

Ken Wilber's Integral Vision:

Supportive Evidence from Clinical Consciousness Research.

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In a series of books published over a period of two decades, Ken Wilber formulated a comprehensive and encompassing vision of reality that integrates in a very creative and imaginative fashion data from a broad spectrum of disciplines. These range from cosmology, quantum-relativistic physics, biology, and systems theory through psychology, anthropology, linguistics, and sociology to comparative religion, mythology, and philosophy. In this impressive *tour de force*, he achieved what most mainstream scientists consider impossible and absurd. He demonstrated that - properly understood - modern science and religion are not incompatible, but represent two complementary approaches to existence.

Although Ken's ambitious vision encompasses the totality of existence, as suggested by the title of one of his books, **A Brief History of Everything** (Wilber 1996), it has a central core. It is the theory of the Great Chain of Being - the understanding of existence as a holoarchival system of levels or stages of the evolution of Spirit. An integral part of this theory is the idea that all the levels of existence are manifestations of consciousness and are experientially available to the individual human psyche. Ken's writings thus show a significant overlap with the areas of my own lifelong interest, which is research of non-ordinary states of consciousness and transpersonal psychology.

My interest in non-ordinary states began rather abruptly in 1956 when, as a beginning psychiatrist, I participated in a psychedelic research project and had a very powerful LSD experience (Grof and Grof 1990). In the last forty years, exploration of non-ordinary states, particularly their significant subgroup which I call 'holotropic,' has been the primary focus of my professional work. Examples of holotropic states are experiences induced by shamanic procedures and aboriginal mind-altering techniques, by systematic spiritual practice, psychedelic substances, and powerful forms of experiential psychotherapy. Holotropic experiences also occur spontaneously in people undergoing psychospiritual crises ('spiritual emergencies').

I have been deeply interested in all forms of holotropic states of consciousness and have had important personal experiences in many of them. However, most of my professional work has been in the areas of psychedelic therapy, holotropic breathwork,

and 'spiritual emergency' (Grof 1980 and 1988, Grof and Grof 1990). In psychedelic therapy, the non-ordinary states of consciousness are induced by chemical means, in 'spiritual emergencies' they develop spontaneously for unknown reasons in the middle of everyday life, and in holotropic breathwork they are facilitated by a combination of faster breathing, evocative music, and a specific form of focused body work. In spite of the differences in the circumstances that trigger them, all these states share important common characteristics and have the same theoretical and practical implications.

Over the years, my theoretical interests and choice of literature have been guided by my clinical observations and my personal experiences of holotropic states. My primary concern has been to find a conceptual framework for a broad range of phenomena that seriously challenge current psychiatric theories and the monistic materialistic world view of Western science. Ken Wilber approaches the same territory with a very different background and from a different angle. He draws on his encyclopedic knowledge of literature from a variety of disciplines and on experiences from his own spiritual practice. His ultimate ambition is to formulate a new integrated vision of reality that would incorporate the best of hard sciences, psychology, religion, and philosophy.

Since an important criterion of a good theory is its compatibility with the facts of observation, the clinical material I have amassed in the course of the last four decades could serve as an interesting testing ground for Ken's conceptual framework. On the one hand, it could provide independent supportive evidence for his ideas and, on the other hand, it might point to the areas where his theoretical concepts need to be refined or modified. In turn, the world view Ken has formulated certainly has the potential for providing a plausible philosophical context for my own findings.

Since our first meeting many years ago at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, Ken and I have occasionally exchanged information in correspondence and personal conversations. These exchanges contained a healthy balance of mutual compliments and constructive criticism. We have also addressed each other's ideas in writing (Grof 1985, Wilber 1994, Rothberg and Kelly 1998). In the published material, we have focused almost exclusively on the areas in which our perspectives on certain issues differ from each other or seem to be in conflict.

Both Ken and I feel that this fact created a distorted impression of the relationship between our respective theories. It put great emphasis on the differences and obscured the

far-reaching correspondences that exist between the ways both of us see reality, consciousness, and the human psyche. The extensive areas of our agreement are particularly significant in view of the fact that the vision we share represents a radical alternative to the views held by mainstream science. I would, therefore, like to use the opportunity presented by the publication of Ken's collected writings to correct this impression and briefly outline the areas in which we have arrived at strikingly similar conclusions.

The first of these points of agreement is the recognition that it is in principle impossible to understand the nature of reality, if our quest remains limited to the information acquired by the 'eye of flesh,' which is to say by our physical senses and their extensions, such as the microscope or telescope. Even if we also fully engage the 'eye of reason' and subject the sensory data to sophisticated intellectual analysis, we will be missing a significant part of the cosmic story. A comprehensive approach to the mystery of existence demands that we include information that is available only to the 'eye of contemplation.' Only such an approach can provide the missing information about areas of existence that are transphenomenal - that is not accessible to our senses in the ordinary or 'hylotropic' state of consciousness.

In my work, the evidence for the existence of these ordinarily hidden dimensions of reality comes from systematic study of a category of experiences that I call *transpersonal*. Some transpersonal experiences are related to elements that we know from our everyday life, but they show them in a radically new perspective. In holotropic states, we can see the material reality around us as manifestation of creative divine energy and directly perceive the unity underlying the world of separate phenomena. This experience that reveals the sacred or numinous dimension of everyday reality can be referred to as 'experience of the immanent divine.'

I have also witnessed on countless occasions that transpersonal experiences can provide accurate new information about various elements of the material world, such as other people, animals, plants, and even inorganic materials and processes. In holotropic states, we can even transcend the barrier of linear time and obtain information from other historical periods in the form of ancestral, racial, collective, phylogenetic, and past life experiences. This information is acquired without the mediation of sensory organs, simply by direct apprehension in the course of experiential identification with various aspects of space-time.

Transpersonal experiences that can be called ‘experiences of the transcendental divine’ do not provide a different perspective on material reality or a new way of acquiring information about it, but reveal domains of existence about which we do not have in our ordinary state of consciousness any experiential evidence. It is thus not surprising that the pragmatic and materialistically oriented industrial societies deny their existence. I have seen repeatedly that transpersonal experiences can provide accurate information about archetypal domains and figures from various mythologies that are not intellectually known to the experiencer. This strongly suggests that the realms revealed by these experiences are ontologically real and provides empirical support for C. G. Jung’s idea of the collective unconscious.

The above observations from the research of holotropic states have important implications for understanding the nature of consciousness, its relationship to the human psyche, and its role in the universal scheme of things. This is another area in which Ken and I have mutual agreement. Unfortunately, because of spatial considerations, I have not been able to include personal accounts and case histories that would make the discussion of transphenomenal dimensions of reality more convincing. In this regard, I have to refer the interested readers to my earlier publications (Grof 1975, 1985, 1988, 1998).

In contrast with the monistic materialistic world view that sees consciousness as an epiphenomenon of matter, a product of the neurophysiological processes in the brain, my research suggests unequivocally that consciousness is a primary and further irreducible attribute of existence and is involved in all the levels of the Great Chain of Being or is able to convincingly portray them. This is also a fundamental metaphysical assumption of Ken’s model.

The area where our theories show the most specific correspondence is Ken’s description of the levels of spiritual evolution that follow the full integration of the body and mind or, in his terminology, the post-centauric levels of consciousness evolution (Wilber 1980). My own classification of transpersonal experiences is strictly phenomenological and not hierarchical; it does not specify the levels of consciousness on which they occur (see table on pages 00-00). However, it is not difficult to arrange the experiences in my transpersonal cartography in such a way that they closely parallel Ken’s evolutionary scheme.

Constructing his map of psychospiritual development, Ken used exclusively material from ancient spiritual literature, primarily from Vedanta Hinduism and Theravada Buddhism. My own data are drawn from clinical observations in contemporary populations in a number of European countries, North and South America, and Australia, complemented by some limited experience with Japanese and East Indian groups.

My work thus provides empirical evidence for the existence of most of the experiences included in Ken's developmental scheme. It also shows that the descriptions in ancient spiritual sources are still to a great extent relevant for modern humanity. However, as we will see, our two systems are not exactly identical, and incorporating my material into Ken's scheme would require certain additions, modifications, and adjustments.

Ken's scheme of the post-centauric spiritual domain includes the lower and higher subtle level, lower and higher causal level, and the Ultimate or Absolute. According to Ken, the *low subtle*, or *astral-psychic, level of consciousness* is characterized by a degree of differentiation of consciousness from the mind and body which goes beyond that achieved on the level of the centaur. Consciousness is thus able to transcend the normal capacities of bodymind and operate in ways that appear impossible and fantastic to the ordinary mind.

The astral level, in Ken's own words, "includes, basically, out-of-body experiences, certain occult knowledge, the auras, true magic, 'astral travel,' and so on." Ken's description of the psychic level includes various 'psi' phenomena: ESP, precognition, clairvoyance, psychokinesis, and others. He also refers in this connection to Patanjali's Sutras that include on the subtle level all the paranormal powers, mind-over-matter phenomena, or *siddhis*.

In the *higher subtle realm*, consciousness differentiates itself completely from the ordinary mind and becomes what can be called the 'overself' or 'overmind.' Ken places in this region high religious intuition and inspiration, visions of divine light, audible illuminations, and higher presences - spiritual guides, angelic beings, ishtadevas, Dhyani-Buddhas, and God's archetypes, which he sees as high archetypal forms of our own being.

Like the subtle level, the causal level can be subdivided into lower and higher. Ken suggests that the *lower causal realm* is manifested in a state of consciousness known as

savikalpa samadhi, the experience of final God, the ground, essence, and source of all the archetypal and lesser-god manifestations encountered in the subtle realms. The *higher causal realm* then involves a "total and utter transcendence and release into Formless Consciousness, Boundless Radiance." Ken refers in this context to the *nirvikalpa samadhi* of Hinduism, *nirodh* of Hinayana Buddhism, and to the eighth of the ten ox-herding pictures of Zen Buddhism.

On Ken's last level, that of the *Absolute*, Consciousness awakens as its Original Condition and Suchness (*tathagata*), which is, at the same time, all that is, gross, subtle, or causal. The distinction between the witness and the witnessed disappears and the entire World Process then arises, moment to moment as one's own Being, outside of which and prior to which nothing exists.

As I mentioned earlier, my own experiences and observations bring supportive evidence for many of the experiential states included in Ken's ontological and cosmological scheme. In a hierarchical classification based on my own data, I would include in the *low subtle* or *astral-psychic level* experiences that involve elements of the material world, but provide information about them in a way that is radically different from our everyday perception. Here belong, above all, experiences that are traditionally studied by parapsychologists (and some of them also by thanatologists and therapists), such as out-of-body experiences, astral travel, ESP phenomena, precognition, and clairvoyance.

I would also add to this list experiences of phenomena that are closely connected to material reality, but reveal aspects or dimensions that are not accessible to ordinary consciousness - the subtle or energy body, its conduits (*nadis* or *meridians*), and fields (*auras*). The concept of crosspoints, bridges between the visible and invisible reality, found in Tantric literature seems to be particularly relevant in this context (Mookerjee and Khanna 1977).

I would include on the low subtle level also some important transpersonal experiences included in my map but not mentioned by Ken. Here belong experiential identification with various aspects of space-time - other people, animals, plants, and organic materials and processes, as well as ancestral, racial, collective, phylogenetic, and karmic experiences. I have shown in my previous publications that all these experiences mediated by extrasensory channels provide access to accurate new information about the phenomena involved (Grof 1975, 1980, 1985, 1988, 1998).

I would also add here from my own classification also a category of experiences that I call *psychoid*, using the term coined by Hans Driesch and adopted by C. G. Jung. This group includes situations, in which intrapsychic experiences are associated with corresponding changes in the external world (or better in consensus reality). Psychoid experiences cover a wide range from synchronicities and ceremonial magic to psychokinesis and other mind-over-matter phenomena, or *siddhis* (Grof 1988) that Patanjali assigns to the subtle level of consciousness.

The categories of my map of transpersonal experiences that could be assigned to the *high subtle level* include visions of divine light, encounters with various blissful and wrathful archetypal deities, communication with spirit guides and superhuman entities, contact with shamanic power animals, direct apprehension of universal symbols, and episodes of religious and creative inspiration (the ‘Promethean epiphany’). The visions of archetypal beings or experiential identification with them can portray them in their universal form (e.g. the Great Mother Goddess) or in the form of their specific cultural manifestations (e.g. Virgin Mary, Isis, Cybele, Parvati, etc.).

Over the years, I have had the privilege to be in sessions of many people whose psychedelic or holotropic experiences had the characteristics of those that are assigned in Ken's scheme to the lower and higher causal realms and possibly even those of the Absolute. I have also had personal experiences that I believe qualify for these categories. In my classification these episodes are described under such titles as experiences of the Demiurg, of Cosmic Consciousness, Absolute Consciousness, or Supracosmic and Metacosmic Void.

While I am writing this, I am also fully aware of the fact that having the experience of these levels does not necessarily mean moving permanently to higher levels of consciousness evolution. The problem of the critical factors that determine when transient experiences of higher states of consciousness lead to lasting changes in evolutionary structures of consciousness is an issue of great theoretical and practical importance. Ken and I have touched upon it in our past discussions and I hope we will explore it further at another place and time

The last major point of correspondence between my own work and Ken's conceptual system I would like to mention concerns the phenomena of involution and

evolution of consciousness, Descent and Ascent, or Efflux and Reflux, that he has extensively explored in his writings (Wilber 1980, 1995). This very subject is the focus of my last book, **The Cosmic Game**. As I have illustrated with many personal accounts, the overall vision of existence as an interplay of these two major movements of consciousness, as well as the specific elements and mechanisms involved, are clearly based on direct experiences that are under certain circumstances available to all of us.

In the light of the above observations, I have no doubt that the phenomena that Ken includes in his holarchic scheme are not only experientially, but also ontologically real and are not products of metaphysical speculation or pathological processes in the brain. The general concept of the Great Chain of Being, according to which reality includes an entire hierarchy (or holarchy) of dimensions that are ordinarily hidden to our perception, is very important and well founded. It would be erroneous to dismiss this understanding of reality as a product of arbitrary metaphysical speculation, primitive superstition, or a manifestation of mental disease, as has so frequently been done.

Anybody attempting to do that would have to offer a plausible explanation why the experiences that systematically support this elaborate and comprehensive vision of reality have in the past occurred so consistently to people of various races, cultures, and historical periods. He or she would also have to account for the fact that these experiences continue to emerge in modern populations under such diverse circumstances as sessions with various psychedelic substances, during experiential psychotherapy, in meditation of people involved in systematic spiritual practice, in near-death experiences, and in the course of spontaneous episodes of psychospiritual crisis.

I hope that the above discussion of the far-reaching correspondences between the observations and experiences from my clinical consciousness research and Ken Wilber's integral vision of reality will help to create a more balanced and realistic impression of the relationship between our respective theories than our published exchanges in the past. I am looking forward to a future opportunity for reconciling our differences, as well as refining our understanding of the areas where our ideas already converge.

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As I have tried to show in another context, anybody trying to defend in this respect the monistic-materialistic position of Western science, would also have to account for the fact that these experiences continue to emerge in highly intelligent, sophisticated, and otherwise mentally healthy people of our era (Grof 1998). This happens not only under the influence of psychedelics, but also under such diverse circumstances as sessions

of experiential psychotherapy, in meditation of people involved in systematic spiritual practice, in near-death experiences, and in the course of spontaneous episodes of psychospiritual crisis.