MR-17 Reflexivity and Systemic Viability

The Orchard at the Edge of the Village

When Mira was a child, the orchard at the edge of the village seemed endless. In spring, its blossoms turned the air white and gold, and in autumn its branches bent low with fruit. Her grandfather had walked there with her, teaching her which apples ripened first and which kept longest through the winter. “The orchard takes care of us,” he would say, and she believed him.

Years passed. Her grandfather died, and Mira left the village to study in the city. When she returned, the orchard was still there, but something was different. Some of the trees stood bare. Others bore smaller fruit. The ground between them was dry and cracked.

The village council had been meeting about it. “The old ways are no longer enough,” some said. “The seasons are less predictable now.” Others disagreed. “The orchard has survived for generations. It will recover.” So they waited.

One afternoon, Mira walked there alone. She saw where younger trees had been planted and failed, where older trees still stood with their bark split by age, and where the irrigation channels had fallen into disrepair. None of it had happened suddenly. Each season had been understandable. Each decision had made sense at the time.

At the far edge of the orchard, she found one of her grandfather’s trees. It still bore fruit — small, misshapen, but alive. She sat beneath it and remembered how certain everything had once seemed, how natural it had felt to trust that the orchard would always remain.

She understood now that the orchard had never taken care of the village on its own. The village had taken care of the orchard. And when it stopped doing so — slowly, unintentionally, reasonably — the orchard had begun to fade.

In the weeks that followed, Mira began repairing the irrigation channels near that tree. She did not announce it. She did not know if it would be enough. Others noticed. Some joined her. Some did not. There were disagreements, uncertainty, cost, effort, and no guarantees.

The orchard did not recover all at once. Some trees could not be saved. Others did. New ones were planted.

Years later, Mira walked there again. The orchard was smaller now, but it was alive. Children ran between the trees. As she watched them, she realised something she had not understood when she was young. The orchard had never been something the village possessed. It had always been something the village participated in. Its survival had never been certain — only possible, and only when someone chose to care for it.

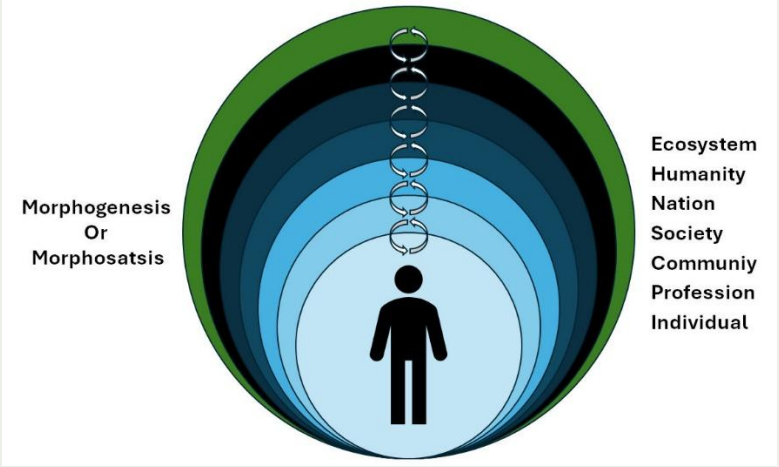
She reached up and picked an apple. It was not perfect, but it was enough. And she understood that it always would be.

Formal Description

Multi-Level Reflexive Viability Awareness is the capacity to recognise that one's beliefs and actions influence the adaptive capacity and long-term sustainability of the systems within which one is embedded, and to take this awareness into account when forming, maintaining, or revising beliefs and behaviours.

Plain English Explanation

Throughout this course, you have learned how beliefs form, how they are shaped by needs and culture, and how reflexivity allows you to examine and revise them.
This module introduces the final step. You are not only shaped by the systems around you. You also help shape them.
Families, professions, institutions, societies, and ecosystems do not maintain themselves automatically. They persist only when enough people act in ways that support their continued viability.
Most of the time, this happens without conscious awareness. People follow established practices because they feel normal, necessary, or expected. But when conditions change, those same practices may no longer sustain the system they once supported.
Motivational reflexivity allows you to notice this. It allows you to see when familiar patterns are no longer sufficient. And it allows you to participate consciously in adaptation. Not with certainty. But with awareness.



Example 1: Engineering
An engineer chose to strengthen a design beyond the minimum required standard, knowing that if everyone accepted only the minimum, the safety of the built environment would gradually decline. His individual decision helped sustain the long-term viability of the profession and the structures people depended on.

Example 2: Purchasing
A purchasing manager selected a slightly more expensive supplier because their farming practices preserved soil fertility, recognising that short-term savings could contribute to long-term ecological degradation. Her decision supported the viability of the wider system her organisation depended on.

Example 3: Teaching
A teacher continued encouraging curiosity rather than teaching only what was tested, knowing that education systems remain viable only when they cultivate understanding, not just performance. Her daily choices helped sustain the deeper purpose of education.

Example 4: Workplace culture
An employee spoke honestly about a problem others had ignored, recognising that organisations remain healthy only when people are willing to see and respond to emerging risks. That small act helped preserve the organisation's capacity to adapt.

Provenance and Links
The idea that individuals exist within nested hierarchies of systems, and that these systems both shape and are shaped by the individuals within them, has deep roots in systems theory, biology, and social theory.

Early general systems theorists observed that complex systems are organised as hierarchies of subsystems within larger systems, each level both constraining and enabling the levels within it. This hierarchical organisation was recognised as a universal feature of living and social systems (Bertalanffy, 1968; Simon, 1962).

Biologists studying evolution further showed that these nested systems persist only when their internal organisation remains viable within their environment. When conditions change, systems may either maintain their existing structure (morphostasis) or reorganise into new forms (morphogenesis) (Waddington, 1957; Maynard Smith & Szathmáry, 1995).

In social theory, Margaret Archer formalised these processes in her Morphogenetic Approach, showing how social structures and cultural systems shape individual action, while individual and collective actions in turn reproduce or transform those structures over time (Archer, 1995, 2003).

Cybernetics and ecological systems theory also emphasised the reciprocal relationship between parts and wholes, showing how system stability depends on feedback between levels, and how the viability of larger systems depends on the behaviour of their components (Ashby, 1956; Odum, 1983). Together, these traditions demonstrate that individuals are not separate from the systems they inhabit. They are components within nested hierarchies whose actions contribute, over time, to either the preservation (morphostasis) or transformation (morphogenesis) of those systems. Motivational reflexivity extends this insight by showing how conscious awareness of belief formation and revision allows individuals to participate more deliberately in these processes.

Practical Exercise

Think of a system you are part of.

This could be:

- your workplace
- your profession
- your community
- or a broader social or environmental system

Ask yourself:

- What practices are considered normal here?
- What assumptions support those practices?
- Have conditions changed in ways that might affect their long-term viability?
- Do people continue these practices automatically, or with conscious awareness?

You do not need to reach conclusions.

The purpose is simply to notice.

