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Transcending this Poor Earth - á la Ken Wilber

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"Nietzsche could deny any form of transcendence, whether moral or divine, by saying that transcendence drove one to slander this world and this life. But perhaps there is a living transcendence of which beauty carries the promise, which can make this mortal and limited world preferable and more appealing than any other." (Camus)

Introduction

You know how it is with influential writers not yet read by yourself. Their opinions keep popping up, alluded to by others who agree or disagree. Then one day a friend says, "You're interested in X? I have a book of theirs and I'll lend it to you." The book obtained, we at last meet the author mind to mind, encountering directly his or her thoughts unvarnished and untarnished by boosters or detractors.

Just so, favourable and unfavourable references to Ken Wilber's transpersonal psychology/philosophy have flickered across my peripheral vision from time to time, the most scholarly by Gus diZerega[1] on the negative side and by Michael E. Zimmerman[2] on the affirmative side. Therefore, with anticipation, I gazed at a borrowed copy of . *Brief History of Everything* [3] whose cover features an immodestly large close-up of the author**;** clean shaven right over the top of his pate, bespectacled dark eyes, and a straight-across mouth with just the smidgen of a smile at the corners that gives the *tout ensemble* a wise-guy look, possibly unintended.

Studying this first edition of his popular book I noticed a faith in historical determinism, faith in a progressive path onward and upward already marked out by ancient mystics, doubtless appealing to ageing boomers in the troubled world they have helped to create. The philosophy of perennial progress comforts both the well-to-do and the poor, for it justifies the status quo as a necessary transitional stage toward the better tomorrow. But this happy message is delivered, surprisingly, in sometimes tones of defensive belligerence not easily reconciled with Wilber's objective of showing, by personal example, the means of attaining higher levels of consciousness. Further, deep ecologists, ecofeminists, and other such are lumped in the category "retro-Romantics" and identified as unwitting foes of human advancement. In the second edition of his book (published in 2000), Wilber's tone is less acerbic though his message is unchanged. The chief accusation against his thinking opponents is their fascination with this world and their shallowness in paying little attention to the obligatory six or seven transformations of the inner self *en route* to the World Soul.

But these and other egoic inconsistencies in the text proved trivial compared to a fundamental flaw that emerges in the first few chapters. Wilber's entire philosophical system is precariously balanced on the "holon" idea, uncritically adopted from Arthur

Koestler who blurred the usefulness of his neologism by including within it all sorts of dissimilar categories.

The aim of this article is to unscramble Koestler's holon-concept which, once clarified, makes nonsense of much of Wilber's neo-Platonic scheme. The source of the holon concept can be traced to the organism and its anatomical structure, and at the end of the article I argue that a logical extrapolation from the organism-as-holon points to Nature/Earth as elevated far above the insignificant status ascribed to it by Wilber, focusing human awareness on the primacy of its home. The remarks that follow pertain only to . *Brief History of Everything* —Wilber's most influential book and, therefore, the one most in need of critical examination. Note that the hierarchical model of reality championed by Wilber is not the only possible one. Other epistemologies ("mindscapes") exist as pointed out by Caley & Sawada[4] following Maruyama. The "generative" or relational web-like model of reality often figured by ecologists is one valid alternative not discussed, though briefly and pejoratively mentioned.

Koestler'S Holons and General Systems Theory

Koestler first used the term "holon" in 1967 in his book, *The Ghost in the Machine*. In the following year he organized the Alpback Symposium (titled, *Beyond Reductionism-New Perspectives in the Life Sciences*) where he presented a paper, "Beyond Atomism and Holism—the Concept of the Holon." As reported in the book *Janus* [5] his presentation began as follows: "This is going to be an exercise in general systems theory—which seems to be all the more appropriate as Ludwig von Bertalanffy, its founding father, sits next to me. It seems equally appropriate that I should take as my text a sentence from Ludgwig's *Problems of Life;* it reads: 'Hierarchical organization on the one hand, and the characteristics of open systems on the other, are fundamental principles of living nature.'"

In the foregoing quote, the terms "open systems" and "living nature" indicate that General Systems theorising initially took its cue from physical/organismic phenomena. "Open systems" are those that, contrary to closed systems and the Second Law of Thermodynamics, do not "run down" (increase in entropy) because their openness allows outside energy to enter and keep them going. The physicist Schrodinger[6] called them "negentropic." Examples are tornadoes, whirlpools, and organisms. Further, the term "living nature" refers to organisms, to Earth's biota. Thus the structures of organisms provided the pattern or paradigm for general systems theory.

In explanation of general systems theory and as a criticism of reductionism in science, von Bertalanffy wrote: "Reality, in the modern conception, appears as a tremendous hierarchical order of organized entities leading in a superposition of many levels, from physical and chemical to biological and sociological systems. Unity of Science is granted, not by a utopian reduction of all sciences to physics and chemistry, but by the structural uniformities of the different levels of reality."[7] The second sentence makes good sense, but the first—in its reference to "sociological systems"—warrants a warning flag. Sociological systems—such as family, tribe, or nation—are strictly people-based. They are population categories, taxonomic groupings of similar things, different in empirical content from organismic systems such as a plant or an animal composed of organs, tissues, cells, and organelles.

Koestler substituted a "holarchy of holons" for von Bertalanffy's "hierarchical order of organized entities." A holarchy is a hierarchy of holons, and a holon, he said, is Janus-faced; it is a whole to its parts below, and it is a part to the whole above. Reality consists of relational holons, not separate "things." The concept, a good one, dissolves the antagonism in science between reductionism and holism, for reduction is a way of understanding that moves downward in holarchies while holism is the upward view. Koestler acknowledged that similar ideas, called "levels of organization" or "levels of integration," had been proposed much earlier by J.H. Woodger[8] who drew on the

organismic philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. Several later contributors were also named, though not the philosopher Feibleman (1954), who also preceded Koestler in examining the "laws of the levels."

Koestler used the biological model of an organism to illustrate the holarchy concept. His schematic representation took the form of a pyramid or inverted tree, the broad base comprising many sub-atomic particles, merged at the next higher level into fewer atoms, these into fewer molecules, these into organelles, cells, tissues, organs, organ systems, and at the top of the holarchy, the organism. Each level or holon is a whole to the parts below, and a part of the whole above. For example, an organ such as the heart is both a whole to the lower-level cellular tissue of which it is composed, and a performing part of the higher-level organism. This simple biological "tree diagram"—a useful abstraction of the organism's anatomy composed of parts within parts within parts—was then imprudently extrapolated to include psychological and social/cultural phenomena.

In Koestler's words: "All complex structures and processes of a relatively stable character display hierarchic organization, regardless whether we consider galactic systems, living organisms and their activities, or social organization . . . The tree diagram with its series of levels can be used to represent the evolutionary branching of species into the 'tree of life'; or the stepwise differentiation of tissues and integration of functions in the development of the embryo." He continued, "Anatomists use the tree diagram to demonstrate the locomotor hierarchy of limbs, joints, individual muscles, and so down to fibres, fibrils and filaments of contractile proteins. Ethologists use it to illustrate the various sub-routines and action patterns involved in such complex instinctive activities as a bird building a nest; but it is also an indispensable tool to the new school of psycholinguistics started by Chomsky." In summary, "Thus organelles and homologous organs are evolutionary holons; morphogenetic fields are ontogenetic holons; the ethologist's 'fixed action-patterns' and the subroutines of acquired skills are behavioural holons; phonemes, morphemes, words, phrases are linguistic holons; individual, families, tribes, nations are social holons."[9] Evidence that all these phenomena fall into similar, parallel, or logical holarchies is lacking.

Logical Pitfalls in "All Reality is Holarchic"

Problems arise when the reasonable holarchy of the organism—the "tree diagram"—is accepted as the template for organic development and evolution, for animal locomotion and behaviour, for linguistics, and for human societies past and present. By ascribing hierarchic organization to "all complex structures and processes of a relatively stable character," the whole of reality as humans know it is assumed to be patterned on the structure of the organism. This is misleading. The anatomical structures of organisms may provide a useful **analogy** for thinking about other systems and their structures, but organisms are not **homologous** with all conceivable systems. Significant differences in content and structure exist between organisms and such other systems as languages, philosophies, cultures, customs, economies, agricultures, climates, and so forth.

For example, holarchies that line up the developmental stages of organisms in **time** sequences do not express the same rules as organism-based holarchies which by their organelles, cells, tissues, and organs show the **spatial** "boxes within boxes" arrangement. Thus human ontogeny from fertilized egg to adult does not parallel the holarchic anatomy of the adult body with its many feed-back mechanisms. The foetus is not first organelles, then cells, then organs, then a baby. Neither are evolutionary holarchies homologous with the structures of organism systems. Koestler accepted these quite different holarchies as congruent, referring without discrimination to the hierarchical organization of **structures** (spatial objects) and of **processes** (temporal events). To accept such things as mind/brain evolution, or the successive stages of cultural development over the last 50,000 years, as parallel to the anatomy of organisms, deprives the terms "holon" and "holarchy" of useful meaning. Further, it posits a fictitious and misleading knowledge of the mental and

cultural evolution of *Homo sapiens sapiens*.

Koestler's grab-bag of holons and holarchies was apparently accepted by Wilber who wrote**:** "All things and processes, symbols, images and concepts are holons. It's holons all the way down and all the way up."[10] This illogic promotes at least two dangers:

1. If all complex structures and processes of a relatively stable character display hierarchic organization, regardless of the nature and level of abstractedness of the structures and processes, then the temptation is offered to link non-homologous holarchies and to treat them as close relatives or as extensions of one another.
2. The rules that fit one kind of holarchy may uncritically be accepted as legitimate for all holarchies.

As to the first, consider Koestler's statement: "The single individual constitutes the apex of the organismic hierarchy, and at the same time the lowest unit of the social hierarchy." (*idem* p.303). The statement, though true, does not warrant linking the two categorically different hierarchies. They are not, to use the jargon, "isomorphic," not parallel in form/structure. The holons of the social holarchy, in ascending order, are larger and larger aggregations of one thing: the individual-grouped in family, clan, tribe, nation/state, and entire human species. In contrast the organismic holarchy in ascending holon order—atom, molecule, organelle, cell, tissue, organ, organ-system, and organism—is one of actual, three-dimensional, volumetric containment, like nested Russian dolls or Chinese boxes. Thus the organism is inappropriate as a pattern of social groups. Also, it is ideologically dangerous in supposing a parallel between cells and people, for the argument can be made that as cells are subservient to the organism so people must be subservient to the state.

Wilber skirts this problem by defining his social holarchy not as an *extension* of the individual or organism holarchy but as a different *dimension* closely related to it. This allows him to skip the foundational units of human societies, namely people, and derive his first "societies with division of labour" from "heterotrophic ecosystems" that in turn are derived (by transcending and including) from "Gaia," derived from "planets," derived from "galaxies." Obviously a number of different categories are here jumbled together, and the precise nature of what he means by "social" holons is unclear. What is certain, however, is that the patterning of the social holarchy and all others is based on Koestler's organic tree diagram.

Here note a topic returned to later. The logical projection of the hierarchy of volumetric containment, above and beyond the human organism, is neither larger aggregations of people, whether as family, tribe, nation/state, nor as "societies with division of labour," but rather the "box" of Earth-space that envelops it and of which it, as one organism among many, is a part**;** viz. the local geographic "heterotrophic ecosystem," to use Wilber's term. Above local ecosystems stand those of wider and wider inclusiveness, up to the final one: the enveloping Earth or ecosphere,[11] a thesis explained in the end section of this article.

The second danger is that the rules governing one kind of holarchy, such as the organism, will be extrapolated to all holarchies. With the organism in mind, Koestler rightly noted that within any holarchy, in an upward direction, the holons function as dependent parts of the larger whole enveloping them, while downward the holons function as autonomous wholes in their own right. By "autonomous" he meant that organelles, cells, organs, etc., all have their own intrinsic rhythms, their characteristic patterns of activity. This he called their *self-assertive tendency*. The opposite aspect of each holon is its *integrative tendency* to function as an integral part of the whole. The stability of any holarchy depends on an equilibrium between these opposing tendencies of its holons. In the human holon, for example, cancer is the self-assertive tendency of cells and tissues wildly out of balance

with their integrative tendency which, when in balance, serves higher-level organs in the organism. Further, he proposed that each holon-level has its intrinsic developmental **rules** (such as the genetic code in the organelle) but the **strategy** by which the rules are expressed is flexible, depending on the "environment" provided by the next higher holon (such as the cell environment of the organelle). The higher the level of the holon (i.e. the greater its "depth") the greater the flexibility of its strategy; hence the "free will" of the human holon exceeds that of its organs, cells, molecules, etc. All this is reasonable for organismic hierarchies, but the extrapolation by Koestler (and, following him, by Wilber) to social, linguistic, behavioural, and culture/evolution holarchies makes little sense.

Other authors, who also "prefer to generalize the meaning of holon to include entities of any type," have argued that all hierarchies (holarchies) are congruent because their common denominator is **information**.[12] According to this reasoning, the organic holarchy; containing cells, tissues, and organs; is isomorphic with the linguistic holarchy that links words, phrases, and ideas because both are trading information up and down the scale; i.e. electrochemical signals and language signals are doing the same thing. By this over-simplification, most means of comparing and contrasting different holarchies and of testing whether their holon sequences obey the same rules, are lost. One exception is the "feedback" test (further discussed as Feibleman's 11th "law" in the next section). In the organism the different levels (organ, tissue, cell, etc.) are in contact, and information (as positive and negative feedback) flows both up and down the holarchy to maintain its integrity. But in developmental and evolutionary holarchies, time's arrow prevents information feedback. While the organism can affect the cell at any one time, the adult organism cannot affect the embryo from which it developed. The oak cannot affect the acorn that mothered it nor, by parallel reasoning, can the agricultural economy affect the foraging economy that preceded it.

The fallacy of mixing different categories, and treating them as isomorphic, traps many otherwise-clever minds. For example, Maturana and Varela[13] discussed organisms, ecosystems, and societies as "multicellular living systems." They did not recognize the fundamental difference between societies, as populations of species, and organisms which, like geographic ecosystems, are volumetric things. Not surprisingly the only commonality they found between the three was "operational closure." Nevertheless, using the autonomy of components as a guide, they arranged from low to high the confused sequence**:** organisms, animal societies, ecosystems, and human societies. Following the same line of thought, Capra[14] also placed human societies at the highest level because, he said, *they exist for their components* (individual persons), unlike the components of an organism that exist solely for the organism's functioning. Thus, according to him, there are good social systems that exist for their components, and bad social systems patterned on the organism which is a fascist model for the fascist state. Part of the problem here is the concept of "ecosystem" held by Maturana, Varela, and Capra. To them it is a hazy equivalent of the multi-species community, just another kind of society that conceptually provides no assistance in sorting out "multicellular living systems." When "ecosystem" is understood in its geographic sense as a volumetric sector of Earth, which includes the organisms that it envelops and supports,[15] its status rises above that of human societies.

The fact is that no one "general systems theory" exists today; there are just too many different kinds of systems. Perhaps von Bertalanffy is to blame for the ease with which many, including Wilber, have made the illogical leap from organism systems to the unlike sociological systems and from them to culture, to mind, and on to the higher levels of consciousness-expansion. In his definition of general systems theory, as given above, von Bertalanffy superimposed sociological systems on biological systems, and, following that lead, Koestler added everything else. The Nobel Laureate, Peter B. Medawar, strongly criticized Koestler for building an illogical hierarchy of holons from non-homogeneous elements.[16] Shaky logic of this kind, he said, can be mischievous. Medawar's apprehension is justified by the uses to which Koestler's concepts have been put by Wilber, for the latter's holarchies are evolutionary time-sequences of consciousness, mindfulness, culture, and social structures, all apparently assumed to be

isomorphic with the spatial biological “tree” model.

Before examining Wilber’s system, the thoughts of Feibleman are relevant.[17] They demonstrate that the organism-holon model (Koestler’s “tree diagram”), as an explanatory and prediction-generating device, cannot simply be clapped on dissimilar systems such as the evolving mind, the developing consciousness, and the changing society/culture.

Feibleman’S Laws of the Levels

Feibleman’s article, apparently unknown to Koestler though published 14 years before he defined his “holons,” used the earlier name, “integrative levels” for the same concept. His intent was to establish the “laws of the levels” or what Koestler later called the “rules” of holarchies. Feibleman clearly had the physical/biological in mind as the paradigm of all hierarchies although, like von Bertalanffy and Koestler, he accepted without critical comment the inclusion of social hierarchies and even mental events above the level of the organism. Nevertheless, most of Feibleman’s “laws” are reasonable generalizations appropriate to the biological systems that were their inspiration. I comment on eight of his “laws” and omit the other four (numbers 6, 7, 10, and 12 listed below) either because they are vague or because they overlap the ones discussed, or both.

1. Each level organizes the one below it plus one emergent quality.

Comment: Perhaps this should read “plus emergent qualities.” Examples are the emergent properties of organelles from their molecular composition, and of organs from their tissues. The idea gets hazy when applied to sociological groupings such as family, tribe, ethnic group, societies with division of labour, and nation; or when applied to evolutionary lineages whose “emergent” properties can only be guessed at.

2. Complexity of the levels increases upward.

Comment: The cell is more complex than the organelle, the organ more complex than its tissue and cells, etc. But note that this law does not apply unequivocally to evolutionary series where palaeontology suggests that organic simplification has often proved to be adaptive and as “successful” as complexification.

3. In any organization the higher level depends upon the lower.

Comment: This law is true for the structure and function of organisms, because the organism depends on its organs, the organs depend on their cellular constituents, etc. It is a truism for ontogeny (embryogenesis of animals, metamorphosis in the insect world) where “depends” means “necessarily precedes in time” Transposed to the development of mentality or the evolution of cultures—both significantly conditioned by outside influences—its validity is highly questionable.

4. In any organization the lower level is directed by the higher.

Comment: This law and the one before it might be better expressed by Koestler’s rule that each organic level or holon (organelle, cell, tissue, organ) has a certain autonomy, but at the same time it must function as an integral part of the next higher holon and, in this sense, is directed and constrained by the higher level. The integrative tendency of each holon must overrule its self-assertive tendency if the whole organism is to maintain its health. Such a law is irrelevant to evolutionary sequences. It is dangerous when applied to sociological systems for it can be used, as Medawar foresaw, to justify subjugation of the individual to the totalitarian state.

5. For an organization at any level, its mechanism lies at the level below and its purpose at the level above.

Comment: This is arguably Feibleman's most important insight. Understanding mechanisms, how a thing functions or "works," necessarily requires attention to its anatomy, by dissection. To understand how an organ such as the heart functions, study is directed to the behaviour of its tissues and cells**.** Because the hidden agenda of science is control and management, the descending path of reductionism that discovers mechanisms is the preferred methodology. In the opposite direction, ascending the holarchy, purpose is revealed. Because teleology—the positing of purpose in nature—has a bad name in science, "role" and "niche" are terms used instead of "purpose." The role (purpose) of the heart is revealed in the context of the organism; the niche (purpose) of the animal is revealed in the context of the ecosystem. This important organismic law makes little sense for developmental, evolutionary, sociological, cultural, and mental systems.

8. The higher the level, the smaller its population of instances.

Comment: This fits Koestler's inverted "tree diagram"; viz. more atoms exist than molecules, more molecules than organelles, more organelles than cells, and so on up to the individual organism at the top of the pyramid. The law is a truism for hierarchies that aggregate upwards, as well as for ecological food pyramids where each level depends for its energy (not fully capturable) on the levels below**:** fewer lemmings than grass, fewer foxes than lemmings. Applied to cultural evolution it is a dangerous concept because, for example, it justifies the hegemony of the Western industrial/agricultural system. The fact that the Western cultural system has few variants (small population of instances) which have supplanted and are supplanting other cultures worldwide, does not automatically confer the title "higher" on it unless, like Marx and Wilber, one believes in laws of historical necessity.

9. It is impossible to reduce the higher level to the lower.

Comment: This law denies the reductionist argument: that all phenomena, including their emergent qualities, can in principle be explained by the laws of physics.

11. Events at any given level affect organizations at other levels.

Comment: The law encapsulates the idea of organic self-organization with feedback connections between the different levels (holons), so that the system's total configuration changes with changes at any level. For example, cellular "disease" affects the whole organism; and stress on the organism can affect organ function. As with most of the other laws, this has to be stretched to make it applicable to other-than-organismic holarchies. It cannot apply to evolutionary holarchies.

The other four laws, without comment, are: (6) A disturbance introduced into an organization at any one level reverberates at all the levels it covers. (7) The time required for a change in organization shortens as we ascend the levels. (10) An organization at any level is a distortion of the level below. (12) Whatever is affected as an organization has some effect as an organization..

My intent above is to show that Feibleman's laws, like Koestler's rules, assist the understanding of organismic holarchies that structurally fit the tree diagram, but they are inexact, confusing, meaningless, and potentially mischievous when applied to non-organism holarchies. Laws or rules governing structures and processes of developmental, evolutionary, psychic, and cultural holarchies will not be the same as those appropriate to physical/organismic systems.

The Wilberian System

Wilber's philosophy accepts the congruence of every kind of holarchy. Following is a brief point summary of his system as pieced together from the dialogue in *A Brief History of Everything.*

(1) All reality (physical and mental) is an assemblage of whole/parts or "holons," each composed of lower-level holons and themselves parts of higher-level holons. **All things and processes, symbols, images and concepts are holons** (emphasis added). It's holons all the way down and all the way up, according to Wilber. His particular focus is on human evolutionary holarchies viewed as historical, progressive, and purposeful.

(2) "Spirit" is the underlying reality, seeking to actualize itself in higher and higher forms of consciousness. Evolution is a progressive process whereby more complex holon-levels emerge as manifestations of Spirit. From atoms came molecules, from molecules cells, from cells came organisms, and so on up to the complexity of the human mind/brain and on to the higher, mystical, transpersonal levels of Spirit. These higher levels hint at what collective evolution has in store for humanity's future.

(3) Two spiritual paths are the Ascending (transcendent) seeking the One, and the Descending (immanent) embracing the Many. Non-dual traditions attempt to integrate the One and the Many, and this is the ultimate saving Way. Wilber states: "Those who do not contribute to this union destroy the only Earth they have." Modernism has emphasized the Descending path, the material path, producing today such imperfections as the Gaia religion whose God is "clunking around in our visual field."

(4) Geological and human history demonstrate aspects of the progressive evolution of holons, from the physical to the biological, from simple organisms to the complex, from the conscious animal to the self-conscious human. The "Great Chain of Being" of Plotinus prefigures the dynamic evolutionary sequence that moves upward from matter (the physiosphere) to living organisms (the biosphere) to human consciousness (the noosphere), then on to Soul and finally to pure Spirit (aka God, the All, Emptiness).

(5) Each emergent holon transcends but includes its predecessors, and evolution is a process of transcend and include. Thus, to transcend all is to embrace all. The biosphere transcends and includes the physiosphere; the noosphere transcends and includes the biosphere; and so on up. Thus, the evolutionary sequence runs from matter to life to mind to soul and, finally, to pure Spirit.

(6) The manifestations of Spirit can be understood as involving four interrelated dimensions or "quadrants," two interior (mental) and two exterior (physical). Each of the four is a developmental holarchy. The interior/mental dimensions are the individual consciousness of self (the "I"), and the shared collective ideas and values of culture (the "We"). Matched to the "I" and "We" are the exterior/bodily dimensions of two "It" worlds, comprising the empirical realities of nature (studied by the natural sciences) and the social institutional realities (studied by the social sciences).

(7) Human evolution **must** proceed on the historical trajectory-from matter to life to mind to soul to Spirit, but it can only do so with simultaneous development of all four quadrant holarchies. For example, gains in individual consciousness ("I") cannot proceed without concomitant changes in the values of culture ("We"), as well as in social institutions ("It") and the way the world appears and is known ("It").

(8) The interior consciousness of self (the "I") develops in the child through stages that roughly parallel earlier cultures of magic, myth, and ego-centric rationality. In post-adolescent development, the adult sense-of-self extends the trajectory from ethnocentric

to “worldcentric” defined as centred on the welfare of humanity in general, a planetary compassion for all people. This level, at which the self begins to experience mind and body as one, is named “Centauric” (an interesting choice of terms, as the mythic centaur was half man, half horse, meaning half noosphere and half biosphere). Above the Centauric lie four higher levels of transpersonal consciousness wherein Spirit reveals itself more and more fully. This evolutionary goal, humanity’s destination, is Oneness with the Godhead—the non-dualism glimpsed by mystics of many cultures through the ages. When the One is known, the Many of the material world is also embraced.

(9) Holons evolve in complexity by dissociating their four dimensions and then, by progressive transcendence, reuniting them in a higher synthesis where new qualities emerge. Human history shows the evolution from tribal to agricultural to industrial, each successive stage revealing a new “worldspace,” a reorientation of consciousness, culture, material knowledge, and social institutions.

(10) In the last few centuries, since the Age of Enlightenment, modernity has witnessed the dissociation of the four quadrants—the “I,” the “We,” and the “It”—with consequent gains and losses. The idea of the autonomous individual entitled to liberty (the “I”), has been a plus, fostering the emancipation of disadvantaged groups (slaves, women). At the same time, freedom from responsibilities has meant a loss of cultural cohesiveness (the “We”). Again, material gains from the hegemonic dominance of science/industry (the external “It” world) have been paralleled by losses in human values and meanings that spring from the interior individual (“I”) and collective (“We”) worlds. Today the task is to advance beyond the Age of Reason with its social industrial/nation state, by effecting a new and higher synthesis.

(11) Western civilization is on the brink of the Centauric cultural level (already achieved, though in a pessimistic mode, by certain existentialists) wherein vision-logic consciousness will experience the mental-material (mind-body) in a higher synthesis that merges the Truthful (the individual), the True (science), the Good (the collective/cultural) and the Beautiful (the collective social). Already mapped by eastern and western mystics are the four spiritual levels beyond the Centauric, culminating in the perfect realization of Nondual Spirit.

(12) Evolution has a goal. Progress is real. Each stage is necessary as a preliminary to the next. To slip back is dissolution. Therefore the one hope for solving present day problems is to advance toward the higher syntheses of the four transpersonal levels of consciousness. Only by following the dictates of the Perennial Philosophy—pressing forward from mind to soul to Spirit—and thus achieving a consensus of enlightened people, can social and environmental problems be overcome.

(13) Two groups stand in the way of spiritual progress: the Ego group and the Eco group. The Ego group comprises those conventional egoic individualists satisfied with the *status quo*. The Eco group, dissatisfied with the *status quo* but unwilling to go forward, includes “retro-romantics” and “ecomasculinists,” who advocate various nature philosophies (e.g. deep ecologists) and nature religions (e.g., neo-pagans, ecofeminists, Gaia worshippers). Their proposed solutions to environmental deterioration are regressive and dangerous. They would turn the clock back to humanity’s childish magic/mythic stages rather than moving through and beyond the Centauric level. Their outward focus—stressing the importance of Earth, of nature—ignores or depreciates the inner “ascending” dimension of Spirit. By ignorantly opting for the “descending” path, they reduce cultural consciousness to the stagnation of “Flatland”: a dull and dispirited physical/biological world.

Wilber’S Progressive Time-Sequence Holarchies

Wilber's key "law" states that each emergent holon transcends but includes its predecessors, and evolution is a process of transcend and include. This is a variant of Feibleman's first law: that each level organizes the one below it, plus emergent (transcendent) qualities. The concept is sensible when applied to organisms. For example, each human being transcends and includes its organs, tissues, cells, organelles, etc., while displaying emergent qualities such as mobility and consciousness lacking in its separate constituents. The concept makes less sense applied to the stages of development and evolution in mind, culture, science, and social institutions.

Wilber's evolutionary sequences are linked to the thesis that holarchies possess a spiritual *entelechy*, or guiding principle of development, from simplicity to complexity. In other words, his sequences are based on a theory of progress onward and upward, like the Marxist faith that historical necessity guides the transition from feudalism to capitalism to communism. The main support of a faith in progress is palaeontology and the fossil record which, over millions of years, yields a story of many stops and starts. So far as human history is concerned, the jury is still out on whether various cultural/social stages in the last 15,000 years are "more advanced" than others. Is industrial society an advance on horticultural society? Much depends on which standards of judgement—such as the work to leisure time ratio, standard of living, population numbers, life expectancy, drain on and damage to Earth, etc.—are adopted. In the last 40 years, new ecological standards having to do with sustainability and preservation of Earth's ecosystems and their biodiversity have come into focus as most important, rendering ideas of long-sustained past societies more relevant than those of the current informational society.

Evolutionary history is lined up by Wilber as proceeding from matter to body to mind to soul to Spirit. As a variant on the same theme, he identifies the evolutionary sequence as progressing from physiosphere (the material domain) to biosphere (the living organism domain) to noosphere (the domain of conscious mind) and on to the theosphere (spiritual domain). He argues that because each emergent holon transcends and includes its predecessor, the biosphere transcends and includes the physiosphere and is itself transcended and included in the noosphere as "a lower level of structural organization." From this it follows that because humans, as conscious beings, are the chief constituent of the noosphere, "the biosphere is literally internal to us, is part of our being." We need, he says, an approach that transcends and includes ecology precisely because the noosphere transcends and includes the biosphere.

Such arguments assume the same kind of structural organization in physical, biological, and mental categories. This, teamed with his Platonic philosophy, provide the bootstraps by which Wilber's system lifts all reality into aspects of consciousness on their way to pure Spirit. The grain of truth in his dogma is that all organisms are "open systems" constantly internalizing energy and materials from the biosphere, but the conclusion that such common-sense phenomena as the physiosphere and biosphere—the Earth realities of air-water-soil landscapes in which humans live, move, and have their being—are interior, structural parts of the mind/noosphere can only ring true for dedicated idealists.

Wilber develops a more detailed explication of his philosophy around the central theme of Spirit manifesting itself in four interconnected, developmental holarchies: two mental/interior and two physical/exterior (summarized above in points 6, 7, and 8). The "person" or "self" derives its meaning from four realities or dimensions: consciousness, culture (especially the formative language milieu), the perceived physical world, and the social institutions that frame daily living. Change any of the four and the configuration of "self" changes. In short, the mind ("I"), culture ("We"), and both ("It") worlds of nature and societal structures participate in "selfhood."

In parentheses, this theme is a valuable contribution. It identifies as "narrow" those prophets and problem-solvers who claim "my way only" as they charge off in one of the four directions, seeking to effect radical change in the human condition by reforming

either consciousness (Freud), or culture (Weber), or concepts of nature (Skinner), or social institutions (Marx), rather than recognizing the importance of all as parts of a four-dimensional whole. The popular chorus in today's individualistic society is "Change Personal Consciousness!" This egoic focus, harmonious with much New Age thought, can be counterproductive when it diverts attention from serious cultural and environmental issues. The popular thesis that only self-improvement (self-realization, self-development, spiritual growth) will change the world, is one quarter right.

Inconsistencies in the "Four Dimensions" Concept

In a critical vein, the quartet of holarchy groups is homocentric. At the highest levels it deals with human mind/brain and culture/society. Thus, the four dimensions of reality represent correlated stages of development of people as individuals within human collectives. They assume the primacy of human consciousness, through whose future unfolding evolution will attain its ultimate goals. On a planet that still has a couple of billions years to produce intelligent life-forms, this seems more than a bit presumptuous.

Having formulated the "four-dimensions of self" idea, Wilber transgresses it in several ways. He is essentially a psychologist, as his primary focus on mind, consciousness, soul, and Spirit indicate. Wedded to the inner "mind-consciousness" quadrant and its transpersonal possibilities, he is intolerant of those who believe that an outward focus on the world as sensed may also encourage a "spiritual upward" step. Further, he violates the concept of balance in the four dimensions by supposing that ancient seers, in primitive stages of cultural/social development, were nevertheless able to advance their consciousness to the highest transpersonal levels. Finally, difficulties arise when each of the four dimensions or quadrants of human experience are squeezed into the Procrustean bed of Koestler's concepts where all evolutionary holarchies are assumed to run parallel and where each holon must transcend and include the essentials of its predecessors.

For example, Wilber's concept of social evolution—also called "exterior collective"—shows the following "transcend and include" series: galaxies - planets - Gaia system - heterotrophic (plant/animal) ecosystems - societies with division of labour - groups/families - tribes (foraging) - tribal village (horticultural/matrifocal) - early state/empire (patriarchal/agrarian) - nation state (industrial) - planetary (informational). Onward and upward, from galaxies to Windows 98™. Note the potpourri of presumed "social" stages with a categorical jump in the middle from structural heterotrophic ecosystems to social collectives and their modes of production (societies with division of labour, etc.). The reader is asked to accept on faith that the stages of childhood mental development (the psychological holarchy) mirror the "group mind" of historical foraging, horticultural, and agricultural societies (the cultural holarchy). In sequence the child learns to use concepts, then rules/roles, then abstract thought (formal operational awareness), whose historic correlates are magic, mythic, and rational cultures, and whose social correlates are horticultural tribal/village, agricultural early state/empire, and industrial nation/state.

The foregoing show little ecological understanding. Wilber's answer to the ecological crisis is spiritual development on the one path that he has marked out. He argues that nothing will change until a sufficiently large number of people with SF3 brains, capable of vision-logic in a Centauric culture matched to a planetary society come up to his level. He is particularly irked by those who do not see it his way, stigmatising them as retro-romantics, ecomasculinists, and ecofascists. Such people, he says, are regressing to the childish pre-rational levels of archaic, magic, or mythic cultures. The physical world for which they nostalgically yearn is that of the foraging or horticultural or early agricultural society: a "return to nature." "Embracing the industrial ontology of simple location (i.e., nature) they hug and kiss the spokes of the wheel that is grinding Gaia to her demise . . . The closer you get to nature, the more egocentric you become."[18]

Such simplistic ideas, coupled with the dogma that the path of human progress has already been mapped out by ancient mystics, provide Wilber's justification for denigrating those exploring other paths for the betterment of the human condition. Stressing the mystical consciousness, he depreciates the physical and natural. Viewing all realities through the lens of humanism, he cannot conceive any other source of values. He announces the end of evolution as already achieved in Pure Spirit by a talented few hominids. And all this based on a false homology between questionable evolutionary series and the holarchy of complex organisms.

An Earth-Based Philosophy Derived From the Organic Holarchy

More realistic than Wilber's by-guess-and-by-God evolutionary scheme is an ecological holarchy in the here-and-now, based on awareness of the close ties between people and the magnificent and beautiful organic/inorganic Earth, plus whatever spiritual overtones their intuitive and intellectual sensibilities bring to it. To quote Capra: "When the concept of the human spirit is understood as the mode of consciousness in which the individual feels a sense of belonging, of connectedness, to the cosmos as a whole, it becomes clear that ecological awareness is spiritual in its deepest essence."[19]

Wilber acknowledges the existence of an ecological holarchy, though stating it wrongly: "Even the anti-hierarchy ecophilosophers offer their own hierarchy," he said, "which is usually something like this**:** atoms are parts of molecules, which are parts of cells, which are parts of individual organisms, which are parts of families, which are parts of cultures, which are parts of the total biosphere. That is their defining hierarchy, their defining holarchy, and except for some confusion about what "biosphere" means, that is a fairly accurate holarchy."[20]

Au contraire, no "fairly accurate holarchy" would mix categories as Wilber does, jumping from individual organisms to families to cultures to the biosphere. The first part of his statement, up to "individual organisms" is correct, as is his statement that the term "biosphere" is confusing. It should be replaced with the term "ecosphere" or Earth.

A logical ecological holarchy follows the simple principle of containment, viz., each level in the sequence is enveloped as a physical volumetric part by the next higher level. On the homology of Chinese boxes that fit within one another, each higher level is the environment of those below. This is the sequence that Koestler accurately showed as the pyramidal or inverted "tree diagram" with the organism at the summit. Let us now take it one step further.

From the base upward, atoms are parts of molecules, which are parts of cells, which are parts of tissue/organs, which are parts of organisms, *which are parts of geographic ecosystems, which are parts of the ecosphere*. Each higher level is the environment or "field" of the ones below, and each lower level is a functional part of the levels above. Note that in this sequence human organisms appear as one among many species-parts of the sectoral ecosystems that Earth comprises. Humans are made from and sustained by the living Planet. Physically and mentally they are Earthlings. Truly they are marvellous creatures, but not the be-all and end-all of creation.

That Nature-as-Earth represents a higher level of integration than the human is a logical extension of the holarchy of containment beyond the organism. To show the implications, Feibleman's 5th and 4th "Laws of the Levels" are here repeated.

#5. For an organization at any level, its mechanism lies at the level below and its purpose at the level above.

The **mechanism** of an organism (how it works) is discovered by descending the holarchy,

by anatomising it. Just so, the function of any given sectoral ecosystem of Earth can be learned by inspecting the interactions of its parts which are organisms (including people), landforms, soil, air, water. Ascending the holarchy, the **purpose** of each holon is revealed in the context of that which encloses it. Thus the role of the heart is to maintain the animal organism in health. The niche of the animal is to play its part in maintaining the ecosystem's integrity. Here is a clue to the role, niche, or purpose of the intelligent human animal in the context of Earth's ecosystems and of Earth itself. Humans, like all holons, ought to act in ways that maintain the health and integrity of the higher level holons—the regional geographic ecosystems and the ecosphere—in which they are encapsulated.

#4. In any organization the lower level is directed by the higher.

Each holon is balanced between its own autonomy (its self-assertive "wholeness") and its role in the greater enveloping system (its integrative "partness"); i.e., between freedom and responsibility. Responsibility to the greater whole is particularly important. As Koestler noted, the integrative tendency of each holon must overrule its self-assertive tendency if the whole is to be maintained in health. Earth is ill because humanity's assertive tendency is running wild. Rather than seeking Earth-wise ways of integrating human endeavours with the ecosphere, instead of looking to Nature as a source of directions, humans have chosen the destructive path of managing Earth only for their own selfish benefits. The part is out of control and, like cancer, is eating up Earth's ecosystems on whose health it ultimately depends.

Some may see hidden in this argument the same dangers that Medawar and Capra foresaw in Koestler's "mischievous" social holarchy where the person-as-holon is inferior to the higher-level State and, therefore, bound to serve its dictates. They may ask, is not the holarchy that places Earth above people just another path to totalitarianism, to ecofascism? The question has purchase in today's individualistic culture where any constraints on human freedom to arbitrarily reshape the world as desired are viewed, if not as traitorous, at least with alarm. In the humanistic tradition, only people possess high intelligence, are important, and loved by God. To suggest otherwise, to place higher values on Earth's ecosystems than on *Homo sapiens*, smacks of "ecofascism."

The "ecofascist" label is loosely used by many, including Wilber. Fascism is a human social institution, a repressive dictatorship backed by force. The creative ecosphere is not a human institution, neither made by humans nor guided by humans. Humans as Earthlings *are* subservient to Earth and to its sectoral ecosystems from which they evolved, are formed, sustained, and to which they return. That is ecological reality. But Earth's ecosystems express no dictatorial decrees as to human behaviour. Nature/Earth gives humanity free rein to pursue destructive courses without the swift, cruel and vindictive reprisals that characterize fascist nations and international warfare. Earth generally shows humans the folly of their ways slowly, her responses presented as lessons to be learned. Whether Earth is recognized as humanity's body/mind/spirit source and support, and whether or not people act responsibly on that knowledge is their choice.

In Conclusion

The potentially useful concept of "general systems theory" has faded rather than strengthened over the last 50 years. The probable reason is that the early promoters of a good idea such as von Bertalanffy and Koestler were too ambitious, too hegemonic. They attempted to bring under one roof all kinds of different categories, treating their diverse structures as isomorphic with those of organisms. From this came nonsensical hierarchies or holarchies composed, as Medawar noted, of "non-homogeneous elements," extrapolated into developmental and evolutionary time sequences. Wilber's philosophic scheme rests on the latter fallacy.

The holarchy idea makes sense when applied to the anatomical structure of the organism—its original inspiration. Then Feibleman's "laws" and Koestler's "rules" illuminate important aspects of biology and ecology. Extrapolation of the different holons or "levels of integration" beyond the organism posits the next higher level as the geographic Ecoregion (sometimes called "Bioregion")—a chunk of Earth space resembling a giant terrarium within which humans and other organisms live, move, and have their being. The sum of all ecosystems is the ecosphere, Earth, source and sustainer of life, recognized as superior to *Homo sapiens sapiens* whose role, niche, or purpose is revealed as ministering to the health of the more creative Being that envelops it.

By this logic, a respectable rationale is provided for a shift in cultural perspective away from humanity to the marvellous planet that births and nurtures all life forms, a shift from navel-gazing homocentrism to Earth-venerating ecocentrism. Matched with Earth's beauty, this is a transcendence that Camus (in the introductory statement) would approve. Without such a shift, without this fundamental ecological perspective, humanity's future—already glimpsed as clouded—is certain to be black.

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