

MINI-THEME SYMPOSIUM: KEN WILBER

NOTE: The editors invited three scholars knowledgeable about Ken Wilber's work to contribute to a dialogue on Wilber and his contemporary importance. We are very grateful to Manu Bazzano, John Rowan and William West for entering into this project with such enthusiasm and insight, and for collectively creating a symposium which we hope clearly articulates the key disagreements about Wilber, and so will contribute to a deepening clarification of the importance of Wilber's work for transpersonal studies. That Wilber's oeuvre generates such strong feelings, pro and anti, is itself a phenomenon that perhaps deserves our careful interrogation and reflection. We would warmly welcome correspondence from readers on this symposium and the arguments therein.

The Editors

House of cards: on Ken Wilber's neo-traditionalism

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Wilber's writings rely on *perennial philosophy* and present a traditionalist perspective drawing on selective scholarship. They provide the reader with the illusion of stability and inclusiveness in a field that is instead pluralistic and multi-layered. His perspective is implicitly wedded to political conservatism and to a hierarchical vision of human experience that denies the reality of the body and the transience of life, and is at variance with a progressive counter-tradition and a counter-cosmology whose provisional tenets are highlighted.

Keywords: Wilber; Integral; traditionalism

Introduction

Expanding on a Lewis Carroll idea, Borges envisioned a time in the distant past when cartography had become so accurate that 'the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province'. These maps were deemed inadequate, so 'the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it' (Borges, 1988, p. 325). Trying to navigate my way through Ken Wilber's output, I similarly marvelled at its enormity, matched only by the gargantuan creation of online and offline links within his *Integral* brand. The idea behind this drive appears to be *inclusiveness*. But does Wilber's Integral's ramifications promote inclusiveness, or are they rather an *engulfment* of existing approaches?

In Borges' story, later generations, not keen on cartography, abandoned the giant map of the Empire 'to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters', having decided that it

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was worthless: ‘In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography’ (Borges, 1988, p. 325).

The purpose of a map is finding one’s way through uncharted territory, but in our era of navigators and android apps we may miss out on the valuable experience of getting lost from time to time, of *not* finding our way.

The pursuit of consciousness

In the preface to his first book, *The Spectrum of Consciousness* (Wilber, 1993), first published towards the end of the 1970s, Wilber quotes the twentieth-century Swiss-German metaphysician Fritjof Schuon: ‘There is no *science of the soul* without a *meta-physical basis* to it and without *spiritual remedies* at its disposal’ (cited in Wilber, 1993, p. xiv, my italics).

Wilber specifies that *Spectrum* aims to support Schuon’s statement. Even though there are diversions in Wilber’s later work, the general idea remains the same, hence in this discussion I will use as key reference points the three notions cited above: (a) science of the soul; (b) its metaphysical basis; and (c) spiritual remedies.

Let us examine the first point. Does Wilber’s work present us with a ‘science of the soul’? Schuon was the author of the instructively titled *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (Schuon, 1984), a notion at the heart of Wilber’s project, redolent of the theosophical belief that all religions share the same universal truth and that all ‘awakened beings’ – Christ, Buddha and Krishna cheerily lumped together (though, notably, not Mohammed) – convey the same message. Both Schuon and Wilber are exponents of *perennial philosophy*, a mode of thought popularized in the mid-1940s by Huxley (2009), a perspective that claims to be beyond perspectives and maintains that there is a ‘divine Ground of all existence’ which in turn constitutes ‘a spiritual Absolute’ (Huxley, 2009, p. 21). The Absolute, Huxley writes, is ‘the God-without-form of Hindu and Christian mystical phraseology’ (ibid.). The interested reader will find in Schuon’s writing humility and soulful appreciation of Islam – both absent from Wilber’s system. At closer scrutiny, *there is no soul* (Heraclitus’s *psyché*) *in Wilber’s work*. It is obliterated by, or identified with, spirit, and summarily confined to ‘lower’, primitive levels, pushed aside in favour of ‘higher’ planes of consciousness, sublimated purity and transcendence.

This is familiar; it reflects the millenarian put-down of *psyché* by the philosophical tradition from Plato onwards and by the institutionalized religions – a state of affairs lamented by James Hillman (1992, p. 68):

Our distinctions are Cartesian: between outer tangible reality and inner states of mind, or between body and a fuzzy conglomerate of mind, psyche and spirit. We have lost the third, middle position which ... was the place of soul: a world of imagination, passion, fantasy, reflection, that is neither physical and material on the one hand, nor spiritual or abstract on the other, yet bound to them both ... But the threefold vision has collapsed into two, because soul has become identified with spirit ... The spiritual point of view always posits itself as superior, and operates particularly well in a fantasy of transcendence among ultimates and absolutes.

The ‘soul’ Hillman speaks about is not the individual, immortal soul of Christian lore, nor the ‘real self’ of psychology, but Heraclitus’s *psyché* – one translation of which is

Hillman's *anima mundi* or 'the soul of the world'. In Heraclitus's own words: 'Traveling on every path, you will not find the boundaries of soul – so deep is its measure' (Heraclitus, 2015).

Speaking of a *science* of the soul, as Wilber does after Schuon, gestures at interdisciplinarity, in this case between science and spirituality, biology and the humanities, psychology and contemplative practices. Wilber (1993) maintains that soul, or rather *consciousness* (a recurring term in his writings), is 'pluridimensional, or ... composed of many levels' (p. xiv). He also maintains that 'each major school of psychology, psychotherapy and religion is addressing a different level; that these different schools are therefore not contradictory but complementary' and, finally, that 'a true synthesis of the major approaches to consciousness can be affected – a synthesis ... that values *equally* the insights of Freud, Jung, Maslow, May, Berne ... as well as the great spiritual sages' (ibid.). There is room, in Wilber's capacious system, 'for the ego, the super-ego, the id but also for the total organism and for the transpersonal self, and finally for cosmic consciousness – source and support of them all' (ibid.).

Yet very diverse and profound contributions of schools of psychology are superficially treated and arbitrarily transmuted to fit within Wilber's Integral edifice. The 'law of similarity' found in dreams is dismissed as 'primitive magical confusion' (Wilber, 1983, p. 49) when we know from Matte-Blanco (1975, 1988) that it corresponds to the 'symmetric mode of being' (Matte-Blanco, 1975, p. 69). Decades of pioneering studies on dreams and the unconscious provide mere furnishing in the basement rooms of Wilber's architectonic fantasy because dreams, supposedly belonging solely to the pre-conscious and the pre-verbal domain, play a minor role in the evolutionary task heralded by these 'most advanced individuals' (Wilber, 1983, p. 54). Wilber's integral traveller will move past shamanism, having learned all there is to know from Mircea Eliade who, Wilber assures us, is 'the greatest living authority' (p. 55), providing the 'definitive study on the subject' (p. 70) – a questionable view when you realize that Eliade relied on Frazer's discredited compilations *The Golden Bough* (Frazer, 2009) rather than Durkheim's authoritative *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim, 2008).

Consciousness ejects 'soul' in Wilber's work, and the popularity his writings have enjoyed over the years is indicative, for they offered a consistent, if not entirely coherent, metaphysical support to the moribund American dream and its neo-liberal appendices. Allow me to explain. John Locke's original claim that humans are entitled to the natural rights of life, liberty and *property* was famously tweaked, in the US Declaration of Independence, to life, liberty and *the pursuit of happiness* – the last woolly notion covering up the refutation of the right of property to black slaves. An updated 'spiritualist' version could take its cue from Wilber: 'life, liberty and *the pursuit of consciousness*'. In other words: do you happen to be poor, black, disenfranchised? Don't worry about social awareness; rise to the level of cosmic consciousness instead.

But what *is* consciousness? Does it float above 'matter'? Can it exist *apart* from phenomena? Here is what the great Buddhist sage Nāgārjuna had to say: 'Just as a child is born from father and mother, so consciousness springs from eyes and colourful shapes' (Batchelor, 2000, p. 56).

The above statement could have been uttered by a French post-structuralist, a phenomenologist, an American pragmatist. Consciousness is always consciousness *of* something. To think of consciousness as separate, as witness to an ever-changing world, is a consolation. A reply to our first question is beginning to emerge:

Wilber's writings do *not* present a *science of the soul*; instead, they attempt to validate metaphysical notions of consciousness.

To carry the self forward

When, driven by the desire to systematize and universalize, we arbitrarily shepherd very diverse practices under the same matrix, their uniqueness is lost. This is what perennial philosophers (also known as *traditionalists*) have done with Buddhism. The co-opting of the Buddha's teachings within the transcendentalist perspective has a long history, some of it covered by Stephen Batchelor (1983), who emphasizes two emerging trends. The first one was 'the need to provide a form of Buddhism ... more compatible with the social life emerging out of the political stability found during the Mauryan, Kushan and Gupta empires' (Batchelor, 1983, p. 48), and which required 'a greater attempt at symbiosis with the indigenous Brahmanical culture and the presentation of ... Buddhism within a metaphysical format able to hold its own against the competing Hindu systems' (ibid.). Second was the deification of the Buddha from sage/physician to omniscient being. Against this process of deification and the baroque paraphernalia that came with it, the radical 'schools' of *Ch'an* and *Zen* sprang up in the Far East, free of metaphysical ballast and otherworldliness, with a straightforward emphasis on somatic practice (*zazen*) and artistic/poetic expression rather than metaphysical enunciation.

The attempt to incorporate *Zen* and other practices within a dominant notion of spirituality continues to this day: it is difficult to extricate *Zen* from the transpersonal approach and the New Age. But distinctions are important, which is why, when asked about my 'spiritual practice', I find myself replying that I am interested in the teachings of the Buddha rather than spirituality.

The very same process of engulfment of Buddhism within transcendentalism is found in the work of T.R.V. Murti (1955), Wilber's main scholarly source on Buddhism. Murti was a metaphysician and philosopher whose book on the *Mādhyamika* school of Buddhism founded by Nāgārjuna charts two different traditions in Indian philosophy: the Vedic-Upanishadic, which stresses the substantial existence of *ātman* (variously translated as self, breath and soul), and the Buddhist, which refutes the very notion of *substance* and conceives reality as flux. Both the Buddha and Nāgārjuna refuse to assert one or the other; they do not commit to either eternalism (something *is*) or nihilism (something is *not*). The Buddha remains silent when asked metaphysical questions; Nāgārjuna dissolves them by extending the two-cornered logic of *dilemma* (two assertions) into the four-cornered logic of the *tetralemma* (four assertions).

The dilemma will state: (1) A is B; (2) A is not B. The tetralemma will assert: (1) A is B; (2) A is not B; (3) A is both B and not-B; (4) A is neither B nor not-B. While mysticism and spiritual absolutism linger on the *third* lemma, Nāgārjuna goes beyond. But this 'going beyond' does not gesture towards a unified reality, an all-encompassing 'whole' or 'logos' (Wilber's mistake). It does *not* suggest unity of opposites. It does *not* translate the Buddha's insights *within* the Vedic-Upanishadic (and later Advaita) worldview – which is Murti's and Wilber's fallacy. Wilber recently wrote of the 'Fourth Turning of Buddhism' (Wilber, 2014) which, under his auspices, will follow the previous three 'turnings' (initiated, respectively, by the historical Buddha, Nāgārjuna and the Vajrayana tradition). This momentous fourth turning will be taking on board the modern world as systematized by the Integral vision, thus giving birth to 'Integral

Buddhism'. This is an arrogant claim, neatly placing Wilber in a direct line of spiritual innovators such as Gautama the Buddha, Nāgārjuna and the whole of the Vajrayana tradition. The fourth turning will capitalize on Nāgārjuna's 'four-fold negation' and will 'make room for nondualistic awareness ... a nondual form of awareness in which the subject/object dichotomy is transcended – or the self/other dualism is seen through – leaving instead pure, undivided, nondual awareness' (ibid.). This is not a fourth level of Buddhism but *regression* to the times before the Buddha, to the logocentric vision of Vedanta and the Upanishads which the Buddha grew out of.

One will find much in contemporary interpretations of Buddhism that similarly translates a radical existential practice into the comforting wholeness of logocentrism. A more appealing route to Buddhist practice for me is one which, tracing the Buddha's silence, Nāgārjuna's dialectical dissolution of our instinct for systematization, accepts the raw existential truth of the Buddha's message without anaesthetic. Borrowing the term from Magliola (1984), I call this approach to Buddhism (and psychology) *differential* – the very antithesis of *integral*. Despite championing Nāgārjuna, the neo-traditionalist Wilber turns the teaching of the former on its head and closely associates him with an interpreter of Plato, the Greek philosopher Plotinus (204–250 AD):

These two souls wrought historically unparalleled spiritual revolutions in the West and the East. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that virtually every Nondual tradition in both East and West traces its lineage, in whole or in part, to Plotinus and Nāgārjuna. (Wilber, 2000a, p. 666)

Now, there *is* lyrical beauty and depth of insight in Plotinus. He *did* expand on Platonism – by suggesting, for instance, that shadows form part of light, that immanence and transcendence are not antithetical. Yet lumping Plotinus with Nāgārjuna is not only an exaggeration; it is an *engulfment* of the very different (and differential) teachings of the latter against the essential *monism* (belief in an ultimate One) of the former. But for Wilber everything goes back to perennial philosophy, everything has its matrix in 'cosmic consciousness'. Even Sufism, apparently, goes back to Plotinus: 'The Sufi tradition is deeply infused by the neo-Platonic tradition ... There is nothing radically new in Sufism that you can't find in Plotinus' (Wilber, 2009).

But the notion that Plotinus provided philosophical ground for Sufism is marginal among Sufi scholars and practitioners. The stance of *phagocytising* (eating up) oversimplified versions of other traditions and practices is found all over the Wilberian oeuvre. A passage in Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō* may help diagnose what is happening here: 'To carry the self forward and illuminate myriad dharmas is delusion. That myriad dharmas come forth and illuminate the self is enlightenment' (Dōgen, in Weisman, Wenger, & Okamura, 2001, p. 6).

In meditation, there is a world of difference between the insight that all *dharmas* (phenomena) are *me* and, on the other hand, the experience that I am *all phenomena*. In the first case, the self is 'bigged-up' to cosmic proportions – it swallows the world up, thus confirming the delusion of its own substance. In the second case, the self is *deconstructed* (a word that is a red rag to a bull for Wilber) and recognized as (ultimately) non-existing (*anatman*). Similarly, that the study of other traditions *confirms* my point of view is delusion; that it *questions* my worldview is enlightenment. Favouring the first mode, as Wilber does, has cultural and political implications. Reducing

otherness to the *same* is the handiwork of Empire and of dominant cultures; colonialism forcibly exports the *same* into the *other's* territory.

The (new) colossus of Rhodes

In the same interview on Sufism mentioned above, Wilber makes a distinction between *esoteric* (internal) Islam which is *good* – partly because it apparently (and reassuringly) derives from neo-Platonism – and *exoteric* (external, social) Islam, which is *bad*:

The exoteric side of Islam is as undeveloped as any in the world; it's really stuck in this deep conformist, mythic membership version of the exoteric Koran. Mohammed was basically a warrior tribal chieftain and the Koran reflects that and that has caused as many problems in the world as any other single factor. (Wilber, 2009)

The customary stance among metaphysicians and traditionalists is typically a-political, which is in itself a conservative stance. It is rare to hear them make overtly political pronouncements. When they do, one wishes that they had maintained their mystical silence; some embraced atrocious views: the perennial philosopher Julius Evola (1898–1974) was a notorious Nazi ideologue, while for Wilber the only politician who came close to the wisdom of his integral perspective is one Tony Blair:

As for world leaders – are any taking something resembling an integral view? The only world leader who comes close, in my opinion, is Tony Blair. Blair – virtually alone, it seems to me – holds the multifarious sides fairly in awareness and draws conclusions (and courses of action) based on a bigger picture. ... Like the colossus at Rhodes, Blair has one foot in America and one foot in Europe, and heroically seems the only world leader attempting to keep that integration in existence. ... His own vision has been consistent, disciplined, passionate but even-handed. That Blair has also been an authentic pioneer in 'third way' politics ... which is one of the first serious moves toward an integral politics that unites the best of liberal and conservative, is perhaps no surprise. Given the actual world situation as it is now, Blair's general position seems to be the best that can pragmatically be offered. (Wilber, 2003)

For Wilber (2007), integral politics unites the best of liberal and conservative, beyond the one-sidedness of attributing human suffering to individual flaws (the Republican stance) or societal injustice (the Democratic view). I'm baffled as to whether this is naivety or shrewd conservatism disguised as high-minded spirituality. Growing signs of the end of US naivety and the USA's peculiarly insular mentality did appear in the last decade, and have been eloquently expressed in North American literature (Marcus, 2015). But the global disillusionment with the USA – for so many across the world a place of insensitive narcissism, privileged greed and belligerent aggression – has not registered with Wilber and his integral followers.

No sweat

The second topic under scrutiny is the assumed need for a *metaphysical basis*. Metaphysics, from the Greek *ta meta ta phusika*, the things beyond nature, is conventionally the domain of religion and abstract thought, dealing with notions such as being (ontology) and providing us with a rational account of the world (cosmology). Today, metaphysics also refers to *any* explanation of the world which is articulated in a system that

precedes and/or placed outside the world. *Conventional*, old-fashioned metaphysics presupposes the existence of ‘Spirit’ placed more or less outside ‘matter’. *Modern* metaphysics may be materialistic in outlook, i.e. empirical and/or phenomenological, but will still provide us with an equally expedient explanation of the world. Both types of metaphysics also grant us the consolation that the wide world ‘out there’ is not a *chaos* but a *cosmos*. A more nuanced thinking may conceive the world, as Joyce did in *Finnegan’s Wake*, as ‘*chaosmos*’ (Joyce, 2012, p. 116) – i.e. as chaos *and* cosmos. But ideas of this sort usually strike the mind of *artists* rather than metaphysicians.

Wilber’s references also include thinkers such as Hegel, Habermas and Teilhard de Chardin. Hegel’s major early work, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel, 1977), first published in 1807, was compared to a *Bildungsroman* (educational novel), informing the reader of the vicissitudes of an intangible protagonist (‘spirit’) across phenomenal worlds, through the ups and downs of successive shapes of consciousness. It is a central work heralding the birth of modern inter-subjectivity, our sense of history and contingency, and represents a controversial attempt to assemble a Stairway to the Almighty with the stepladders of logic. Crude interpretations also attribute to Hegel *theodicy* – the presence of God’s providence in the midst of history’s evils – and a rose-tinted version of progress, with humanity propelling the whole of creation towards better, shinier and higher levels.

It is this Pixar-friendly version of Hegel that is solemnly endorsed by Wilber. There are *countless* interpretations of Hegel – Wilber’s achievement is to have offered quite simply the most ludicrous to date. Ignoring that Hegel’s *Geist* (spirit) is steeped in *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the time – change through conflict, contingency, and the blood, sweat and tears of history – in *Up from Eden* Wilber (1983) opts for a fantasist version of the journey of spirit through history:

[I am] trying to describe, or rather suggest the ‘subjective flavour’ or ‘subjective mood’ of consciousness which defined each of its various stages of evolution, and not confine myself to the standard, empirical descriptions of physical and material archaeological remains. (p. 39)

Why grapple with ‘empirical descriptions’ when you can surf on a spiritual wave of self-styled spirituality? Impatient with paltry archaeology and dull empiricism, Wilber empowers himself with the task of guiding travellers into Spirit’s journey through history, from pre-history through the present day and beyond, to the dizzy feat of ‘Absolute Spirit’ and ‘Absolute Knowledge’. Unfortunately, current Hegelian scholarship puts a spanner in the Integral works, and understands Absolute Knowledge as *radical relativization* and Absolute Spirit as *demise of the subject* (Zizek, 2013), and is conspicuously devoid of the compensatory happy endings typical of evolutionary fantasies.

Astounding science fiction

Before founding Scientology, Wilber’s fellow self-propagandist Ron Hubbard explored science in the 1930s and 1940s, writing stories for *Astounding Science Fiction*, the most fashionable US magazine of its kind. They were silly and brisk; the heroes ‘morally, mentally and physically superior to the rest of humanity’ (Aviv, 2012). In *Typewriter in the Sky* (Hubbard, 1995) the protagonist, writer Horace Hackett, turns his best friend into a character of his novel, with every plot turn producing changes in his friend’s reality. His friend moves through life powerlessly, swept

along by a semi-divine force – ‘spirit’. The novel is remarkable in its own silly way – a rare exemplar of shoddy metaphysics married to bad fiction, heralding some of the themes later articulated by Wilber. This begs the question: could it be that Wilber’s work will be remembered as a brainier, cooler version of *Dianetics*?

Fear of music

Given his penchant for structures, hierarchical systems, maps, quadrants and his fixation with gathering branches of knowledge (or rather their skeletal, *Lego* version) to see how they can all be ‘integrated’ into one giant, all-American edifice; given his unwarranted belief in the future emergence of *one* global culture with *one* global new religion and spirituality, it comes as no surprise to discover that Wilber’s *bête noire* is post-structuralism – alongside Derrida’s *deconstruction* and post-modernism. Post-structuralism affirms *difference*, dismantles the preposterous centrality assigned to the human subject, questions the dominant interpretations of history and the veracity of language; it is allied to imaginative writing and the arts; it turns philosophy from bearer of systemic truth to an art form. It questions the compulsion to system-building as betraying a writer’s lack of integrity and inability to admit not-knowing which is at the heart of being human. It charts the emergence of ethics, the sacred, and of religious experience conceived within the (horizontal) *infinity* of the phenomenal world rather than in the (vertical) *totality* of mystical revelation proffered by prophets old and new. Implicit in post-structuralism is a progressive and socially emancipatory discourse sorely missing in Wilber’s perspective.

It is not surprising that Wilber should be critical of post-structuralism and that he equates it with ‘relativism’. What *is* surprising is that his argument is bigoted and uninformed. His writings are littered with attacks on post-modernism. One example will have to suffice here. As anyone working in universities will have noticed, since the advent of neo-liberalism academia has been besieged by a ‘new brutalism’ (Warner, 2014, p. 42) that dictates that students are customers, content is governed by targets and goals, where lecturers are given workload allocation and instructed by bureaucrats, and where the university itself is no longer a place of learning but a business promoting uniformity and the promise of lucrative jobs. Wilber is unaware of this; for him, the problem with academia is that it has been hijacked by a handful of dangerous post-modernists:

Extreme postmodernism ha[s] ... completely invaded academia in general and cultural studies in particular ... The politically correct were policing the types of serious discourse that could, and could not, be uttered in academe. Pluralistic relativism was the only acceptable worldview ... It claimed that there are no universal truths ... (Wilber, 2000b, pp. ix–x)

Given, however, that his Integral map aims at inclusiveness, Wilber decided to praise ‘positive’ aspects of ‘post-modernism’ (in itself an arbitrary label and not reducible to the foggy notion of ‘pluralistic relativism’), swiftly proceeding to fit his own *Lego* version of post-modernism within his universal edifice:

Pluralistic relativism is not itself the highest wave of development ... [It] gives way to universal integralism. Where pluralism frees the many different voices and multiple contexts, universal integralism begins to bring them together into a harmonized chorus. (Universal integralism thus stands on the brink of even higher developments, which directly disclose the transpersonal and spiritual realms.) (ibid., p. xi)

The consolations of metaphysics

Wilber's appeal is *normative*. His writings emerged in the early 1980s, signalling the end of exploration and the onset of regimentation. Two dismal decades followed, dominated by the sinister figures of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. In the areas of psychology and spirituality, many of us felt the need for a system, *any* system, that could provide reassurance and consolation after the confusion engendered by one LSD trip too many – after the joyful and excruciating experiences in communes around the world. None of us had read de Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity* (de Beauvoir, 2000); we didn't know what she had meant by warning us against the mistake of turning *ethical projects* into *ethical systems*, and inviting us to maintain an open emancipatory ethos rather than allowing it to fossilize into rigid systems. Nor did we take heed of post-structuralism's shrewd lessons. And so 'it was all too easy for received psychological categories to slip back in, undoing the considerable deconstructive work that has been effectively carried out by poststructuralism' (Massumi, 1995, p. 87). In the small but creative world of the 'human potential movement', this implosion meant that many began to see the rich, pluralistic array of experimentation as chaotic and began to look for systems. Enter Ken Wilber. He was at hand to provide some with a map and a temporary dwelling to rest their tired limbs. True, the map was patched up with bits and pieces of disused practices and dubious scholarship. So what? It felt *good* to finally have someone state that the place we chanced to find ourselves in fitted this grand evolutionary climb towards super-consciousness.

In response to our second question: do we really *need* a metaphysical basis in our life? Some of us do; there is nothing wrong with that. We all crave reassurance at some point. But it is good to remember that what we call *ground of being*, *universal truth*, *absolute* etc. is a useful, temporary description, and that the prophets expressing it from a higher plane of consciousness are fallible.

The transpersonal denial of death

I am he attesting sympathy. (Whitman, 2003, p. 19)

We have come to the final topic: the nature and scope of 'spiritual remedies'. I will look at one of these: meditation practice. First, I would like to quote the following passage from Wilber (1983), where he writes about the first Zen wave that swept North America in the 1960s:

An influential number of otherwise highly intellectual people, incapable of supporting rational and egoic responsibility in a culture clearly stressful and drifting, began championing ... narcissistic, regressive freedom from the ego level, through pre-egoic licence, while intellectually claiming to be pursuing the trans-egoic Zen of spontaneous freedom. As the general cultural malaise spread, many other people began to share the 'Dharma Bum' attitude, turning narcissistically upon themselves, damning culture per se, championing Marxist dogma (religion is not always the 'opiate of the masses' as Marx thought, but it is true that 'Marxism became the opiate of the intellectuals', as a French critic put it), and ... withdrawing to the pre-egoic abode. They ... took as their heroes a handful of truly trans-personal souls and, confusing pre-personal with trans-personal, pointed to Krishnamurti and Ramana and Zen, and thus managed to front an otherwise undeniable rationalization for their regress to Eden. (Wilber, 1983, pp 323–324)

The *Dharma Bums* in question are: Gary Snyder, Pulitzer prize-winner poet, activist, eco-philosopher and long-time Zen practitioner; Allen Ginsberg, one of the major American poets in the Whitman democratic tradition, who studied Vajrayana Buddhism with a pivotal figure such as Chögyam Trungpa; Jack Kerouac, who inspired generations to come by combining in an original idiom Proust, Joyce and existentialism. The ‘Beats’, as they are known, represented an important turning point in Western culture and a progressive response to the vacuous banalities of the American Dream. Wilber relegates them to the limbo of pre-egoic regression.

Leaving aside the arbitrariness of Wilberian jargon (pre-egoic, egoic, trans-egoic are simply hypotheses inhabiting different ‘floors’ in Wilber’s edifice) and the swipe at Marxism, the fact that he reads the Beat Generation phenomenon as a regressive route to a sensual Eden is instructive. The two perspectives could not be more different: Wilber articulates a puritanical ethos married to traditionalist metaphysics and a conservative cosmology; the Beats inherited the teachings of Zen (particularly Snyder), and the legacy of Whitman, a poet of democracy and of the body, of a notion of democracy that is inseparable from the body – a notion that requires a whole new cosmology, as Martha Nussbaum (2003, pp. 656–657) explains:

Here is a new cosmology that Whitman offers us, to stand over the cosmologies created by philosophical and religious systems: the finite mortal individual, democratic citizen, equal to and among others, who contains the world within himself by virtue of his resourceful imagination and his sympathetic love.

This new ‘irregular cosmology ... of our finitude and imperfection [is] Whitman’s replacement for Plato’s world of transcendent forms, for the Christian cosmology of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven’ (ibid., p. 661). What makes democracy possible is a heightened sense of justice, which begins with seeing men and women as *ends*. A bland notion of democracy neglects the bodily reality of men and women; it forgets eros and mortality in the name of transcendence. But the only transcendence democracy needs is the transcendence of hierarchy, of hatred and oppression. The only ‘spirit’ democracy needs is the empathy of the poetic imagination, a ‘new thinking’ ‘involve[ing] a form of erotic touching’ (ibid., p. 665).

Meditation itself is a bodily practice, not a stepping stone to some imaginary ‘higher’. The insight gained in meditation occurs as somatic experience. Committed practice awakens us to the truth of our finitude and the transient nature of life. Awareness of this mortal body’s breathing makes me aware of *dukkha* or suffering. *Dukkha* becomes ‘fully known’ (*pariññā*) – the first, in Stephen Batchelor’s formulation (Batchelor, 2012), of Buddha’s four noble tasks. Circumventing this in the name of ‘spirit’ is a denial of death, albeit a ‘spiritual’ denial of death.

Wilber’s system misreads meditation as a way to foster a developmental stage beyond the ego and an expansion into so-called cosmic consciousness. It also literalizes and reifies a ‘spiritual’ dimension, seen as distinct from the world of phenomena.

Meditation – as I experience it – is akin to phenomenological enquiry; it is becoming aware of the wider organismic field; it helps the practitioner to actively adapt to the wonderful and terrifying fluidity and uncertainty of the world. Rather than a stepping stone to some imaginary higher level, it deals with – and helps one appreciate more fully – the everyday (Maezumi, 2001), the life of the organism beyond the narrow confinements of ego and of the self-concept (Rogers, 1956).

Addendum

Hegel, by far the most gifted creator of a philosophical system in the modern era, died in Berlin in 1831 during a cholera epidemic. He was 61. A portrait painted shortly before his death unmistakably shows his fear. A failure of ‘absolute knowledge’ and ‘absolute spirit’? It depends how you understand these. Wilber (1983) tells us that in the face of death, we have two choices, ‘deny and repress it or ... transcend it in the superconscious All’ (pp. 58–59). Hegel had known, according to Wilber, the ‘superconscious All’. It still didn’t help, which is what makes him, in my eyes, all the more likable, for genuine fear can be a powerful antidote to spiritual arrogance. To fully know the reality of human and other sentient beings’ suffering is a gateway to compassion and wisdom, without which the creation of a system is worthless. Life is too short. Should the reader decide to check Wilber’s sources a little more closely and follow his line of argument attentively, she may find that the whole system is but a house of cards.

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Wilber and me

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The first thing to note about Ken Wilber is how honest he is. Instead of defending everything he has said, he acknowledges where he has gone wrong and has taken steps to do better. In his excellent book *The Eye of Spirit* (1996) he describes Wilber-I as his first theoretical position, and labels it as Romantic/Jungian. What he did in his earliest published writings was to see 'the infantile pre-egoic structure as being, in some sense, a primal Ground, a perfect wholeness, a direct God-union, a complete immersion in Self, a oneness with the whole world' (p. 154). This was an attractive position, and it linked with many other writers he admired. But as time went on, he realised that this was an idealized notion, and in fact an example of what he subsequently called 'the pre/trans fallacy' – mixing up the pre-logical with the post-logical or trans-logical. As he said, if two things are both non-logical, they can easily get confused. Some people are still confused: one of the leaders of the Spiritual Emergency Network still believes that infants are spiritually advanced.

So Wilber moved to his second theoretical position, Wilber-II:

Spirit manifests as the entire world in a series of increasingly holistic and holarchic spheres, stretching from matter to body to mind to soul to spirit itself. But all of these different dimensions are actually just forms of spirit, in various degrees of self-realisation and self-actualisation. (p. 157)

This is a much more unified position, and much easier to defend. We start now with a sub-rational position, and gradually rise to the rational, and then on to the post-rational or super-rational. This is much more consistent and much more believable. But Wilber did not stop there.

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