

Completing the Hierarchy of Purpose

by

Warren Kinston

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From:
Dr. Warren Kinston,
Director, SIGMA Centre,
Brunel, The University of West London,
Uxbridge, Middx. UB8 3PH
U.K.

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Purpose is an essential concept for the rational design of personal and social action. Inevitably, the literature of purpose spreads over many disciplines and domains. As a result, both in practice and in the academic literature, purpose—and its many cognate forms such as goal, objective, policy, intention, aim—have been used in widely varying and often confusing ways. The commonest distinction within purpose dichotomizes the concept into goal versus objective, with one described as 'vague, abstract, general' and the other as 'precise, concrete, quantifiable' [1-3]. Such a simple analysis does not stand up to critical scrutiny and has been invalidated by empirical testing in the field [4].

THE LEVELS OF PURPOSE SO FAR

Following extensive and in-depth consultancy research with organizations and governing bodies, Kinston identified five distinct types of purpose and demonstrated that they formed a hierarchical framework [4-6]. The function of the hierarchy could be seen to be the translation of values into action. The theory postulates that active pursuit of the goal(s) of any given individual or social system, however complex or simple, requires these goals to be differentiated and articulated in five distinct levels. These are named as follows: *banner goals* (L-V), *mission* (L-IV), *political aims* (L-III), *strategic objectives* (L-II), *tactical objectives* (L-I). A brief description of each of these forms of purpose follows, and a summary is provided in Table 1.

L-V: Banner goals are purposes which express specific actualizable values. The typical format is 'we all believe in and want to ...X...'. Banner goals (*syn.* ideals, focussed or basic values, philosophy, needs, rights, fundamental objectives*) socially legitimate and justify laws, institutions, and organizations but are not tied to any particular one. For example, banner goals of local government might include 'to protect children from harm' and 'to foster independence and self-help', but these are also banner goals of publishing firms, of health services, and of parents. Banner goals, impersonal in themselves, express personal aspirations and tap into motivational drive. They invariably imply action but are neither specific enough nor sufficiently concretized to enable its realization.

L-IV: When people want to move from such banner goals towards engaging with reality, they need to ensure that all activity is sufficiently organized. The first step is to set themselves a *mission* which defines the basic identity of their project and hence the main activities and the people involved. The format here is: 'This project/agency/department &c is set up to ...X...'. In other words, a mission (*syn.* general aims, object, primary task, function, service, brief, mandate, terms of reference) is the purpose which serves as the *raison d'être* for the project. The mission boosts specific motivation for the endeavour, and stabilizes the organization by providing for internal consensus.

L-III: However, there is never enough time, energy, people or money to pursue all the implications of the mission. It is therefore necessary to specify *political aims*, which lay down preferred foci of emphasis or concern and generate change in on-going activities. The political aim (*syn.* policy, priority, criteria, emphasis) is a value statement which leads and orients endeavour in an outer world of impinging problems and attractive possibilities. So, at this level, a choice amongst alternative valid values must be made, and the result is inherently controversial. The formats here include: 'The important thing is to improve/reduce/ignore/concentrate on ..X.. (rather than Y)'; 'We must come down on this side of ..X.., not that side'; and 'The relevant criteria governing choice are X, Y, Z...' These purposes are akin to banner goals but require to be expressed as priorities, because allocation of any resource (which is the precisely specifiable and concrete form which value takes) should reflect the intensity

* *Syn.* (= synonyms) refers to terms commonly found in the literature or in research with politicians, managers or professionals, and which apparently refer to the form of purpose under consideration. The correctness and other implications of such usage are contentious and will not be pursued here.

processes referred to above, it was less clear precisely how it linked into the abstract world of values. It was always evident that banner goals (and hence all lower level purposes too) must exist within some context that made them meaningful by endowing them with a *sense or feeling* of importance and significance i.e. of value. Such a context of pure experiential value could, in the deepest analysis, be seen *to govern all choices made in relation to purposive endeavour, without itself being part of the specification of action, or even consciously considered*. Elucidating this context makes up the next part of the paper. Implications for the realization of values are then noted. In the final section of the paper, the abstract form of the full hierarchical structure, with emphasis on the present additions, is briefly examined.

THE VALUE CONTEXT

Although values may be used primarily to shape action, values may themselves be developed and promoted independently of action; and, of course, debated and studied.* When considering such pursuit, L-5 banner goals appear as the result of higher values of some sort. We can reasonably ask the question 'why?' of banner goals. For example, why is it that we all believe in and want such specific and actualizable values as education for our children? or efficiency in our public services? or unpolluted air? In examining such issues and reviewing the literature on values, two further levels of purpose unambiguously emerged which appear to be beyond any hierarchy within the banner goal level, and which result in completion of the hierarchy of purpose utterly. These levels, here labelled *value systems* (L-VI) and *ultimate values* (L-VII), will each be examined in terms of those properties which proved relevant for the lower five levels (cf. Table 1).

Value Systems: Level VI

Value systems are abstract but particular. They are sometimes termed 'belief systems', 'philosophies', 'value-frameworks', or 'ideologies' [12-14]. Each value system defines a complete and coherent approach to valuing the 'how' and 'what' of achievement within a given area. Each approach is necessarily felt as distinctive and incompatible with other approaches. Adherents of a value system repetitively reaffirm and proclaim their support for it, and wish to deny the value and validity of alternative ways of thinking and acting, sometimes to the point of pursuing the actual annihilation of the alternatives and their adherents. Value systems are therefore both powerfully integrative (in terms of those adhering to them) and intensely divisive (between adherents of different systems).

Examples of value systems and their integrative-divisive quality can be easily identified. Within the mental health field, psychoanalysts and psychiatrists adhere to fundamentally different models of mental illness [15], and often have difficulty collaborating as the patient may in fact require. In politics, a variety of ideologies are well recognized e.g. fascist, conservative, liberal, socialist, communist [16]. These represent competing views on societal government, and give rise to parties whose representatives fight each other in elections, in the legislature, and sometimes in civil

* The psychological and philosophical study of value is known as axiology [9,10]. It was not until very recently, the 19th century, that value came to be universally recognized as one of the great philosophical subjects. The theory of value requires consideration of many topics including: What is the nature of values? what are the fundamental values? how are values to be classified? how may we determine the relative value of things? what is the ultimate standard of value? are values subjective or objective? what is the relation of values to reality? Value research is carried out today in a variety of disciplines including philosophy, psychology, anthropology, religious studies, sociology, economics and politics. A literature review lies beyond the scope of the present inquiry which is oriented to purpose. However, the propositions in this paper (and its precursors) are relevant to the above questions and have drawn on the literature. Research enlarging on the ideas in this paper and aiming to produce a systemic model of the realization of value in society is underway at SIGMA Centre [11].

culture, social form, dogma, or endeavour. Ultimate values merge with the essence of what reality is and what humanity can be, and are frequently conceived in spiritual terms or as attributes of God.

Ultimate values stabilize, vitalize and nourish individuals irrespective of their specific beliefs, cultural background or personality, and lead to a stronger expression, clarification, amplification and validation of particular values and beliefs. For most people, this will be at the banner goal level. For example, beauty might be called on to bolster support for literature, parks, and architecture; truth and freedom to underpin efforts to promote scientific endeavour and psychotherapy; harmony and wholeness to provide the rationale for well-managed effective organizations and racial integration. However, ultimate values do not themselves provide any indication of a direction for concrete action, or exactly what values might be held. Thus uniqueness may be invoked to underpin racial discrimination, order to justify violent punishment, and truth to permit torture.

The distressing examples just quoted reflect the *use* of ultimate values, rather than *contact* with them. Contact with ultimate values is an emotional state which seems to be invariably experienced as uplifting [27]. Such contact may occur in either solitary or group settings. There is societal work to be done in this regard, and leading political and religious leaders and artists of all types strive to evoke contact with ultimate values. Those who do so primarily and regularly become *spiritual leaders*.

Because justification is not needed, ultimate values may be simply proclaimed and affirmed. In the words of Mother Julian of Norwich: 'All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.' Each ultimate value can be defined in terms of others: 'truth is beauty, beauty truth' [31]. Such tautological articulation is typical of ultimate values, and it seems likely that ultimate values are essentially one single unified value, Absolute Good. This value is then seen as the nature of Being or God [10, 27] in so far as the ineffable can be articulated by man.

If ultimate values are essentially a transcendent unity, then no higher level of articulation is logically possible, and the hierarchy is therefore complete, logically as well as intuitively.

The Pursuit of Values

L-VI and L-VII together form a potential abstract value context above the actual five-level system of purposes previously identified. Their contents permeate and shape all deliberate endeavour. However, they do so largely implicitly because neither ultimate values nor value systems require to be articulated or consciously accepted for purposes to be set or actions to occur.

However, formulation and articulation is definitely relevant to *the effective development and promotion of values, themselves*. Both of these higher levels aid in developing consensus on worthwhile practical ideals at L-V, in providing a rationale for desirable endeavours at L-IV, and in setting criteria for action, coherently prioritizing values and allocating concrete resources at L-III. (L-II and L-I relate only to actions on given values, implementation, and not to development of values themselves.) In other words, there appears to be a five-level framework of purpose oriented to values, the pentad from L-VII through to L-III; and *each of these levels might be regarded as a different form or definition of value*. For example, each manifests the polarization and dichotomization characteristic of values.

This framework of purposes which are values has marked similarities to the original framework of purposes oriented to active pursuit of values (L-V to L-I). A third system from L-VI to L-II can also be identified as being specifically concerned with purposes oriented to the mediation of values. In accord with a convention developed elsewhere [32] and used in the full model of the realization of value [11], these five-level groupings of the full seven-level hierarchy are labelled from the bottom up: G-5¹, G-5², G-5³ (see Figure 1).

has emerged from systemic research rooted in the need to design and apply purposes and values in a way that politicians and managers find immediately useful.

AN UNDERLYING MODEL

The framework presented above needs to be placed within two contexts. First, it must be seen in relation to other hierarchical models emerging from an on-going programme of work (known as the SIGMA Project) at Brunel University. Second, it needs to be related to hierarchical models offered by other leading systems researchers.

The present seven-level hierarchical framework of purpose turns out to be strikingly similar, possibly homologous, to other frameworks developed by the author and his associates in areas as diverse as inquiry [35], managing [32,36], action [24,37], change [38], and experiencing [39]. In each framework, two contextual levels have been identified above a five-level system of actual operation. A full comparative analysis is not possible within the scope of this paper, but common features of the uppermost two levels (the present focus) are noticeable.

Based on the descriptions provided in this paper, the upper level (L-7) could be typically described as totally encompassing, fully abstract and general, maximally creative and open, and completing utterly the phenomenon under consideration. The lower level (L-6) could be described as interacting with the output generated at L-7, both mediating in relation to actualities and also systematically structuring and shaping those actualities. L-6 systems thus ensure that operations at L-5 to L-1 are coherent and feasible on the one hand, and sensible and worthwhile in principle, on the other.

It may be added that all the seven-level frameworks developed in the SIGMA project have proved to be practically useful, in the sense that they have served as helpful guides to the design and operation of relevant social structures and processes. The frameworks do not belong to any academic discipline or to any specific social domain, but to personal and social functioning in general. When a framework is understood and applied appropriately, action is not prescribed but facilitated. When framework principles are violated, the result is not primarily failure or overt breakdown, but rather confusion, discord and loss of power.

Turning now to related findings of other researchers, it may be noted that hierarchical structures, often but not always five-level, have been identified in disparate fields [40]. Klir [41], Beer [42,43] and Jaques and coworkers [40] have each recognized a five-level framework of operation as potentially general. However, none of these authors has systematically characterized additional higher levels comparable to those presented in this paper.

Klir, concerned to develop ways for computers to solve system problems, refers only to progressively higher actual meta-systems. These bear no relation to the abstract and potential contextual dyad identified here. In his theoretical efforts, Jaques restricted himself to postulating a five-level framework [40] although he has recognized at least three and possibly more additional 'levels of work' in organizations [44,45]. In illustrations, taken from other writers, his co-workers ignored higher levels which were offered: omitting to mention, for example [40, p.261], the sixth level of the hierarchy of educational objectives suggested by Bloom and his colleagues [46]. Beer, by contrast to Klir and Jaques, explicitly recognized the need for something qualitatively different above the five-level system. He associated a single undifferentiated level of 'higher management' with the phenomenon of self-consciousness and the creation of identity, a quality noted in the present study.

Review of the literature has revealed that one or both higher levels are frequently omitted or collapsed in formal presentations. In the example of educational objectives noted above, Level 7, which might have been described as 'choosing a problem to solve', was omitted—even though the significance of learning to make this choice had long been recognized [47]. The need for such self-consciousness is now firmly

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