, in the domain of ideas, the deconstructive intellectual methods invented by high post-modernists were dazzlingly sophisticated. Yet these ideas, e.g. how facts are inescapably fallible and that knowledge and history are constructed narratives, have been mis-/re-appropriated by comparable idiots to fashion our post-truth milieu. Similarly, insights from deep contemplative practice, e.g. that "the self is empty" or "the world is an illusion" are, in their radical forms, powerful yet potentially harmful insights that traditional religions did not give members the tools to realize until one's development could properly assimilate their import and caveats. Our point here is that developmental theory is another such concept. As with contemplative practices, its benefits seem substantial and its downsides are subtler, so the dangers of misappropriation can be difficult to appreciate.

As more people become attracted to developmental theory, as is happening within the community of metamodern scholars and elsewhere, it becomes ever more important to highlight the caveats needed to employ it. Some traps of using these models have been generally acknowledged, including: the temptation to categorize people into simplistic stage categories; and assumption that "higher is better," which can lead to arrogance and blind-spots in sophisticated thinkers, and to unproductive motives to coerce people up the "ladder" of development; and thinking that higher development leads to more ethical behavior (see Stein, 2008; Stein & Heikkinen, 2008; Murray, 2011; Cook-Greuter, 2013; Torbert & Erfan, 2020). Therefore, in the next two sections
we move beyond generally known tensions between complexity and simplicity as outlined in the Preliminaries, into some less acknowledged caveats.

**Developmental Externalities**

**Modes of cognitive coordination.** Here we will argue that most cognitive development and growth creates unintended consequences (externalities) that accumulate shadow material in the individual or collective psyche. To examine these ubiquitous negative potentials of developmental or hierarchical learning and thinking, we take as a starting point what is arguably the most elegant and powerful definition given in the literature. Michael Commons' precise and compact definition of hierarchical complexity defines the "complexity order" of a capacity in terms of how many hierarchical levels of one thing building upon another that a task or skill implies (Commons & Pekker, 2004). Developmental theories differentiate horizontal growth from *vertical or hierarchical* growth. Horizontal growth is driven largely by differentiation or accumulation of same-level capacities; while vertical growth is said to follow a phase of horizontal growth, and is driven largely by the integration (or coordination) of lower-level capacities. Commons has boiled hierarchical development down to a "mathematical" or "axiomatic" foundation, wherein each "new task-required action must: (1) be defined in terms of the lower stage actions and (2) coordinate the lower stage actions in a (3) nonarbitrary way" (Commons & Chen 2014, p. 252).

However, much is hidden within the abstract idea of "operating upon" or "coordinating" lower levels. A concept, skill, or idea can operate upon, build upon, or "go meta" in many ways—and determining the sub-species of such operation reveals much that is useful in explaining both the strengths and potential calamities of hierarchical growth. As we will see, there are specific problematic or pathological ways of over-functioning for of each of the sub-operations within hierarchical complexity. In Murray (in-press) I give an analysis of the sub-operations of hierarchical growth, drawing from several theories of cognitive architecture (Laire, Newell, & Rosenbloom's 1987 SOAR model; Anderson's 1983 ACT model; Commons & Pekker's 2004 HCT; Fischer's 1980 Skill Theory; and O'Fallon et al.'s 2020 STAGES model). The resultant is this set of cognitive operations: Differentiation (the only non-hierarchical, or horizontal operation in the list), Composition (assigning relationship, pattern, or mappings), Generalization (extends the boundaries of something to include more), Abstraction (eliminates non-essential properties among objects to form a higher order class), and Integration (inter-relating elements interpenetrate to the degree that a new functional unit emerges). These processes operate simultaneously and fractally at multiple process levels: entire-spectrum, tiers, levels, and level transitions.

We will articulate how cognitive complexity potentiates the production of demi-reality by analyzing the possible down-sides of each of these five forms of hierarchical coordination. Somewhat tongue-in-cheek (because these forms are only partly or sometimes problematic), we title the subsections: Disastrous Differentiation, Noxious Composition, Vicious Abstraction, Pernicious Generalization, and Tyrannical Integration.

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8. Two neo-Piagetian developmental theories have come to prominence as representing the most sophisticated and powerful maps of human development: Michael Common's Model of Hierarchical Complexity (MHC) and Kurt Fischer's Skill Theory (Commons et al., 1984; 2014; Fischer et al., 1980, 2008). Initially developed separately, they have been show to correspond extremely well. We use Commons because his definition of development is more audaciously axiomatic.
1. Disastrous Differentiation. There are several dangers inherent in differentiation and related horizontal operations (the focusing, discrimination, substitution, and reinforcement of individual concepts, parts, etc.). (1) Because cognition is embodied and thus has limited capacity, attending to one thing implies that one is not attending to other things that might be more important. (2) Differential is akin to "analysis" which means to break into parts and study the parts. Such analysis can ignore deep and subtle relationships and the nature of "the whole." Deconstruction opens up nuance and detail, but can also obliterate context and set the stage for pathological abstraction and generalization. (3) Differentiation can be taken to an extreme or given too much salience. A difference discriminated can become a "discrimination against," because properties not in common are disregarded or exadurated.

2. Noxious Composition. (1) It is widely recognized that human cognition over-performs in seeing patterns in data where there is only noise. The human brain is a master pattern-matcher, and in its insatiable goal to make meaning it seems to care less about accuracy than sense making (Shermer (2011) calls this tendency "patternicity"). (2) Composition can lead to complication. As a complicated system grows, its internal inconsistencies and inefficiencies can clog/bog the overall system, and lead to increasingly diminished returns, malignancy, and hazard. Snowden (2000, 2002) differentiates complicated systems from complex systems, where "complicated" is Snowden's term for systems that, though they may contain numerous interrelated parts, are comprehensible by human analysis. They exhibit the linearity of "one thing predictably leading to another," even it if may take a team of experts a long time to work out those details. They do not reach the level of complexity and impenetrability of naturally "complex systems" described in theories of complexity science.

3. Vicious Abstraction. On the topic of abstraction we use R. G. Winther's James and Dewey on Abstraction (2014) as our point of departure. Winther says that "for both thinkers [the critique] amounts to recognizing that abstraction is powerful and liberating, yet has a dark side" (p. 2). The danger is that reductive selection is "value-laden and interest-driven" (p. 7). James says: "abstraction...becomes a means of arrest far more than a means of advance in thought... . . . The viciously privative employment of abstract characters and class names is, I am persuaded, one of the great original sins of the rationalistic mind" (1909a, p. 135, emphasis in original). Winther summarizes the problems with vicious abstractionism as the "dismal [or] disregard of context...Such dismissal may be conscious or unconscious, implicit or explicit, intentional or unintentional, and leads to universalized, narrowed, and/or ontologized abstractions" (p. 10).

One of the most often cited problems of abstraction is "reification"—what Winther calls "ontologized abstraction"—the psychological tendency to treat abstract concepts as if they were concrete (tangibly real). Typical examples include: "mother nature takes revenge," "the war on drug addiction," "Big Pharma wants to keep you sick," and "the We-being of collective consciousness." Often with these concepts non-concrete entities are imputed with properties of living intentional beings. Reification has a number of synonyms or sub-types, with names that embellish its meaning: "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness" (Whitehead, 1929), "confusing the map for the territory" (Korzybski, 1958), "the myth of the given" (Sellars, 1956), concretism, hypostatization, objectification, and metaphysical projection. Reification is a type of magical thinking that is not constrained to operate within the magical/mythical developmental levels of the psyche, but also thrives within highly abstract/rational/logical narratives, in the fertile ground of theories, ideals, and metaphysical philosophies (see Murray, 2019).
4. Pernicious Generalization. Generalization does not (necessarily) lose information, which Abstraction does—by its definition.9 Issue of generalization hypertrophy include: (1) Bias. Similar to Abstraction, Generalization submits to motivated bias in how boundaries of emphasis are drawn; and is a culprit in all forms of prejudice. (2) Over-generalization. A rule or principle that is valid (even unbiased) within in a limited context can be inappropriately generalized to a wider context or different domain. (3) Reification. Another danger is in treating the boundary conditions of a generalization, which are often imprecise and biased, as if they were definitive and given in nature. (4) Harm. As the post-modern critique (of grand narratives, meta-theories, and the social reproduction of conspicuous ideologies) shows, generalizations can be both fallacious and pernicious. While abstraction moves us away from the concrete, generalization moves us away from specifics and details. Even if we don't jump to conclusions or prejudices, generalizations blur fine-grained details. As one expands to take in a meta-view and take more objects into awareness, one loses track of the specifics of each item, or of the items themselves (as the trees become the forest). As with abstraction, it is sometimes the tender realities of human experiences and needs that are forgotten in the big picture meta-perspective.

5. Tyrannical Integration. Integration is a term used to indicate when parts (once Differentiated) form a complex system of relationships (Composition), which includes a boundary (Generalization) that strongly differentiates a system from its environment—with such deep interdependence and coherence that a new whole (or holon) emerges at a hierarchically higher level of being (and in some cases replicates itself). The idea of "transcend and include" (or transcend and embrace) popularized by Ken Wilber (2006), refers to processes of Differentiation and Integration understood to drive development and the emergence of new forms from prior forms. "Integration" and "emergence" are often paired, but here we will make an important distinction. We will generally use "Integration" to refer to changes in cognitive understanding or mental skill, and "emergence" to refer to processes in nature, excluding those cognitive processes. This is to be able to differentiate nature, which in a sense, "just is," does not contradict itself, and is never "wrong:" from human conceptions and belief structures, which can contain error and demi-reality. In reference to Wilber's "theory of everything," "transcend and include" processes in nature produce emergent objects and phenomena (solar systems, life, animal behavior, etc.), but these are not our focus. Here our use of Integration points to the hierarchical production of human ideas, values, and concepts.

In the face of post-modern critiques of totalizing narratives, colonization, and hierarchy in general, Wilber makes the important distinction between "natural hierarchies" and "dominator hierarchies." Wilber says "normal hierarchy, or the holism between levels, goes pathological when there's a breakdown between levels and a particular holon assumes a repressive, oppressive, arrogant role of dominance over other holons" (Wilber, 1995, p.23). This distinction is important for correcting those with an ideological aversion to hierarchies, but its broader import often goes unspoken. "Dominator hierarchy" usually points to clearly oppressive or authoritarian relationships or social systems. But, we can extend the idea to the nature of cognitive and conceptual integration in general (i.e. to hierarchical development in cognitive complexity, concepts, theories, etc.). That is, not only "bad" people and ideas dominate other people and ideas, but there is something "dominating," and also demi-real, in the nature of all abstract ideas as they purport to transcend and include their composite priors. As Integration is a culminating

9 Ponsen et al. (2009) abstraction "hides or removes less critical details while preserving desirable properties. By definition, this implies loss of information [...] while generalization...] defines similarities between objects [without effecting] the object’s representation. By definition, this implies no loss of information" (pg. 6).
step following Differentiation, Composition, Generalization, and/or Abstraction, it can "lock in," or further habituate and harden, all of the pathologies mentioned above for the other operations.

In addition to simplicity, another theme common in dialogues on emergence, transcendence, and integration is coherence. Coherence is an aspect of processes in which constituent priors engage in a radical interdependence and coordination, leading to a new whole. But, as in the theme of simplicity, if we bracket out "nature" and focus on human-created ideas and concepts, coherence (or convergence) can mask confirmation bias. Likewise, elegance can mask reductionism, and coverage or scope can mask colonization and oppression. At the extreme, the useful purity of the coherent integrated abstraction becomes the tyrannical and totalizing "cognitive hegemony" of the ideal entity or the ideological vision (what Marshall, 2012, calls the "grandiose...pathology of the paradigm of simplicity...").

When "it all seems to fit together" so well, one must question whether the impression of Integration is part of a self-perpetuating or delusional system. For example, some narratives referencing "The Good, The True, and the Beautiful," though inspiring and provisionally valid, mask essentialist thinking that draws attention to transcendental ideals and neglects concrete, embodied, and practical ethical considerations. Bracketing out inconvenient truths can produce a feeling of coherence and elegance. Despite well-meaning attempts to shore up faulty knowledge with empirical facts and rational analysis, in the end, at the level of individual meaning-making, there is surprisingly little distance between the felt sense that marks confidence in truth, validity, or elegance, and the "objective truth" of these things. At the level of conceptual ideas coherence indicates a self-contained system of consistent elements, but does not guarantee that a system represents reality (though incoherent or self-contradictory systems are less likely to map to reality). In Murray (2019) I discuss the value of developing an inner awareness of the "epistemic drives" that motivate belief and its confidence. This is one example of resourcing lower level felt-sense perceptions to regulate more complex cognitions.

**Integrity and ethics.** Integration implies an achieved coherence or congruence among parts, and is thus closely related to the integrity of a system. In the domains of psychological health and moral character, integrity is about harmony and alignment within layers of the self-system, for example action matching speech, and speech matching beliefs. Also, a healthy unconscious or deep psyche is measured in part by the integrity (harmony) among one's inner voices and drives. Though ethical reasoning can involve complex perspective taking, ethical being implies modes of embodied integrity not guaranteed by intellectual skill (Posner, 2009). Ethical being must include a deep felt-sense empathy or identification (reciprocity and interpenetration) with the other. According to Roy (2018), right action requires "perception as participation," which implicates the deepest layers of the psyche, not the most abstract. We also know that complex reasoning, abstraction, generalization, and transcendence, like the witnessing aspect of "objectification," can create a moral and empathic distance between people, and are implicated in the abdication of responsibility and the justification of deception, bureaucracy, dehumanization (Aguiar et al., 2007; Nussbaum, 1995). The pivot of ethical choice is not around prowess in cognitive complexity per se, but around the ego's gambits into certainty, arrogance, control, and power. Here again, the way ahead must include recovering fluid access to foundational human capacities such as connection, trust, care, honor, awe, curiosity, and perceptual clarity, often left behind as life stressors create occluding structures and exacerbate egoic drives.  

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10 Objective truth requires a collective process that scrutinizes individual conclusions. Collective meaning-making is of course also quite susceptible to bias and demi-reality—an important topic outside out scope.

11 Note that capacities such as compassion, empathy, and responsibility are not included in this list, because they require a developmental sophistication that comes after the "foundational" capacities listed.
The issues examined in this section, taken together, illustrate the ever-present dangers of pathological or hypertrophied cognitive complexity. Note that actually, these "pathologies" are deviations from an ideal, not deviations from the norm, and the problems with building hierarchical complexity that we discuss here are normal and inevitable—the only thing that varies is the degree of "pathology" and the degree of the actual ethical impact. To further elaborate the problems that come up in over-valorizing the concept of Integration, or "transcend and include," next we will re-examine the common idea of a "simplicity on the other side of complexity."

**Simplexity and Telos: is Simplicity Guaranteed Beyond Complexity?**

Einstein famously noted that "everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler," and Oliver Wendell Holmes said "I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity." Simplexity, a concept pointing to the simplicity on the other side of complexity (Broder & Stolfo, 1984; Reiss, 2020), is a popular meme woven into discourse on integration, emergence, and development, where a new whole (or holon) "transcends and includes" the parts, yet "is more than the sum of the parts." Simplexity describes the "paradoxical [and] generative tension between" simplicity and complexity (Cunha & Rego, 2010, p. 86) and can mean "the ability to balance on the simplicity-complexity fulcrum" to avoid "analysis paralysis" (Kluger, 2008). Simplexity draws on complex dynamic systems theory, which explains emergent phenomena in terms of self-organization and emergence, in which new entities form when parts achieve a radical degree of intercoordination, such that the nature and behavior of each part depends on the others (see prior footnote on dynamics systems theory). As we have said, emergence in "natural" processes does transcend and include, while we have shown that in the domain of human conceptual reasoning and beliefs, emergent ideas (or conceptual Integrations) usually transcend while excluding some things. The differentiation of natural vs. conceptual domains is a rough heuristic we use to illustrate the problematic developmental externalities noted above, which do not arise as such in the development of non-conceptual skills such as sensory-motor skills.12

Next we enumerate some caveats to correct for five common misconceptions related to transcending-and-including or simplicity: (1) a teleological fallacy, (2) a top vs. bottom fallacy, (3) a phenomenological note on complexity as a feeling; (4) a deeper analysis of the ubiquity of transcend-and-exclude; and (5) showing how both learning and unlearning can come too early. These discussions support a more nuanced understanding of the relationships between simplicity and complexity in cognitive growth and cultural change, and add to our "indeterminacy analysis" (Murray, 2006) of developmental models.

(1) **Eros and Teleology.** Following Wilber's lead, development has taken on a teleological bent in some communities. His narrative of Eros and development as an ascending path toward transcendence, wholeness, and nondual unity, all imbued with a type of simplicity and totality,

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12 A related dichotomy comes from dual-processing models of cognition—e.g. unconscious vs. conscious, fast vs. slow thinking, primary vs. secondary cognition, left vs. right hemispheres, etc. (overlapping but non-equivalent models; see Kahneman, 2011; McGilcrest, 2019). Very roughly, the unconscious/fast/primary/implicit brain functions map to our "nature" category, and the conscious/slow/secondary/explicit to conceptual/symbolic/rational thinking category. The difficulty in this distinction is that the patterns of splitting, categorizing, and linearizing compelled by secondary cognitive processes can become ensconced and habituated within unconscious (primary) layer. We could say that the processes of unlearning/release we are emphasizing works primarily on such structures. Though beyond our scope here, some resolution is found in differentiating cognitive processes from content or structure.
has been used by some to infer a type of inevitability, predictability, and essential goodness at the later steps along the path of human development. This perspective follows the lead of mystic Teilhard de Chardin (1999) who speculated that the universe evolves towards an Omega Point—an ultimate state (telos) of cosmic (divine) unification. Like the "simplicity on the other side," these things seem to await those who work with skillful means, or perhaps just with patience and perseverance. However, emergence is much more of an unpredictable, chaotic process producing novelty and surprise (Sapolsky, 2017), and it is better to treat emergence as a type of benediction or grace, deserving gratitude, rather than something one has control over. (Wilber mostly agrees, as he says, for example, that awakening is an accident and mediation makes one accident-prone.)

Part of the confusion here is in conflating different types of emergent phenomena, some of which are more predictable than others. The fluid skill of riding a bicycle "emerges" or transcends-and-includes rather predictably after practice. But the most interesting chaotic processes are much less predictable. We cannot predict the outcomes of climate change, how a child's personality will develop, or what will emerge from a creative brainstorming session. Not only is most emergence unpredictable, its nature is a mystery science does not yet understand. And, as we argue throughout, even if transcendence, emergence, or Integration is achieved in the realm of human meaning-making, it is not necessarily Good, True, or Beautiful—it contains demi-reality.

(2) Is simplicity at the top or bottom? Wilber and others in transpersonal theory follow perennial religious narratives of enlightenment and awakening that locate the pinnacle of human development at the top of a developmental or evolutionary spectrum. It is too easy to focus on the forces of increasing complexity and forget their opposites. Evolution is a chaotic process that allows for "backwards" movements of collapse and reductions in complexity (Holling & Gunderson 2002). Taken as a whole, the additive nature of complexity means that over time increasingly complex forms will develop somewhere, but no single species or form is guaranteed to evolve into greater complexity.

More importantly, what science tells us is that in the upward/forward direction, driven developmentally by moves of differentiation and integration, and/or driven evolutionarily through moves of random variation and selection—tends towards increasing diversity, uniqueness, and autonomy among members (Tooby & Cosmides 1990; Pinker, 2003). Through evolutionary time, the span and diversity of species branches forever outward, without any sign of curving back toward some unity (though punctuated by episodes of collapse and reorganization). Also, anecdotally, it seems that more highly developed individuals tend to express more uniqueness, as opposed to a convergent bland similarity.

We argue that the phenomena associated with psychological maturity and spiritual advancement and are more fundamentally about re-gaining access to primordial levels of the developmental/cognitive "stack." In contrast to a purely ascending model, our model posits a continuous revisit to descending movement, followed by periods of ascending integration. The downward direction points involutionarily toward increasing similarity, simplicity, and commonality, toward what Jean Gebser called "the ever-present origin" (1949). Later levels of complexity development tend to motivate, support, and integrate ever-deeper involutionary journeys of ablation, recovery, and revelation. But not necessarily—as complexity capacity (ascending) and spiritual clarity (descending) are interrelated but can happen independently, and they involve structurally different processes (see Murray, in press).

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13 As Daniel Schmachtenberger quips "[emergence is] considered the closest thing to magic that is a scientifically admissible term" (https://www.meetup.com/Sacramento-Politics-and-Philosophy-Group/events/zzwwlbyrzjbd/).
Ego development (i.e. wisdom skill) represents the combination of the ascending (complexity capacity) and descending (spiritual clarity) movements. At each fulcrum of ego development some structure must be released in order to move forward (and see O'Fallon’s, 2020, model of "necessary but not sufficient" prerequisites for ego development). The latest levels of ego development involve deconstructing (see through) the earliest cognitive structures, processes, and differentiating splits (e.g. time, space, inside-vs-outside, self-vs-other, conceptual boundaries, perceptual boundaries, etc.).

Ascending movements of complexity capacity have no fixed upper bound or plateau, but the lower levels do have a definitive "bottom" or "source," which should be seen as an ideal or a horizon rather than an achievable state or stage. Though people diverge greatly on the level of conceptual beliefs and theories, at ever deeper strata humans have more and more in common with each other, and, even more deeply, in common with all mammals, and further, all life forms (and even further, all matter).

The unity and simplicity is at the bottom more than the top. However, our descending movement is not a regression, but releases capacity and insight that is then available to be integrated and interpreted by the higher levels. Thus, in ego development (but not in all cognitive development), 
height implies depth (as noted by Freinacht), but (differing from Freinacht) depth is not a location or state but a structural volume—the result of the upper layers of the stack of consciousness having ever more free, open, fluid, and resonant access to the lower levels, as and when occluding structures are ablated. This principle is captured in O'Fallon and Barta's (2020) notion of maximizing the "surface area" of all developmental levels. It is reflected in Torbert (2020): "vertical development goes both ways, up and down. On the ‘down’ side, development requires becoming more ongoingly aware of our embodied actions...as we approach the [later stage action-logics], we exercise this post-cognitive attention more and more continually, observing ourselves alternating among all the earlier action-logics." (p. 12-13).

(3) The feeling of simplicity/simplicity. In human experience, simplicity and elegance are, in large part, feeling states more than an indication of actual cognitive/structural simplicity or elegance (just as confidence in a truth claim is as much about a subjective feeling as a correspondence with reality—see "epistemic drives" in Murray, 2019). When the fluid skill of riding a bicycle emerges from practicing its component parts, the feeling of elegance in the coordinated activity betrays the efficiency following trial and error learning, and accompanies the fact that the skill is becoming automated within the unconscious mind, freeing the conscious mind from effortful focused reflection and feedback cycles. After trail and error and practice, one can find and lock-in (learn) a "solution" that is more simple because it is both easeful and powerful/effective. In the domain of conceptual ideas the feeling of a simplicity following complexity is more suspet. As we illustrated, ideas that seem to transcend prior ideas can feel simpler or more elegant because the have discarded contradictory, inconveniently messy, or seemingly irrelevant details and outliers. That move is always biased (it can be a more valid move if the selection biases are made explicit). The notion of "the simplicity on the other side of complexity" can be a convenient device for vindicating a preferred theory, vision, or value, because it "naturally" emerges from and transcends what developmentally came before. Also regressive forms of simplicity, such as romanticism and spirituality-adorned ideologies, can be justified with reference to a simplicity that has emerged "on the other side" of modernist complexity, and must thus be superior to it.

(4) Fixing and freedom. To now we have noted that it is conceptual development, more than sensory-motor development, that excludes as it Integrates and transcends. But at a deeper level of analysis, there is a way that something is left behind in all forms of learning. We have already
showed how each sub-operation of hierarchical complexity involves tacitly biased pruning, filtering, or binding, but the issue is deeper still. Development is understood in terms of creating or modifying connections (structures) in the mind/brain (note that connections can be excitatory or inhibitory). Most salient, there is a new capacity to do something—to meet certain challenges and opportunities in a new way, which then forms a foundation for more complex skills and knowledge to be built upon. But, second, and less acknowledged, each new structure creates a fixing that limits or obscures certain possibilities for thought, action, and perception. Each cognitive adaptation encodes a solution to a problem—one that took a significant investment of energy and trial-and-error to discover (unless it was imprinted quickly and rigidly during a traumatic event). This conditioning efficiently specifies what to do (or cognize) in similar future scenarios. Alternative solutions or responses are then less likely to be considered, once a handy (provisional) solution is fixed in memory.

To put it metaphorically, once a home's foundation is set, it not only provides substructure for many possibilities, it also limits the scope of possible homes to be built above of it. Thus, when a new capacity is built, some freedom and potential is lost. The tradeoff is usually productive, at least in the short term, as the benefits of the new structure and its efficiency can outweigh the loss of freedom and access. But as we have shown, development accumulates demi-reality and solutions whose usefulness expires. Cognitive conditioning biases one to respond in a certain way and to perceive in a certain way, so each instance of learning also distorts information flow, (it enhances some features of each situation and inhibits others).

(5) Learning or unlearning too quickly. Our discussion highlights the dangers of misapplying developmental theories, but more generally it highlights how human "epistemic drives" toward the higher, the unitive, the singular, the totalizing, the ultimate, the essential, etc. pair dangerously often with egoic or demi-real outcomes. Our analysis of simplicity vs. complexity shows that phenomena thought of as at the further reaches of the psychic stack, within either cognitive or spiritual frames, often involve releasing structures to gain access to primordial resources. Clarifying this confusion yields a number of insights. For example, above we warned of the dangers of a misappropriation of concepts such as "the self is empty," "the world is an illusion," or "words have no real meaning," but there are also dangers in gaining the authentic experience of these things. Radical processes of cognitive deconstruction can take one into nihilism or paralysis when foundational supportive structure are missing, while, in the other direction, they can also ablate structures to leave one without fear of death, pain, or embarrassment; and can produce a charismatic confidence in the truth of one's beliefs. They can also lead to a sense of universal perfection that obliterates interest in learning or improvement.

Thus, the fetishization or imposition of either the ascending or the descending paths can lead to misfortune. This is why we need models sophisticated enough to speak to the nuanced dynamics between simplicity and complexity. Such models support ethical outcomes by emphasizing the health and integrity of foundational structures as a prerequisite to extreme transformations from either constructing or deconstructing. They inform when is the best time for a developmental construction or deconstruction.

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14 This is similar to the notion of supporting creativity with "generative constraints"—setting limits can increase creativity within the "sandbox" of the constraints, while it also prohibits possibilities outside that sandbox (De Bono, 1995; Stokes, 2005; Sonenshein, 2017). For example, Sagiv et al. (2010, p. 1086) found that in general "externally imposed structure increases creativity."
Recasting Developmental Theory Through Ascending and Descending Paths

While Common's theory of hierarchical complexity (MHC) is a general theory of development applicable to vertical development in any skill domain, it is not used explicitly to describe releasing complexity, and for that reason our discussion needed to be extended to consider the matters of "integrity and ethics" noted above. One can have a cognitive or conceptual understanding of the principles of integrity or ethics, in fact a very sophisticated understanding, and not apply that understanding to the deconstruction or release of aspects of the self-system. Theories of ego development (Cook-Greuter and O'Fallon; and the closely related theory of meaning-making maturity by Kegan) are particularly applicable here. Ego development theories touch on this territory because adult ego development requires releasing aspects of the self as one matures. Processes in psychotherapy and contemplative practice that are designed to deconstruct or release harmful beliefs, egoic attachments, habits of perception or behavior, etc. tend to support ego development. (It is beyond our scope here (see Murray, in press), but a more meticulous treatment of this territory requires more nuanced distinctions between psychological, ethical, and spiritual development—but suffice it to say that theories of ego development approach these areas.)

All of the above sets the stage for revised, depth-oriented models of human development (ego development, meaning-making maturity, or wisdom skill) that incorporate ascending and descending processes (see also O'Fallon 2020; Barta, 2020; Torbert, 2020). As our focus here was limited to the interaction between simplicity and complexity, we will only sketch this framework here, which is explained in Murray (in press).

- Development is understood, as in prior models, through processes of differentiation and integration, leading to successive levels that, in one sense transcend and incorporate prior levels. At a more nuanced level, the process can be described in terms of the sub-operations of hierarchical complexity, which we named as Differentiation, Composition, Generalization, Abstraction, and Integration.
- However, we add that, with each emergent capacity, something is lost. This is especially true in the domain of conceptual ideas and meaning-making, where, as we have shown, each of the sub-operations of cognitive development are likely to produce biases, omissions, obstructions, and shadow elements—and leave something inaccessible or in shadow.
- At some point in one's development or life's challenges, certain learned structures become problematic and call to be unlearned or released; and/or certain elements that were left behind call to be recovered or healed. This is especially true of ego development, in which, by its very nature, each successive level of maturity involves the release of some structure to allow for a new ego structure to emerge. This model can be applied to contemplative practices and psychotherapy (as well as and emancipatory or critical philosophy) to clarify the dynamic interactions between the release/destructive/healing movements and the constructive/integrating/learning movements.
- Processes of release/deconstruction/healing can be difficult, disorienting, and resistant to change, for three reasons. First, from trauma and recovery theory (Anda et al, 2006; Anderson & Hanslmay, 2014; Bremmer, 2006) we know that some learned structures are closely associated with experiences of fear or pain (and the amygdala), and thus include "do not go there" occlusions within the learned gestalt (i.e. avoidance, denial, blind spots).
Second, lower strata structures have more structures build on top of them, and thus more is at risk in deconstructing them, producing a different source of resistance. Third (and related to the other two), any learned structures (associations) tied to the ego or sense of self resists deconstruction, as it represents the threat of a type of death (loss of something essential to one's being). All three of these factors can produce the "immunity to change" (Kegan & Lahey, 2009) that psychotherapeutic, contemplative, emancipatory, and cultural transformation practices work to overcome.

- When psychic occlusions (blocks, lacunas, shadows) are released, several things usually happen. First, the occluded "truths" become available as insights. Second, bound up energy is usually released and generates "aha" experiences such as revelation, inspiration, emotional/energetic surges, feelings of clarity and power, etc. Third, following the descending movement of releasing complexity to recover a lost insight, the insight is available to be re-integrated in new ways into existing structures, so a constructive or ascending movement usually follows the descending deconstruction.

- We also hypothesize that ever-later levels of ego development require the recovery of ever-earlier or more primordial psychic structures. We suggest, following Roy (2018; and as articulated more in Churchill & Murray, 2020), that, while psychotherapy releases structures at the level of personality and social-self, contemplative practices are tuned to release structures at more primitive or primordial perceptual levels, where space/time, inside/outside, self/other, and object differentiation/permanence are originally constructed.

- Because the model is based on developmental theories, which differentiate a many-leveled spectrum of consciousness/cognition, we can, following the STAGES developmental model (O'Fallon 2020; Barta 2020), tie unlearning and shadow work to specific developmental levels. I.e. processes of unlearning, releasing complexity, and shadow-work, can be elaborated according the specific level of depth being targeted or healed. Such models can make fine-grained recommendations on when/how/why specific structures should be constructed or deconstructed.

This framework applies to the release of complexity in individual meaning making and could be extended to apply to collective meaning-making. We also suggest, without argument here, that releasing complexity (accessing lost psychic resources) in this way will contribute to the release of complexity in social (economic, political, technological,...) systems as well.

**Conclusions — Untangling Knots**

Metamodernism has been defined descriptively as a distinct cultural phase observed to emerge after post-modernism, which blends and prioritizes prior cultural milieus in new ways. Meanwhile, for many scholars (including Freinacht) metamodernism is defined prescriptively and structurally as a phase that can and should emerge after post-modernism, if culture evolves in ways that heal pathologies of prior world-views, and integrates, balances, and transcends the seemingly discordant elements of earlier meaning-making frames. Culture, politics, art, and technology naturally evolve towards increasing complexity, differentiation, and diversity, and those interested in chronicling these domains will find endlessly fascinating patterns and stories to narrate (whether real or projected). Perhaps this multi-perspectival storytelling is part of the swing from the seriousness of post-modernity toward the more playful, earnest, and self-aware attitude attributed to metamodernism. Meanwhile, our species is lurching into crisis, and some
cannot help but look for the deeper sources of our troubles in hope of charting a revised course. For this, we need "theories of change" that have at least a minimum chance of guiding deep transformation. This, of course, needs to be done with a humility and openness generally missing in scholarly and political narratives.

Our modern and post-modern instincts lead with the intellect (whether constructing or deconstructing), which does its work through analytical splitting and detachment. Meanwhile we avoid gazing into the painful and disorienting deeper truths about ourselves—processes that hold the key to healing division and alienation. Even among those interested in alleviating human suffering, the trend is to focus on understanding complexity and using complex reasoning and abstraction to imagine new cultural structures and games. Many using developmental theory as a tool orient to the ascending paths of meta-understanding and transcendent being. This text is an invitation to prioritize releasing complexity over building more complexity, and to draw maps toward the recovery of lost inner treasures alongside maps for scaling new heights.

We align with the romantic sentiment to prioritize the reclamation of foundational skills and virtues including care, trust, humility, curiosity, authenticity, reverence, respect, etc. Unlike the romantics, we understand this terrain, not in terms of a process of swings, conflicts, and counter-corrections between the poles of a polarity (though that describes some of it), but developmentally, through hierarchical structural relationships. Through this lens, foundational skills and resources are already present within each of us, but are occluded or distorted by structures of habit and belief at higher hierarchical strata. The job of the intellect then, is to gain just enough additional complexity to understand our entanglements to be able to unlearn and release the hampering knots.

A more hierarchical and depth-oriented understanding of the relationship between complexity and simplicity (reason and compassion, logic and intuition, progress and tradition, transcendence and embodiment, etc.) can inform collective sense-making and undertaking, to inform decisions on when it is best to increase complexity in a system (e.g. through learning, reflection, and adaptation), vs. release complexity (e.g., through healing, deconstruction, or recovery), or do nothing and remain alert as situations go their own course ("do no harm").

This simple-sounding path is commensurate with the goals of established maps in contemplative practices, virtue ethics, and psychotherapy. But society seems to veer ever further from the goodness and simplicity indicated by such paths, something else is needed. The source of our modern calamities, of the meta-crisis, is human nature, and the "path home" involves a type of species self-understanding (Ord, 2020; Crutzen, 2006). Yet the turn toward radical responsibility for our condition is very difficult and strongly resisted. It will need powerful impassioned re-storying, but also more adequate explanatory models. In this text we attempt to integrate the insights of fields like contemplative practice, virtue ethics, and psychotherapy with the significant explanatory power of developmental theory. And in so doing, we also aim to dispose developmental theory towards depth, i.e. supporting the health, wholeness, and clarity of the more foundational levels of the psyche; and away from driving aspirations toward increasing complexity and transcendence. We believe that complexity, transcendence, and transformation are best seen as mysteries of emergence and gifts of grace that manifest when the occluding and conflicting lower-strata structures are healed and integrated. This model motivates the difficult journey of healing and deconstruction by showing how this journey can naturally lead to the sought-after goals of insight, clarity, union, wisdom, and empowerment. It illuminates the role of complexity as the skillful means to adjudicate how recovered psychic resources are integrated and put to use.
In times of great uncertainty it is essential to be able to locate and embody our essential goodness. But doing so is a complex job given the labyrinth of tangled patterns bequeathed to us. We can let simplicity guide our compass as we grasp the tools of complexity to get the job done.

References


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