

to do in our teenage years. The problem becomes when we try and impose any model on the territory.

Wilber has been called the ‘Einstein of the transpersonal’ world, which is a huge claim. I certainly am of the opinion that, like Freud and therapy, anyone seriously thinking about the transpersonal and spirituality in general should consider him and his work. I would not, however, place myself in Wilber’s ‘camp’. I do have several friends, some therapists, some not, who are very keen on him and his theories. But for me I am not sure that I am in anybody’s camp any more!

I do, however, have a lot of time for him, and feel that he deserves to be read and taken seriously by those of a spiritual/transpersonal bent (and others). I am therefore more pro than anti. So I guess that I come to praise Wilber, not to bury him!

Like Freud, Wilber is sometimes ignored or misunderstood and naively criticized; and just as therapy cannot and probably should be explored without considering Freud, so transpersonal and spiritual therapy should not be explored without considering Wilber (and more besides).

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Wash your plate: rejoinder

Manu Bazzano

In the heyday of Greek thought the term ‘symposium’ marked a convivial event, a rousing drinking party spiced up by weighty philosophical discussion and held together by friendship. A Greek-style philosophical symposium even engendered friendship, which was considered by Epicurus the highest value. I know this is an incurably starry-eyed picture, yet I am certain one thing did take place in ancient Greece. Participants would come out transformed, their assumptions altered, their mutual respect enhanced.

Leaving aside the lack of wine and face-to-face encounter in a virtual exchange of ideas, I found this particular symposium, so generously promoted by editors David

Kalisch and Richard House, a disappointment. I had hoped to be challenged by West and Rowan, and to come out of this conversation with a slightly different view on Wilber. Sadly, I must confess to be thoroughly unconvinced and unimpressed by their arguments. I wouldn't be surprised if they felt equally unaffected by my views. West did not deign to mention, let alone discuss or challenge, any of the numerous points I raised, choosing to refer instead to John Heron's well-rehearsed six-point critique of Wilber, which apparently 'echoes a number of points' made in my piece. He does not say *which* of Heron's six points echo mine. I am happy to fill him in on this: *none*. And here is why:

- 1) I do not accept the notion of an 'inner spiritual path', let alone notions of 'descent' or 'ascent'.
- 2) I understand sitting meditation as a *communal* event. It is done with others, and if alone, *for* others. It is the double-entry book-keeping mentality of self-improvement that turned it into a solitary technique; also, it is not a means to anything. If it is, it is not meditation.
- 3) See point 1.
- 4) I do not recognize the existence of 'higher' or 'lower' beings, nor of any vertical or arboreal metaphor which speaks of peaks and depths, of up and down and bypasses the horizontal *infinity* of being-in-the-world.
- 5) I do not accept the existence of 'differing versions of our selves' except for didactic purposes. I see them in contradiction with the unity of the organism.
- 6) This point is potentially interesting; unfortunately, West does not say more than the generic 'Heron does not regard the end-point of our development as returning to the one from which we are created'.

A valid if muted point West makes is that my piece deals with theory. Similarly, Rowan casts doubts on the academic diatribes Wilber got engulfed in and praises instead the usefulness of his work. 'Theory' *can* be abstruse and removed from experience. It can also be practised in such a way that it helps us think, and think through. A lack of healthy, basic philosophical skills can have disastrous consequences. Our collective inability to think critically means we are now buying into the philistine pragmatism in vogue and into the neo-liberal ideology that says we have reached the end of ideology.

I do not separate theory from experience, heart from thought, deed from contemplation. But I am a little touchy about bad theory, particularly when it is hailed as original. Elsewhere I have written about religion as bad poetry; similarly, I see Wilber's spirituality as bad theory.

Notions of *ascent* and of 'spiritual development' are misleading; they are also in bad taste. Saying, as Rowan does, that one has experienced a breakthrough, or reached this or that level of spiritual accomplishment, is known in ancient Zen lore as *walking around with dog shit on the tip of one's nose*. The sensible thing is to wipe it off, not parade it.

'What is enlightenment?', Joshu was famously asked. He replied: 'Have you had your lunch?' 'Yes.' 'Now wash your plate.' Two meanings: pay attention to the everyday, don't look after 'enlightenment'. But also: now that you have

experienced a breakthrough, wash it off, forget it, don't brag about it. It is said that Zen begins *after* the 'spiritual breakthrough'. One could see it as the next stage of development: the Nondual and what have you. I see it as becoming what one is already.

Bluntly put: to become a Buddha is to realize one's human animality, one's inescapable mortality, one's instinctual, refined ability to play, and to play-with-others. Nothing to do with going up the ladder of a human-centred 'spiritual evolution'.

Although I fail to see the validity of Wilber's map, I respect those – some of them colleagues and friends – who find it useful.

Critique of Manu Bazzano: a rejoinder

John Rowan

I have to say that I do not like the tone in Manu Bazzano's article at all. It all comes across as rather cheap and sneery. But here are some specific objections.

(1) 'There is no soul' in Wilber's work. On the contrary, the soul is the main character in the Subtle level, as described by Wilber in many of his books. The Subtle level of consciousness is the home of all the main spiritual experiences – gods, goddesses, dakinis, archetypes, angels, nature spirits, mystical experiences, dreams and so forth. And the leading character of this level is the soul. The soul can be given many names, such as Higher Self, Antaratman, daimon, anima and so forth, but it is the hero(ine) of this level, according to Wilber. Dreams belong to this realm, and Wilber exhibits a deep respect for it.

(2) Bazzano shows a complete misunderstanding of the tetralemma, which refers to the main teaching of the Madkhyamika school of Buddhism, and is designed to smash every last little bit of ordinary consciousness, resulting in a complete emptiness and loss of everything. One of the most testing experiences of my life was when I was put through this by a sage. Bazzano shows little respect for this great insight.

(3) 'Current Hegelian scholarship' refers to Catherine Malabou and her excellent insights, which also chime in with the recent and very vigorous work of Slavoj Žižek, who is one of my heroes. This recent work concentrates on the dialectic, rather than on the great historical structures, and in my view is much more interesting. I have corresponded at length with Ken Wilber about Hegel, and he too finds him deeply interesting.

Right at the end of Bazzano's piece, he makes two points which I would like to dispute. One is the statement that the object of meditation is not the achievement of some higher state. As I read Buddhism, the object of all the efforts of reading, engagement, meditation and so forth is to reach Nibbana. Bazzano is highly unorthodox in rejecting this. Nibbana was often referred to by the Buddha, and his followers seemed to understand this pretty well. To reject this is to reject too much.