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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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Wilber-III

explicitly distinguished *the different developmental lines that unfold through those 17 levels*. These different developmental lines include affective, cognitive, moral, interpersonal, object-relations, self-identity, and so on, *each of which develops in a quasi-independent fashion through the general levels of basic structures of consciousness*. There is no single, monolithic line that governs all of these developments. (p. 213, original italics)

This was a significant move forward, because we escape from an imposed uniformity and can move about with much greater freedom among all sorts of alternatives. It has always been a bit of a mystery – as well as a frightful scandal – that so many gurus and other spiritual leaders have been exposed as exploiting their followers, financially or sexually, or both. This new idea makes it much more understandable: being high ranking on one developmental line tells us nothing about what may be the case on other lines. But Wilber was not finished yet.

Wilber-IV came when Wilber saw that one evolutionary stream was not enough; we need four:

The first step toward a genuine theory of consciousness, I believe, is the realisation that consciousness is not located in the organism. Rather, consciousness is a four-quadrant affair, and it exists, if it exists at all, distributed across all four quadrants, anchored equally in each. (p. 270)

This idea became the AQAL (all quadrants, all levels) model used in all of Wilber's later work. It says that we have to pay attention not only to the individual consciousness (that is just the upper-left quadrant), but also to the social background and connections of the person (that is the lower-left), and the broad sociological setting (that is the lower-right) and the physical presence and character of the person, in the upper-right quadrant. This AQAL position became the bedrock of the positions taken in Wilber's later writings.

Wilber-V represents the coming into being of the Integral Institute, and the increasing emphasis on the transcendent Kosmic Mandala. Wilber speaks of Kosmic habits rather than scientific laws. He writes about integral post-metaphysics. We meet the concept of the Kosmic address. We discover that each position has an inside and an outside. This now is a much more complex position. Wilber also gets more interested in the brain, and describes Delta waves (deep sleep) (Wilber, 2006, p. 166), Theta waves (dreaming), Alpha waves (hypnagogic), Beta waves (typical waking state) and so forth. Incidentally, you can find on YouTube a fascinating video of Wilber controlling these waves, eliminating each type until there is none left at all (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LFFMtq5g8N4>).

All this is just to show how honest Wilber is in his self-criticism and his ability to move on from incorrect positions. But I want to make it clear that I am not championing Wilber as a great thinker and a correct authority, but rather as someone who has given us a map which is very useful to me and to others working in the field.

This is so particularly for me, because my history in the consciousness field links very closely with the basic Wilber map. Psychedelics are not only useful for exploring the Subtle and mystical states; they are also useful for assisting and encouraging psychotherapy. In my own therapy in the early 1970s I used LSD from time to time. I would take a tab, and then use a tape recorder for the next few hours. What I

discovered was that LSD could open the swing-doors of the mind, and hold them open for a time. This enabled me to do deep work on my early life and my then current problems. And I think it made me more bold and enterprising than I would otherwise have been. All through the 1970s I put myself through every form of therapy that was then available, mostly humanistic, many of them in spontaneous leaderless groups. I practised three different forms of co-counselling. I was one of the founders of the spontaneous therapy and politics group known as Red Therapy, which often met for a whole weekend. I went to a number of groups led by big-name visiting group leaders. I signed up for the first Primal Integration group, led by Bill Swartley, and led the group when he was out of town. It was usual for these groups to last for a whole weekend of intense therapeutic work.

During the 1970s, through all these experiences, I would say that I went through some form of rebirth process four times, no holds barred, so to speak. I plumbed the very depths of my psyche. I remember that on two occasions I took a dose of LSD in the Primal Integration group, which led to one of the most fundamental rebirth experiences of all. My whole personality changed over that 10-year period. I started as an introvert on every test available, and ended up as an extrovert on those same tests. And I learned how to be intimate with another person, with no compulsion to hold anything back. I learned to work so thoroughly with feminist ideas that I ceased to be frightened of feminists. So I arrived at 1980 with the view that I was self-actualized, in the Abraham Maslow manner.

The question was: what to do next? I agonized about this, and went to various sources in search of an answer. Sogyal Rinpoche was no help, even when I told him I was in the land of the hungry ghosts. The Raja Yoga people taught me a form of meditation which sent me to sleep every time. The Rajneesh people told me to just jump in, but I wanted to know exactly what swimming pool I would be jumping into, and this was not clear. Then at a party I met a woman who told me that she had come across a writer called Ken Wilber. 'He writes a bit like you, and I think you would like him.' So I bought a couple of books by Wilber, and liked them very much. He told me that my next move was to explore the Subtle level of consciousness. But I had no idea of how to do that.

At this time, I invented my own style of meditation, which in principle could take me the whole way up the spiritual ladder, so to speak. In 1982 I started to meditate every morning, first thing. I continued to do that ever since, and am still doing it. By taking it so seriously and consistently I was able to experience other forms of meditation very easily. I did a course at the Buddhist Centre in Bethnal Green. I did a course at the Goenka Centre in Hereford. I did more than one course at the centre in Wales led by John Crook from the Western Ch'an tradition, who told me I had reached kensho.

By coincidence, after my conversation at the aforementioned party I ran into a man whom I knew pretty well, and who had been through some political experiences with me. He said that he and some friends were starting a Moon Group, and would I be interested in joining. It turned out to be a Wiccan group, led by an experienced witch from the USA, and was basically an educational effort to initiate people into the neo-pagan spiritual realm. I duly joined the group, which I found very useful, and at the same time started reading people like Jung, Kerényi, Marie-Louise von Franz, Joseph Campbell, Starhawk, the Farrars, Arthur Avalon, Jean Houston, James Hillman and so on. In the 1980s I spent 10 years going into and through the Subtle level of experience. I was obsessed with diagrams about the relationships between different figures in the Subtle space, and produced more and more of them.

So by the end of this decade, I was well initiated into the Subtle level of consciousness, and wrote about it later (Rowan, 1998).

As the 1980s drew to a close, I was in therapy with Ian Gordon-Brown, one of the pioneers of the transpersonal in the UK. I had learned from Wilber that the next stop on my journey would have to be the Causal level of consciousness. At the Causal level, I was told, there were no problems, because everything was One. So I asked Ian – ‘Yes, but how do I do that?’ I wanted a set of instructions on how to move from the Subtle to the Causal. But all Ian said was – ‘You just do it!’ I was a bit surprised by this, because I thought there should be an orthodox path and method. But I went ahead, and in my morning meditation I simply turned my attention to the Causal. Instantly, I was there! It was not an experience – I had had plenty of those in the Subtle – but rather a simple realization: all this detail was unnecessary – there were no problems, no signposts, no handrails, no landmarks and no words. I spent the next 10 years exploring the Causal, with the help of authors such as David Brazier, Robert Rosenbaum, Michael Eigen, Mark Epstein, Frances Vaughan, Jenny Wade, Brant Cortright – and of course Ken Wilber.

Then at the end of that time, I decided I was ready to explore the Nondual. Again in my morning meditation I just turned my attention towards the Nondual, and there it was – again, just a simple realization, not an experience; just an awareness of the total simplicity of the Nondual, which made me laugh. In fact, there was nothing to be done but just to laugh. It was all so ridiculous, the way people took it all so seriously, when really there was nothing to take seriously or not seriously! People do take the Nondual so seriously and argue about it, but I have now arrived at a very simple story about it. The final assumption of the Causal is that everything is One. But the whole process of the spiritual path is the giving up of false assumptions, one by one. Now all we have to do is to give up this final assumption, and we are in the Nondual. I don’t know why people make it all so complicated.

So what I am saying here is that the reason I am so fond of Wilber is that his model fits my own experience so precisely. This means that I can teach it to other people wholeheartedly, and not hold back as if there were some doubt about it.

More importantly, however, this means that I am promoting Wilber not as a great thinker with an infallible doctrine, but rather as a man who has been very useful to me personally, and who I think would be useful to anyone who has to work in the field of counselling or psychotherapy. Most particularly, he has offered a beautiful distinction between the Mental Ego and the Centaur levels of consciousness. This is in my view one of the most useful distinctions for any therapist to be able to draw. Many clients come to me who are still sunk in the Mental Ego stage of consciousness, and I am able to help them emerge from that and adopt the Centaur consciousness, which will enable them to understand themselves and their fellow man so much better. It is also interesting that this is an insight which dates only from the nineteenth century. It did not exist before Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. So Buddhism has no way of recognizing it, and lumps the Mental Ego and the Centaur together under the heading of the Gross. I have to say that I lost some of my respect for Buddhism when I realized this. One of the best writers on the Centaur is Will Schutz (1988), and I often recommend his book to the earnest seeker.

I have to say that in my view Wilber hit his peak around the year 2000. After that he was severely limited by his illness, a particularly difficult form of ME. Year after year he has been promising the sequel to the great book *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, and year after year he has failed to produce it. *Integral Spirituality* seems to me not very good – much too complicated, fancy and fussy in its considerable detail.

It is true that he has brought into being the Integral Institute, which produces vast numbers of courses, DVDs, books, exercises and so forth, but personally I do not find all this very interesting. Wilber has produced many short talks on YouTube, which are excellent and well worth tuning into, but it is all rather bitty and ad hoc compared with the great days of his best books.

And he has produced some great books. *The Atman Project* was a brilliant contribution, and so was *No Boundary. Up from Eden* was remarkable and extraordinary, and *Integral Psychology* a master work. *Grace and Grit* is, I think, his most personal and moving book, and of course *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* is a masterpiece. Personally I like *Boomeritis* very much, with its brash, cheeky approach to Spiral Dynamics, but I fear its excitement has already faded. Wilber did probably publish too many books, not always of the highest quality, but his best work has to be hailed as superb.

I value Ken Wilber as a very helpful writer for the jobbing therapist, and I am not very interested in his wordy battles with Jorge Ferrer and others. As an academic he may or may not be of the finest, but as a guide for the therapist I find him superb. His basic map seems to be very easily understood, and very useful, particularly in distinguishing between the Mental Ego and the Centaur.

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Wilber and me – or is it I, it or thou? A commentary on Bazzano and Rowan

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These two articles on Wilber by Manu Bazzano and John Rowan hint at the range of topics and the opinions raised by a careful consideration of Wilber's work. As with all innovative thinkers Wilber is worth the struggle of reading in the original without someone's commentary, however helpful. So it is to be hoped that one consequence of these articles is that more readers of *Self & Society* will familiarize themselves with Wilber's writings first hand.

Indeed, John Rowan invites us to apply Wilber's thinking to our selves and to our clients with clarity and insight. Manu Bazzano takes Wilber to task on a more theoretical and philosophical basis and seeks, finds and challenges some of the more conservative aspects of US culture writ large in Wilber's writings.

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