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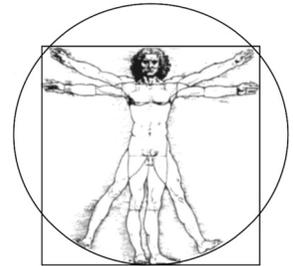
Promoting excellence in psychology

Transpersonal Psychology Section

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# Transpersonal Psychology Review

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## Editorial

# It is time again... to eternity

Ho Law

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**O**NCE again, I am writing the editorial this year at 15:00 on Sunday, 19 July (BST) in Peterborough, UK. So another year has gone by. Reading my last editorial, I first reported my fond memory about our annual conferences. So I do not need to repeat myself about how much I enjoyed the 18th Annual Transpersonal Psychology Section Conference last year, and how special the conference is to me. Instead, I shall let Harold Randall, my colleague from Denmark, tell us about his experience of attending the Conference. Harold presented the conference report from his own perspective, and yet provides a complete coverage of the conference presentations, including those parallel sessions that he did not manage to attend!).

Those who attended the conference last year would know we changed the venue and held it at The University of Northampton. There were a few colleagues who asked me what happened to the regular venue that we used to hold our conference, at Cober Hill Scarborough. It was clear that over the years, many of us have developed a strong connection to the conference and hence to the place that it was held. Indeed there was quite a passionate debate at the conference about the change of its venue – some participants even advocated that to hold the conference, the place would need ‘a soul’. The discussion continues well beyond the conference within the Section Committee. On balance we observed that when comparing the two venues, there are pros and cons – in terms of its access, provisions and so on. In terms of number of participants, there was no decrease in number – it seems that a different location attracted some new

participants, though lost some past attendants for various reasons...

Anyway, for those who are still yearning to return to Cober Hill Scarborough, you may be pleased to know that once again, our Annual Conference will be held there this year on 18–20 September. See [www.kc-jones.co.uk/transpersonal2015](http://www.kc-jones.co.uk/transpersonal2015)

As the last year’s conference theme was on ‘Contextualising Mindfulness: Between the sacred and the secular’, its report, workshop and papers have been presented, there is no Special Section on Mindfulness in this Issue. For those who are interested to join the Mindfulness Reading Group (MRG), which was set up in September 2013 at the University of East London (UEL), you may like to know that in the future, the monthly Mindfulness Reading Group (MRG) meetings will be held at **The British Psychological Society (BPS) London office between 12:00–13:30 on ?**. The meeting is open to both BPS members and non-members.

Although the initiative was partly triggered by my departure from UEL in June this year, it was mostly due to my ongoing professional commitment to promote psychology as I see the move as a way to implement some of the BPS strategic goals 1–5 (See [www.bps.org.uk/strategicplan](http://www.bps.org.uk/strategicplan)).

The proposal to launch the meetings as interdisciplinary CPD events received unanimous support from both the Psychotherapy and Transpersonal Psychology Sections Committees. It forms a unique CPD event and represents an interdisciplinary and cross-sectional collaboration. The exact dates will be announced through the Mindfulness Interest Group email-list. If you wish to join the Group email-list and/or simply



keep in touch, please contact me. Dr James Walsh and I used to take on the role of facilitator for the meetings. I shall continue with this role and coordinate at the BPS London Office. However, more volunteers would be welcome so that we can take turns to facilitate. If you want to be a volunteer, please let me know (see contact details at the end of this article).

Back to this Issue, as said, we start with the Conference report by Harold Randall; followed by Elliot Cohen's paper which not only summarises his workshop on the 'Hold and Release' practice as a new way into meditation and mindfulness, but also provides a transpersonally-informed discourse on the practice from traditional Daoist, Kabbalistic and Vedantic perspectives. In the search of his Afrocentric spirituality, Dwight Turner shares with us in his paper with his colleagues – the sacred dream and journey that took him back to the top of Victoria Falls in the Zambezi River – which opens up a broader discussion and initiates a call for an intercultural approach to the Transpersonal to include the 'spiritual other'.

Last Issue reported on some key aspects of Ken Wilber's work and the possible misunderstanding and misinterpretation by Hartelius and Ferrer (2003) by John

Abramson. A debate is ensured, as it opened up a series of discussions. This Issue reports on the on-going unfolding conversations between Hartelius and Abramson. Mike Rush in his paper on *The contribution of Western Esotericism to Transpersonal Psychology*, discusses its implications and the potential for a re-synthesis of the two traditions.

In this Issue, we have introduced a special Section that includes papers from individuals and independent scholars who offer their specific insights on topics that they have personal experiences and/or particular expertises in. It starts with Emma Shackle who shares with us her unique and personal experience in and observations on being a twin. In her paper – *Twins and the Transpersonal* – she argues that twins are not singletons and their voice should be heard.

Stephen Sayers offers an interesting account of the past and the future being assimilated to the present in his paper on Time and Eternity. And finally, we end this Issue with a beautiful poem by John Rowan on *The Ordinary Mystic*.

## **Ho Law**

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## Conference Report

# The 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Transpersonal Psychology Section Conference 2014 – A personal experience

H.W. Randall

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FROM MY EXPERIENCE, arriving at a Transpersonal Psychology Conference is like entering a mountain tunnel. Suddenly the light changes. Just as suddenly bright spots begin to appear, above and to the sides. Each of them one after another spills in through one's window, then fades into the background, as another delivers its *bonne bouche*. One can change tracks, but not direction. Forward thrust may be felt to vary at times, but one is drawn steadily along by the gentle nurture of a deeper current. We are engrossed. There is seriousness, there is laughter. There are both cognitive and meditative heights, and there are floating moments of pleasure. Eventually the tunnel's end becomes perceptible. One continues unperturbed. By the end of the tunnel, newly gathered morsels lay loosely enfolded under the pre-frontal bonnet that had opened and closed, opened and closed, like an excited chattering chipmunk, as one rolled along. This body of expansive information, this portmanteau of electrolytes, one carries forth to encounter normal traffic again.

That is one way to look at it. But metaphor itself can be like air pouches under one's feet. Yet I am less inclined to compare the booty from a TP Conference to morsels that have been gathered into a baggage compartment like a picnic luncheon prepared for the alimentary canal. The experience is definitively more of a spiritual character.

It happens every time; may be to the organisers' credit; I am not sure. But one

thing is certain, they are the architects of the passageway. The presenter-vehicles passing along that passageway are those for whom it was designed, and those who fulfil its yearly architectural genius, like the water in a water trough.

The 18th Annual Transpersonal Psychology Section Conference, 2014, converged with the expressed purpose of distinguishing where mindfulness practice may be understood to appear along the spectrum of the sacred and secular. To submit a single, more specific statement of its purpose: to determine how the experience of mindfulness, which has its origin in an Eastern, sacred context, has come to differ, if at all, in terms of method and accomplishment by its application in secularly oriented forms of therapy and other health practices here in the West, particularly the UK.

As one of the attendees of the conference, I can say that the conference has more than lived up to the tunnel analogy above. As to whether the basic quest was achieved, not having regarded the results of the Conference Feedback Forms or heard from the views of others, I can relay only my own judgement, which has passed from 'concluded' to 'maybe' to 'apparently'. Despite a composition of 50 trillion cells and a superficial nature of dualistic parts – two feet, two eyes, two ears, etc. – presenting oneself to all of the paper/workshop sessions was not manageable. What is recallable after a week or two of normal traffic, which included transition through an elevation of 30,000

feet, is another confounding matter. While the sequence of events that surfaced in personal, mental space has naturally spiralled into cosmic space, some highlights of the presentations, with an attempt to account for them with equanimity, aided by the Book of Abstracts, may be recapitulated as follows.

It began with warm exchanges of experience, warm coffee, and warm, official, opening announcements [by the Section Chair]. Following this, in the hush of another room [for a paper presentation on 'Mindfulness is not meditation, just self-awareness' by John Rowan], in the company of many attentive ears (silently propelled vehicles). the term 'mindfulness meditation' was right off charged to be a misnomer; instead of mindfulness being taught by the counselling services, it was (and still is) rather 'self-awareness' through meditation that was being cultivated without any real attempt to convey whatever may lay in the concept of 'beyond the ego'. 'Mindfulness has nothing to do with meditation nor transpersonal levels (of experience)' – the subtle, and causal levels. 'What effect did that have on you?' is yes/no thinking and has little to do with third tier thinking.

In the same venue, the next paper ['Mindfulness–Awareness through Conceptual Analysis: An Approach by the Tibetan Buddhist Gelug School' by Unjyn Park], which drew on an acquaintance with the Tibetan Buddhist Gelug School, posited that mindfulness used as meditation in counselling tends to focus on stress reduction, and it is thereby extracted from its original, soteriological context; it may develop concentration, but it would tend to focus on the personal domain and not necessarily develop a better understanding of the broader reality in which we are immersed; personal stress reduction is not the same goal as development of spiritual awareness.

Two other papers were presented in a neighbouring room, in parallel to the above mentioned two. One presenter [Anita Sian Hickish on 'A Phenomenological Investiga-

tion of Trance Mediumship: Toward an understanding of meaning making'] – a long-time practitioner of Aikido – spoke of embodying the immanent in transpersonal work; of techniques that help unification of our being by minding the body and embodying the mind; that embodiment is both personal and transpersonal. The other paper ['Care & compassion – Two sides of one coin perhaps?' by Alex Gardner] focused on behaviours that are central for human inter-identification and the survival of humanity; it posited care and compassion as two sides of the same underlying attitudinal or belief process; that while they may be intrinsic, emotional fatigue can result from activities such as fund raising, etc.; and that the two processes, rooted in Agape, can be regarded as 'spirituality in action'.

I found some coffee and cup-in-hand returned to the same venue to peruse and appreciate the many, intricately fine, information-rich poster presentations. For purposes of conciseness here, I shall take advantage of the axiom 'a picture is worth a thousand words' and leave it at that.

In the Keynote that evening the question of whether mindfulness training truly can be secular was (again) posed [by Tamara Russell on 'Can mindfulness training really be secular?']. Some of the ways in which mindfulness has been 'adapted' to the needs of certain clinical groups as well as healthcare staff has had positive results in groups with eating disorders and bipolar illness.; the 'Body-in-Mind Training Framework', the product of the presenter – a practitioner of Tai-Chi – was described as a 'body-based mindfulness'

Then came dinner, conversation, and wine. The wind currents of the tunnel churned out a harmonious tune as the lights tended toward a merged wholeness.

Saturday, 07:00, the Keynote presenter of the previous evening led a few attendees in Tai-chi exercises. Shoes wet, red-faced, refreshed, but deeply relaxed, we headed *en masse* for breakfast. At 09:15 I and many others embarked on a presentation that

posited (again) significant differences between sacred and secular uses of mindfulness [‘Intention and presence in the practice of IRECA: mindfulness as a means, not an end?’ by Chris Pike] Mindfulness used in counselling seeks positive effects at the physiological level. The role of intention is, however, underplayed; using a middle-eastern healing modality, activation of the left-frontal lobe was found to result from ‘genuine treatment’, while nearby random event generators issued non-random results, compared to placebo and non-treatment controls.

Next was a paper on studies of spiritualist mediums [‘What can we learn from an exploration of the phenomenology of Spiritualist Mental Mediumship?’ by Chris Roe & Liz Roxburgh], who claimed experiences beyond the personal domain, such as contact with the spirits of the deceased; comparisons were to be made with Brazilian research into Spiritism; this area faces the challenge of accounting for such experiences in conventional terms; while questions of well-being contra pathology and transcendence of being contra self are held in balance, the studies are believed to inform our understanding of consciousness and Higher Self.

Related to the same area of inquiry, one of the two sessions running parallel to the above two explored why psychedelics and possession are traditionally, rarely combined when Shamans communicate with spirits of the dead [‘Psychedelic Possession: Incorporating incorporation into plant shamanism’ by David Luke]; the other paper reported on a study using Q-methodology to explore practitioner understanding and use of Loving Kindness Meditation [‘Understanding Loving Kindness Meditation; A Q-study with practitioners’ by Kim Sheffield].

After the infusion of two cups of coffee, spirituality (contra spiritualism) was directly taken up. two papers proposed ways in which spirituality may be understood and developed. The first [‘Spirituality in Person-Centred Perspective’ by Tony Lawrence] considered the relationship between spiritu-

ality and person-centred therapy; it cited the nineteen propositions of Carl Rogers, purported to describe individual development from pre-self to post-self stages; these were in turn discussed in relation to other transpersonal theories of spiritual development. Subsequent to this was a report [‘Spirituality as an Integration of Psychology and Religion: Problems and Possibilities’ by Fraser Watts] arguing that while mindfulness can be practiced for both religious, moral/transcendent as well as secular psychological interests, it thirdly can be cultivated as simply ‘spiritual’, embodying both impersonal-religious and practical-secular purposes.

Both of these papers were paralleled by a workshop [‘The Hold and Release Practice: A Transpersonal Exploration’ by Elliot Cohen] that taught a simple ‘Hold and Release Practice’, developed by the presenter, that can be used as preliminary practice for teaching sitting meditation in general; the technique has its roots in Daoist culture, including Yin-Yang cosmology, Daoyin, and Qigong.

The purposeful use of mindfulness for secular purposes was argued in a positive vein in an after-lunch Keynote entitled: ‘Mindfulness: Sacred or Secular – does it really matter?’ [by Michael Chaskalson]. The speaker, an advocate of Mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR) and the use of mindfulness in workplace settings, posited: ‘At the moment of experiencing, there is no ego-self’; and (if I understand my notes correctly) ‘Mindfulness is about being more aware of yourself, others, and the world about you’.

Late afternoon moved one’s attention to a consideration of the reticence that some teachers have shown in teaching religious education (RE in the UK). Even so, RE has been asserted to contribute to community relations; mindfulness practice was regarded for its possible contribution to cross-cultural exchange; the concept of mindfulness was investigated among RE teacher trainees, who discussed how it could be used on a personal basis and within the primary classroom.

A parallel workshop cited evidence for how the impact of creative activities can be personally empowering, and how they together with mindfulness interventions have fostered mental health; in this interest multi-modal exercises were introduced and explored [by Jessica Bockler on 'Creativity & Mindfulness for Health'].

The evening Keynote, ['Mindfulness and the transpersonal traditions: Beyond reductionism' by Geoffrey Samuel] the Director of the Body, Health and Religion Research Group, led us in a consideration of the complex, sacred origins (pre-Vipassana; Theravada vs. Vajrayana) of MBSR; meditation is the core of Buddhism, and its traditions are 'beyond reductionism'.

The annual panel discussion following the Keynote was vibrant. Then came dinner with wine, which poured over into merriment and volunteered entertainment, as per tradition. There were guttural echoes from Tibet accompanied by guitar, melodious Celtic notes on the violin, and full-barrelled baritone plus tenor lullabies from Scotland. In such a gathering, no clamouring sense of aesthetic judgement could dampen the urge to cast outward upon the environment one's inspiration.

Sunday, for some, began with clinical parapsychology in the UK ['Clinical parapsychology in the UK: Counselling for Anomalous experiences' by Rachel Evenden & Liz Roxburgh]; about how clients with anomalous experiences (AEs) report to secular counselling services; how they may be better supported by specialist training of the therapists, especially in light of their having expressed a need for such preparation. This was followed by a Paper ['Monkeys' paws, poppets, sheep and goats; or, the necessary components of successful spells' by Charmaine Sonnex] reporting on interviews of professed Pagans, recruited online, and their experiences, including spell-casting as a positive art of healing; about how effectiveness of such healing requires ethical 'intent specificity', in order to disallow unintended results; how it has been observed that people

cannot be made to do what they normally would not; and, stressing the importance of not being manipulative, how one must ask for a subject's permission to cast a healing spell - all of which implements 'focus'.

A parallel session ['The Compassionate University: Policy, Rhetoric, or Reality?' by Scott Buckler] started with an introduction of Salzberg's assertion that the culmination of mindfulness is the development of loving kindness and compassion; while focused attention and open monitoring tend to be prevalent as mindful practices, the principle of compassion has acquired focus in sectors including business, environment, health care, science, and research; the tensions and prospective solutions regarding the development of a 'compassionate university' were explored. In the other parallel Paper session, ['Searching for Afro-Spirituality: Creating a space for African spiritual traditions and meaning within the Transpersonal' by Dwight Turner, Jane Calaghan, & Alasdair Gordon-Finlayson] it was posited that a true perennialist theory of spirituality would subsume the forms of spirituality found in alternative world cultures; the complicated relationship between God, the spirits, ancestors, and humanity in African spirituality were explored; from the perspective of Africa, without the input from cultures other than the major western and eastern religions, the concept of the transpersonal could seem to have a 'neo-colonial cloak'.

Finally, the Keynote on Sunday evening ['From caves to laboratories: Buddhist meditation practices in contemporary society' by Peter Malinowski] focussed on the shift of the study of meditation 'from caves to laboratories'. Starting with the 'cave', the presenter relayed the message of one of his teachers, Lama Nydahl: mind cannot be found, it is not a thing; it is not a matter of improving health; 'forget it!' Then the presenter moved over to the laboratory. From another source (apparently acquainted with the cave), structuring in terms of identifying neural mechanisms of attentional control, as in meditation, is the

result of ignorance. Big claims for MBCT? Not so, such claims are not supported by the lab data. Attempts have been made to measure the effects of mindfulness using a multimodal approach, which in particular included neurophysiological tools, such as EEG. The presenter stated he does not distinguish between focused attention and open monitoring, as they 'both are always there'. He reiterated the claims of other investigators that secular interests look to the technique of mindfulness (meditation) to accomplish specifiable ends; in contrast to this, the learning and experience of mindfulness was originally believed to lead to Buddhahood; and, in the terms of another source, Buddhism is like a clear crystal – put it on a blue surface, and it will become blue.

The tally of the reports as represented here seems to comprise three groups: (1) those who emphasise the difference between the sacred origins and the secular uses of mindfulness practice as distinct and essentially non-unifiable; (2) those who suggest that both lay on the same continuum, and for that matter practical use may move one closer to the ends realised by those approaching it as sacred; that by applying whatever constituent techniques they use to define or identify mindfulness practice in a secular context, results have been shown to be positive; and (3) those who do not make clear their relationship to mindfulness as meditation or practice.

Of group 1, there were apparently five Papers; group 2, eleven papers; and group 3, five papers.

The conference was to address three (four) interrelated questions: (a) 'To what extent is mindfulness practice promulgated in therapeutic and social contexts true to its roots in the spiritual traditions?'; 'Have the bounds of the term 'spiritual' become so elastic as to be of little value?'; (b) 'What impact is the widespread incorporation of what is at core a spiritual practice having on contemporary society?'; and (c) 'Is the popularisation of meditation practice leading to a distortion of the root traditions from which

it has been extracted?'

Group 1 suggested that in answer to questions 'a' and 'c', secular practice is not true to mindfulness roots; that 'mindfulness practice' has tended to change meaning by its importation to the west from its lands of origin. Group 2 would not seem to deny that position, at least directly, but they would address question 'b' by emphasising that the way they understand and apply mindfulness practice has positive results.

### **Commentary – mostly questions**

'The result of ignorance?' But isn't that why one studies... the mind? And why is it pointless to do so... in the see-it-as-an-object way that some in the west do? Studying the 'mind' seems like a larger order of interest than studying the direct and indirect effects of meditation on personality and brain – the behavioural and neurophysiological.

The secular interest in 'mindfulness practice' would seem to be initially that of enabling one to face practical aspects of one's life, for which an increase in the development of self-awareness seems primary. The secular interest offers a means to ends that are specifiable.

In contrast, the sacred interest in mindfulness practice is or remains that of transcending the practical aspects of life; of exploring how our lives may be understood and experienced in terms of that which may be universal, or in any case how one can relate to whatever may lay beyond conceptual apprehension or conscious apperception, with which we associate spiritual origins and ties.

The question remains: will the positive results from the secular applications naturally and eventually become the same as those who have an acknowledged interest in developing an understanding of the universal context of humanity?

The overall result as represented here appears to contribute to situating mindfulness between the sacred and the secular. However, if it is correctly to be regarded on a scale, then should there not be some mark-

ings on the scale that indicate stepping stones, if not thresholds?

My understanding and practice of mindfulness is that of an experience generally entered after entering a meditative process by other means or techniques. It is an advanced form of meditation, and as such its practice would follow acquaintance with other forms of meditation practice, given the right interest and openness.

Should the differences of forms of meditation, all of which can have a constructive effect, not be acknowledged within the contexts of so-called secular applications?

Developing concentration by focussing on either an external or internal object of the senses, perfecting an art of a physical nature, developing an ability to remain open and consciously ride on the wave of an emotion, etc.; as all who read the Transpersonal Review would know, there are different ways to approach an essentially internal experience that may begin with the personal and lead toward the beyond-personal. If not by the term 'mindfulness meditation', then how is the experience of advanced meditators in the East to be represented?

Shouldn't 'mindfulness meditation' be distinguished from 'mindfulness practice'?

If one enters meditation with an undercurrent of fear or apprehension, would not the meditative experience tend to be different than if one entered the meditative process with an undercurrent of love and/or positive regard?

How can one put down in writing what is in the 'mind'? – a generalised expression from B. Dylan.

When can language ever capture and faithfully represent such internal experiences to the point of conveying it to a non-practitioner?

Lastly, I offer my apologies to those whom I may have misrepresented. A lot of information was dished out at the conference, and it seems that only bits of it still cling to the structure under the pre-frontal bonnet. All corrections, complaints, and comments, even on the punctuation, will be welcomed.

**Note:** Conference details have been added by Editor in square brackets.

**H.W. Randall**

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# The hold and release practice: A new way into meditation and mindfulness

Elliot Cohen

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*I initially developed the 'Hold and Release Practice' (HRP) whilst working with enhanced-care service users in the NHS and private practice (between 2005-2009). The HRP was subsequently developed and introduced to BA(Hons) Psychology & Society undergraduates between (2011–2014) and to Interdisciplinary Psychology MA students at Leeds Metropolitan University (2013–2014), and to over 100 participants at various 'Yoga Manchester – Meditation for Beginners' workshops (from 2013 onwards). More recently the practice was offered as a workshop during the 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Transpersonal Psychology Section Conference, 'Contextualising Mindfulness: Between the Sacred and the Secular' (10–12 October 2014). This short and seemingly simple practice, serves as an embodied and experiential introduction to the relationship between posture, breath and mind, and is also a potent 'preliminary practice', preceding and supporting any style of sitting meditation practice. In addition to outlining and describing the technique, this paper will provide transpersonally-informed, reflexive interpretations on the practice – inspired by traditional Daoist cultivation techniques, Kabbalistic and Vedantic perspectives. It is hoped that in addition to being of use to novice meditators that HRP will also serve as a useful supplement for those with an established practice.*

**T**HE HOLD AND RELEASE PRACTICE (HRP) appears remarkably simple, if one is to consider and relate to it only as a physical exercise – comprising, as it does, of three main movements (see figure 1–3).

However, the physical components of the exercise (what one does with one's body) may be considered as constituting merely an

outer form or expression, whereas the various levels of inner form and activity (what one does with one's breath and mind) are what give the technique its potency – its semiotic-charge and transformative potential. The movements themselves initially take the form of a kinaesthetic learning activity, with the intention of allowing the meditator



Figure 1–3: Please supply a caption

to achieve a gentle yet poised posture.

One may initially see some commonalities with Edmund Jacobson's (1938) early work concerning 'progressive relaxation' through consciously tensing and then relaxing different muscle groups – one key difference however is that the HRP does not require any tensing, and achieves its aim purely through a shift in posture and accompanying associations/visualisations.

The HRP is also a way to vividly experience what Herbert Benson (2009) describes as the 'relaxation response', through its deliberate contrast with what may be perceived (initially) as a 'stress response'.

As the HRP begins with one's body and posture it would be appropriate to refer to Catherine Kerr's recent work on mindfulness-based somatic awareness, and her observation that 'mindfulness starts with the body' (Kerr et al., 2013) – as the body (and one's breath) is always anchored in the present moment.

This focus on the body also provides us with an opportunity to recall and reflect upon the earlier, pioneering work of Wilhelm Reich (1976), concerning bio-energetics and his early descriptions of psychophysical rigidity – 'body armouring' and the importance of being able to identify, loosen and release these restrictive, damaging blockages.

I have found that the HRP is particularly useful for introducing mindfulness-based approaches (Kabat-Zinn, 2013) to beginners – as it simultaneously allows new meditators to achieve a comfortable, upright position whilst experientially discovering for themselves the fundamental relationships between posture, breath and mind.

### **A posture practice**

A comfortable and upright posture (a required foundation for any effective meditation practice) is often difficult for new meditators to achieve. One is commonly advised not to slouch too far forward (often resulting in torpor or sleepiness) or arch too far backwards (commonly leading to back pain and an associated agitated state of

mind) – thus achieving an embodied 'Middle Way', much like the Buddha's meditation instructions to his struggling disciple Sona (a former musician):

'Sona,' he said, 'I have heard that you are not getting good results from your practice of mindfulness and want to return to the lay life. Suppose I explain why you did not get good results, would you stay on as a monk and try again?'

*'Yes I would, Lord,' replied Sona.*

*'Sona, you were a musician and you used to play the lute. Tell me, Sona, did you produce good music when the lute string was well tuned, neither too tight nor too loose?'*

*'I was able to produce good music, Lord," replied Sona.*

*'What happened when the strings were too tightly wound up?'*

*'I could not produce any music, Lord,' said Sona.*

*'What happened when the strings were too slack?'*

*'I could not produce any music at all, Lord,' replied Sona*

*'Sona, do you now see why you did not experience the happiness of renouncing worldly craving? You have been straining too hard in your meditation. Do it in a relaxed way, but without being slack. Try it again and you will experience the good result.'*

*Sona understood and stayed on in the monastery as a monk and soon attained sainthood.*

(Sona Sutta, A.iii.374f, Buddhahnet Accessed 4 September, 2014)

What is important, in relation to the HRP, is the Buddha's use of opposites and extremes

to skilfully demonstrate the ideal state – this will be later explored with reference to Daoist teachings concerning the dynamic relationship between Yin and Yang and the Hebrew letters (*Beit* and *Aleph*).

### Practice outline of the hold (Embracing, Bowing)

The first position one adopts is the holding position, where (whether one is seated on a cushion or a chair) one crosses one's arms over one's chest, while placing the hands upon opposing shoulders (see figure 1) – this resembles both the 'brace position' that one adopts when an aeroplane is making an emergency landing, and also the posture the *Mevlevi* Sufi adopts (while standing) before his dance (or ecstatic movements), as part of the *Sama* ceremony – ecstatic movement (as a form of *Dhikr* – devotional acts).<sup>1</sup>



Rather than the 'brace position' I would prefer this to be thought of in a more Sufi manner as an 'embrace' position – as one is literally left holding, embracing oneself.

As part of the inner practice, at the point of extension and subsequent return, one may use one's arms, hands and imagination in tandem, to visualise gathering up all the various disparate aspects or fragments of oneself, or of one's life, into one's being and centre<sup>2</sup> – where it is held and contained. At this point one allows the weight of the elbows to naturally lower the body (including the head), allowing it to bow into a semi-foetal position (see figure 2).

During the practice I have found that it is important to consider (and record) not only people's experiences – 'how I experienced the movements/what I felt', but to also take into account people's associations – 'what I associate this with/what this reminded me of'. By including participants associations it is hoped that we are able to understand the

effects of the technique in more holistic depth.

When performed with student groups ( $N = 32$  in; 36 in; 30 in 2011; 2012; 2013 respectively) at Leeds Metropolitan University, as part of the Psychonautics (navigating the mind) module, meditators commonly reported two quite distinct 'feelings' and 'associations' while in the second position (see figure 2):

1. 'I feel safe, protected, cocooned'
2. 'I feel a little trapped, like I can't breathe properly'

Although the vast majority of meditators experiences were in the first category, I was keen to address the issues raised in the second.

Firstly, whether pleasant or unpleasant, the posture is temporary (held for only two or three minutes) – in this sense one might understand the position as helping one to cultivate qualities of 'patience, forbearance' and 'equanimity' (Wallace, 2011, p.167), which should all be integral qualities underlying and supporting any meditation training.

Secondly, the sensation of not being able to breathe properly (and perhaps some of the resulting associations with being 'trapped') is primarily due to our habitual predisposition to breathe from the chest (or in particularly stressful situations the throat); the position of the arms across the chest appears to inhibit a full inhalation – however with a slight shift in focus one can effectively and quite dramatically reverse this feeling.

The position of the arms across the chest is actually and naturally moving the centre and sensation of breath, from the chest into the belly. In effect the hold and bow position (see figure 2), should encourage one to move the breath deeper into the body and the belly – this is the identical place one typically

<sup>1</sup> For some beautiful footage of the *Sama* ritual the reader may wish to visit and view the following link: <http://vimeo.com/87064606> accessed 3 October 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Analytically-inclined readers may appreciate certain parallels with Jung's writings on Individuation, and related Lurianic Kabbalistic teachings regarding 'gathering the sparks' of holiness – the curious reader may consult Drob, S.L. (2000). *Kabbalistic metaphors: Jewish mystical themes in ancient and modern thought*. Lanham, Maryland: J. Aaronson.

focuses on in Yoga (abdominal breathing) and the ‘preferred location’ of focus during Daoist meditation (Kohn, 2010, p.2). This shift in attention from the chest into the belly leads to a natural deepening, lengthening and gentling of the breath, and also provides a sense of release (when contrasted with restricted chest or throat breathing). This position is held for only a short time – two to three minutes is sufficient.

### **Practice outline – The release**

The following release movement is done extremely slowly with close attention paid to every sensation and association. The hands are released from the shoulders and slide slowly down the outside of one’s upper arms, then down the legs until the hands are palms-down, just above (or if one prefers upon) the knees. One then begins a very steady and conscientious process of moving into an upright position. One continues until one ‘feels’ perfectly upright, poised and balanced (see figure 3). After reaching the fully-upright position one is free to simply sit with bare attention, or to gradually move into one’s familiar practice.

Meditators have consistently reported very vivid and pleasant sensations during this movement into the final, resting position:

1. ‘I felt so relaxed’
2. ‘I felt so free’
3. ‘My mind felt really still and calm’

The shift in posture and the subsequent re-opening of the chest area (physiologically and psychologically) provides a strong sensation of release and the feeling of opening-allowing one to feel as though one is now breathing with one’s whole body (from both the belly and the chest). It is a relatively swift method to induce a ‘relaxation response’ (Benson, 2009) and many meditators reported that it wasn’t simply a matter of them feeling physically more relaxed, or breathing deeper/gentler, but that their minds also felt calmed and centred by this practice. It is in this manner that one can

begin to demonstrate the way one’s posture affects one’s breath, and the way one’s breath affects one’s state of mind. The Daoist scholar and cultivator/meditator Professor Livia Kohn has insightfully observed:

*In all cases, the breath is a bridge between body and mind, as an expression of mental reality, closely linked to emotions, nervous conditions, and peace. The more the breath is deepened and calmed, the quieter the mind becomes and the easier it is to suspend the critical factor and enter into the serenity of the meditative state. (Kohn, 2010, p.2)*

The HRP’s kinaesthetic properties may also be related to, and supported by a relatively recent experiment conducted by Carney, Cuddy and Yap (2010) concerning ‘power poses’. The research team explored how by adopting certain ‘power poses’ (typically with one’s arms raised above one’s head in a heroic or victorious manner), participants would actually begin internalise what the posture signified, and to feel more confident and self-assured – due to its particular pertinence I have taken the unusual step of including the abstract in its entirety:

Humans and other animals express power through open, expansive postures, and they express powerlessness through closed, contractive postures. But can these postures actually cause power? The results of this study confirmed our prediction that posing in high-power nonverbal displays (as opposed to low-power nonverbal displays) would cause neuroendocrine and behavioral changes for both male and female participants: High-power posers experienced elevations in testosterone, decreases in cortisol, and increased feelings of power and tolerance for risk; low-power posers exhibited the opposite pattern. In short, posing in displays of power caused advantaged and adaptive psychological, physiological, and behavioral changes, and these findings suggest that embodiment extends beyond mere thinking and feeling, to physiology and subsequent

behavioral choices. That a person can, by assuming two simple 1-min poses, embody power and instantly become more powerful has real-world, actionable implications. (Carney, Cuddy and Yap, 2010, p.1363)

These findings point to the bi-directionality of body language- in that our physical posture and movements (features of non-verbal communication) don't simply communicate and indicate aspects of ourselves to others (revealing whether we may be feeling - scared or self-assured), but that our postures are also speaking to ourselves (and that, whether consciously or unconsciously, we are listening).

In 1999, while attending teachings of the Tibetan Buddhist master Sogyal Rinpoche, I was conscious of how he spent a great deal of time talking about the importance of taking an 'inspiring posture' during meditation – imagining one is a king or a queen, or even a mountain, and to sit in manner that conveys this majesty or solidity. This advice certainly transformed my practice and it is hoped that the HRP may be utilised as a moving practice that embodies and communicates (to oneself and others) a sense of rising and opening up, in confidence, and sitting with authentic presence.

### **Transpersonal perspectives and reflections on the HRP**

The HRP rests on a keen awareness of contrast, between first being in a closed and then open posture. Meditators' respective, accompanying associations are as important as the postures, and I am always keen to consistently record reflections following sittings, and encourage others to follow the set procedure in order to replicate these results for themselves.

The holding positions may be seen as a deliberately exaggerated embodiment of being in a stressful state; although it is important to note that the position itself is typically adopted due to its comforting properties. A foetal or semi-foetal position is commonly observed during times of stress or as a result of some trauma. Whilst working in

the Grafton ward of Manchester St. Mary's Psychiatric unit (during 2003–2004) I would often observe patients (particularly new patients) in this all-too-familiar posture.

On the one hand it is typically/traditionally interpreted as a symbolic act of, or attempt at regression – to return to the warm, safe prenatal environment of the womb. It may equally be understood from an evolutionary or comparative psychological perspective, as an inbuilt defensive mechanism – in that vulnerable prey can often be observed (when neither 'fight' nor 'flight' is possible) attempting to roll into a ball in order to protect themselves – retreating within as opposed to retreating without.

But one may, and I believe should, also take a more transpersonal view and understand it not merely as an attempt to return to a pre-birth state, or a form of atavistic regression, but rather the psychophysical expression of a wish to initiate a process of re-birth. In this way the movements themselves can begin to take on a deeper, more personal and spiritual significance, whilst being simultaneously rooted in ancient wisdom traditions – in this instance I have utilised Daoist, Kabbalistic and Hindu concepts (and I would actively invite and encourage additional insights from the reader).

I do not believe this to simply be a mere process of 'reading in' to these postures, but rather if one conscientiously follows the practice these connections and resonances appear to present themselves; to be intuitively and experientially 'read out' (Lancaster 2007) by practitioners.

To this end, what now follows are series of Transpersonally-informed reflections (Anderson & Braud, 2011) and reflexive interpretations (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009) – that is to say 'Ways of seeing which act back on and reflect existing ways of seeing' (Clegg & Hardy, 1996, quoted in Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009 p.271). It then remains up to the reader and practitioner to test and establish for themselves the usefulness of these reflections and connections (and for this purpose I am keen to enter into correspondence).

### Daoist insights

Through my ongoing immersion in Daoist traditions<sup>3</sup>, including my work with the Northern School of Daoist Studies (2009-2013) and the British Taoist Association (2008-2014), some clear connections between the HRP and traditional Daoist cultivation appear to have emerged.

We have already explored the manner in which the second position one adopts (see figure 2 – holding-bowing) is evocative of the foetus. In Daoist traditions of 內丹Neidan – Inner Alchemy [pill], one of the ultimate goals is to cultivate the immortal [sacred] embryo – 聖胎 Shengtai (see figure 4). This inner-chemical process is described in Richard Wilhelm’s (1962) famous translation of ‘The Secret of the Golden Flower’, for which Carl Jung (his close friend) provided the foreword and commentary.



Insert Figure 4 here  
File: Figure 4 EC 11

This embryo may be understood to represent the cultivation of an immortal, fully-realised potential, and authentic Self. I have previously written about both the significance and symbolism of this idea from an analytical perspective:

*A Jungian may view as particularly intriguing that the Daoist’s visualisations of conceiving and gestating the immortal embryo, centre beneath our navel (in the lower dantian); beneath the original, simultaneously physical and symbolic mark of separation from our mother (from the mother). This psychological separation, or freedom, from the mother would likely be understood by Jungians as being part of the heroic journey towards selfhood; and what better way to symbolise this process than by ‘symbolically’ giving birth to one’s self. (Cohen, 2011, p.112)*

The long and complicated processes of Daoist cultivation include introducing the practitioner to the technique of embryonic breathing. Embryonic breathing is understood to be the key in regulating and directing the Qi around the body to ensure health, longevity and eventual realisation.

It begins by instructing the practitioner in normal abdominal breathing, or 佛家呼吸 *Fo Jia Hu Xi* – Buddha breathing (Yang, 2003, p.68) which can naturally occur as a result of the second posture in the HRP (figure 2). As one inhales the abdomen gently expands, and as one exhales the abdomen slowly contracts – ‘...normal abdominal breathing is able to bring a beginning practitioner to a state of deep relaxation’ (*Ibid.* p.71).



As the traditional visualisations include generating and raising the qi from the belly (lower *dantian*), up the spine, into the head (upper *dantian* – or third eye) this ascent is mirrored in the lifting/straightening of the posture (from figure 3 to figure 4).

In almost all Chinese arts of cultivation, *Daoyin* (a form of Daoist Yoga), *Qigong* and the more recent *TaiChi* the practitioner seeks to harmonise his/her breathwork with his/her movements and mind in order to locate one’s centre and discover the meaning of ‘stillness in movement’ (Horwood, 2008, p.6).

The British-born Daoist priest Shi Jing (the chair of the British Taoist Association) reflects on the purpose of *Daoyin* in his writings on the Eight Brocades:

*So these teachings are not just a philosophy, they are a practical instruction on cultivation! Lao Tzu also talks about returning to the state of a little babe. The deep abdominal breathing, the expansion and contraction of the lower dan tian, the effortless breathing of the babe. Tao Yin is part of that return to simplicity and natural stillness. (Shi Jing ND, pp.4-5).*

The effectiveness of the HRP may be further

<sup>3</sup> Primarily the *Quanzhen* (Complete Reality) *Longmen* (Dragon’s Gate) tradition.

understood through the ancient Chinese principle of *Yin* and *Yang*, and the theme of complementary, mutually-defining opposites:

*In Chinese worldview, the cosmos is generated from the undifferentiated Dao through the interaction of Yin and Yang, two principles or 'pneumas' (\*qi) that are aspects of the functions of the Dao itself. Their continued hierogamy engenders everything within space and time, giving rise to the material and spiritual manifestation. The cosmos is not static but in constant change.*

*The term yin originally denoted the shady or northern side of a hill, where yang was its sunny or southern side. This early definition, found in sources of the Spring and Autumn period, was later expanded to include all that is shady, dark, and cool, and all that is sunny, bright and warm respectively. The notions of Yin and Yang were thus applied to various complementary entities and phenomena, such as female-male, dark-light, night-day, low-high, earth-heaven, passive-active and so on. (Baldrian-Hussein, 2008, p.1164).*

Following in this description, one may now understand that it is precisely through feeling off-balance (through bowing forwards), feeling closed and constricted that one is able to tangibly appreciate and differentiate a feeling of being upright, balanced and released. As *Yin* and *Yang* alternates, so too the HRP is not a static posture, but an active movement that can symbolise (and in some cases initiate) a transition from one psychological state to another.

Within the iconography of *Yin* and *Yang*, one can observe the seed of *Yin* within *Yang* and vice versa – the example I often give to students is to remember a time where they laughed until they cried (or cried until they laughed). This also serves to remind us (in this case) that the potential for equilibrium

can often be found precisely within the preceding imbalance. *Yin* and *Yang* may be understood as opposites that are not necessarily in opposition, as is illustrated in the second verse of the *Dao De Jing*:

*...having and not having arise together. Difficult and easy complement each other. Long and short contrast each other; High and low rest upon each other; Voice and sound harmonise each other; Front and back follow each other. (Gia-Fu Feng and English 1996)*

We might also reflect that we may come to know and achieve a suitable posture for meditation by first deliberately adopting an unsuitable posture for meditation.

### **Kabbalistic insights**

As a result of ongoing Transpersonal group-work with the Hebrew letters (from 2008–2014) and my work facilitating the Jewish Meditation group *Ohr Menorah* (2012–2014)<sup>4</sup>, the hold and release practice has also taken on, and resonated with particular Kabbalistic principles. It is perhaps also appropriate that my very first introduction to Kabbalah (in 1994), was through the work of Perle Epstein, which included a comparative study of Daoist and Kabbalistic meditation techniques:

*Taoist meditative practice also compares the human body to the macrocosm, focussing on the spine as the source of divine energy, which can be evoked by a combination of visualisation and breathing. Like the Kabbalist, who 'stirs the world above' by sitting down to his meditations here below, the Taoist reflects the outer world through the harmonising of mind, breath and body. (Epstein, 1978, p.70)*

As the Hebrew letters are considered to be the tools of creation (Lancaster 2005), by embodying the letters one may symbolically engage and participate in the creative process.

<sup>4</sup> The group's 2012 launch was reported in a press release from the Movement for Reform Judaism <http://news.reformjudaism.org.uk/press-releases/a-new-light-for-menorah.html> accessed 13 October 2015.

The first and last positions of the HRP, strongly resonate with, and are reminiscent of two particular Hebrew letters – ב *Beit* and א *Alef*, and may be interpreted as constituting a movement from *Beit* to *Alef*.

ב

*Beit* appears with a firm base, opening on only one side (the left side – the same direction one reads Hebrew, from right to left), with its top-half bent over. The letter *Beit* is traditionally understood to be a feminine letter, related to the Divine Attribute (Heb: *Sefira*) of understanding (Heb: הַיִּבּוּ *Binah*) which may be associated with the belly/womb (Heb: בֵּטֵן *Beten*), and also a house (Heb: בַּיִת *Bayit*) (Matt, 2004, p.185<sup>5</sup>; Ginsburgh, 1990, p.40).

Although the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *Beit* is the very first letter of the Torah (the letter that initiates the process of creation), as the famous first words of the bible in Hebrew are תִּשְׂאָרֵךְ *Bereshit* – ‘In/With the Beginning’ (Genesis i.i).

In the holding – bowing position (see figure 2) one is keenly aware of one’s firm foundation, upon the cushion or the chair – one’s curled shape is strongly reminiscent of the letter *Beit*, symbolising the beginning of a creative/transformational process. One is conscious of and firmly within one’s body – which in Kabbalistic terms is understood to be the house/temple of the soul. It is also significant that in the second position, the head is naturally lowered towards the body, as this precedes and anticipates the release aspect (third movement) of the practice, which will constitute the subsequent embodiment of the letter *Alef*:

*The first word of the Torah, תִּשְׂאָרֵךְ, spells שֵׂאֵר תֵּיב, ‘the head of the house.’ The intention of creation, the Divine act of building, is that the head, the secret of the letter alef – the revelation of G-d’s Absolute Unity – comes into His house, the letter beit. (Ginsburgh 1990, p.44).*

From the firm and directed, closed and constricted letter *Beit* one straightens into an upright position, led by the head, that evokes the letter *Alef*.

א

*Alef* is upright and open on all sides – appearing primarily as a letter of balance; between God and Man, Heaven and Earth, and ‘The secret of the ‘image’ in which man was created’ (Ginsburgh, 1990, p.26), and also returns us to our previous description of Yin and Yang:

*Alef is thus a Jewish version of the Yin-Yang symbol of complementary tendencies. Alef embraces the ambiguity and the balance of form and emptiness, separateness and unity, oneness and ‘thousandness.’ The Zohar describes this situation: ‘Crying is enwedged in my heart on one side, while joy is enwedged in my heart on the other side’ (interestingly both laughing and crying use the same muscle, the diaphragm.) (Seidman 2011, Chapter 1).*

According to a central Kabbalistic text, the *Sefer Yetzirah* (book of formation), *Alef* represents the element of air (Lancaster, 2005, p.182) and this further relates to its traditional association with the respiratory system and diaphragm (Ginsburgh, 1990, p.26) – indeed one of the most immediate sensations accompanying the movement from the second to third position in the HRP, is the vivid sense of air/breath entering and animating the entire body (but with a particular focus on the diaphragm and belly). The letter *Alef* is a silent letter, and as such may be understood as being the letter of the breath, and in Genesis it is the divine breath that animates Adam:

*Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. (Genesis 2:7).*

<sup>5</sup> Primarily the *Quanzhen* (Complete Reality) *Longmen* (Dragon’s Gate) tradition.

From a Kabbalistic perspective therefore the movement from *Beit* to *Alef* does not only symbolise a personal rebirth but may be seen as a re-enactment of the process of creation itself.

### **Vedantic insights – A concluding tale of two birds.**

My study of Vedanta, in 2010 with Swami Dayatmananda, mainly centred on the *Mundaka Upanishad*. In this scripture is found a very brief but profound tale of two birds:

*Two birds, inseparable friends, cling to the same tree. One of them eats the sweet fruit, the other looks on without eating. (3rd Mundaka, First Khanda – Müller, 1962, p.251).*

It is further taught that the first bird who eats the fruit occupies the lower branches, whereas the second bird that looks on, occupies the higher branches (Hariharananda, 2008).

This lower bird represents the ordinary self/mind, engaged in constant activity, flitting from branch to branch, ‘tweeting’ and ‘flapping’ through its existence; stopping only occasionally to look up to the still, silent, second bird who sits serenely in the upper tree canopy. One might also say that this first bird represents ordinary cognition, consensus consciousness – our daily mental processes and activity.

The higher, second bird represents the transcendent self; the Atman, who silently witnesses but is ultimately beyond the first bird’s worldly existence. In this way the second bird may be thought of as representing the transcognitive realm – above and beyond our ordinary thoughts and feelings.

The story continues that each time the lower bird tastes bitter fruit it yearns and gradually begins to ascend to the place of the higher bird.

*The light from its plumage is reflected on the first bird and the latter’s own plumage starts melting away. When the first bird finally reaches the branch on which the second is sitting the whole vision changes. It finds that all along it had been the second bird. The apparent duality existed only because it had deserted its true self for the fruits of the tree. Its former self was only a distorted reflection of its true self. (Hariharananda, 2008, p.9).*

For those who are familiar with the Chakras (the psycho-spiritual centres discussed in *Raja Yoga* – Badlani, 2008, p.240), this story also reminds us of an ascent from lower levels of being up to higher levels of realisation.

The HRP (moving from figure 2 to figure 3) enacts a ‘rising above’ one’s previous position/situation, with the focus moving from the *Manipura chakra* (centred around one’s belly and navel) in the second posture, to the *Ajna* or *Sahasvara chakra* (located in the third eye region or just above the crown of the head) in the third posture – as the majority of meditators’ also reported experiencing a genuine sense of stillness and serenity in the final upright, resting position.<sup>6</sup>

### **Concluding remarks**

It is my sincere hope that this practice will be able to serve a multitude of different functions – from helping new meditators in achieving a comfortable and conducive posture for any sitting practice, and that it may also constitute a supplementary practice that precedes one’s familiar meditation sitting.

I would also ideally like the HRP to be thought of as a ‘practice’ as opposed to a ‘technique’. The word ‘practice’ suggests some level of continuity, discipline and cultivation; whereas ‘technique’, to me, seems to connote some sort of trick, or short-term strategy.

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<sup>6</sup> Additionally, one may notice certain physical parallels with yogic *Pranayama* and the use of the *bandas*, which translates from the Sanskrit as ‘lock’ but can also mean to tighten or hold (Rachman 2014) – where a particular posture is held/locked while the breath is also consciously restricted. The feeling of release effected by unlocking the *banda* is not too dissimilar, in principle, from the feeling of release in the HRP, and both are intended to help align the body and restore a sense of flow and equilibrium.

In our age of speed, shortcuts and ‘quick fixes’ the HRP should represent a need to slow down, gather ourselves - determining to begin again and rise up.

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# Searching for afrocentric spirituality within the transpersonal

Dwight Turner, Jane Callaghan & Alasdair Gordon-Finlayson

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*The aim of this paper is to show, via the lens of a culturally specific dream, how the transpersonal could benefit from broadening its approach to spirituality to include the wisdom of African spiritual beliefs. Considering some of the reasons for its lack of prominence, together with an exploration of some of the richness held within African spirituality, this paper suggests that a more Cosmopolitan approach to the Transpersonal is needed to avoid the creation of a spiritual Other. [This paper was based on the presentation at the 18th Annual Transpersonal Psychology Section Conference on 10–12 October 2015, The University of Northampton.]*

## Introduction

AS A black transpersonal psychotherapist working in multi-cultural London, I am often blessed to find myself working with clients from within my own community. Having trained at a centre where the spiritual was greatly valued, and undertaken my own research into my own spiritual beliefs, researching Buddhist, Taoist and Muslim teachings, to name but a few, I was often left with a sense that something was missing. On closer inspection it was a more afrocentric understanding of spirituality that I felt was absent for myself, one that would enhance my personal spiritual identity.

A deeper consideration of the problem here left me with a real sense that such an Afrocentric cultural paradigm has had little to no real acknowledgement within the Western world of the traditional transpersonal. This revelation was especially surprising given the often clear, yet also often unacknowledged, influences that African ontologies have had on the transpersonal over the years. For example, Jung on his worldly travels visited Africa and, even allowing for his personal prejudices, was clearly influenced by the numerous and diverse spiritual practices he encountered on his visits (Stevens 1990). In the more modern era the works of the mystic Daskalos (Joseph 2012), and the understanding the roles of spirits in our daily lives, have clear connections to those often experi-

enced on the African continent. Yet, besides the interesting work of the likes of Mazama (2003), within the transpersonal movement I am often left asking where is the black, African or Caribbean voice when it comes to offering a perspective of our collective spiritual experience? And does an afrocentric perspective on spirituality have a space within a global spiritual tapestry?

Another criticism perhaps is that the mainstream transpersonal has taken on a more western-centric outlook on the spiritual, and one that can sometimes appear as another type of dualism that echoes many of those that have plagued western philosophical thought since the time of Plato. The cost of this is the silencing of the many alternative voices that have something different to say about relationship to the spiritual; for example the rich heritage of Maori spiritual thought, including the linking of mind, body and spirit to the land (Van De Port, 2005); or the incredible relationship of God, spirits and humanity that is prevalent in many African religions (Mbiti, 1989). It is this continued ignorance of other forms of spirituality threatens to coat the transpersonal in the type of neo-colonial cloak that, in places, it has worked hard to avoid.

To emphasise this point, Asante (1984) suggests, the flaw within the traditional transpersonal its overreliance on the wisdom of the major religions, and thereby the exclusion of many other forms of spirituality. His

idea brings into focus the idea of transpersonal narcissism, echoing the idea of Ferrer's (Hart et al., 2000), where the transpersonal, and spiritual experiences, are defined by an increasingly narrow set of criteria. This thereby creates what I would term a spiritual Other, where one is humanity increasingly makes judgements on what is spiritual and what is not for the rest of us. The numerous spiritual experiences revered by the many alternative world cultures should also be encouraged forward, as then they could inform such a spiritual whole. The inclusion of an African ontology is essential to this.

But how did this come to pass? One theory for this is the spread of the Western religions during colonial times often led to the suppression, exclusion or the dilution of religions and religious practices judged by Western religions as 'unchristian'. For example, Candomble, a religion born in West African and transported to South American by slaves, only survived as a religion in Brazil by incorporating a number of Christian practices into its means of worship, and the influence of the merging of these practices is still seen within its ceremonies today (Van De Port, 2005).

Another problem for the transpersonal is the sheer number of spiritual practices and religions on the continent of Africa. As a continent where there are 53 nations (including the islands off the African coastlines but considered to be African), and hundreds of languages spoken by numerous tribes, and tribal groups spread across the continent. This therefore means there is no one religion that covers all of Africa, unlike say Catholicism across parts Europe (where even here there are differences), meaning that at best in any understanding of African spirituality what one must aim for is an understanding of the main ways of spiritual worship across Africa.

Perhaps though the most interesting perspective on the absence of an acknowledgement of afrocentric spirituality within the transpersonal is that it would involve a worldly psychological shift downwards. Using the sign of the cross as a metaphor, this would involve a change of direction away from the more

Western tendency to move from the West to the East, or from the left and right, and would encourage a movement downwards, down through the chakras towards the more earthly and emotional aspects of ourselves that have been ignored in some spiritual practices where the emphasis is placed on transcendence of the egoic self, and not I will suggest the incarnation of spirit.

Overall though, my argument involves more than reaching for a Perennialist understanding of the spiritual (Ferrer, 2000; Oldmeadow, 2010), where the similarities between religious paths are recognised in the quest for an understanding of the universal expression of spirituality. What I am questing for here is a recognition and acceptance of forms of spiritual expression that currently perhaps reside outside of the perennial norm. And this is where a more cosmopolitan perspective is perhaps more useful.

The main ideas within cosmopolitanism for this paper revolve around the interesting concept of the understanding and acknowledgement of cultural others, where we don't have to agree with them, be it their ideas or societal habits, but we do have to accept their right to their own point of view (Appiah, 2006; Snee, 2013; Pollock et al., 2000). This would allow for an acknowledgement that we are all the Spiritual Other in some way or form, a necessary step on the path towards this search for this mythical universality (Pollock et al., 2000). The taking of a more cosmopolitan consideration of spirituality therefore allows for a positioning of other forms of spirituality; Afrocentric, Maori, Aboriginal and many others, alongside the more established and understood spiritual beliefs of the East and the West.

To understand African spirituality, it is wise to underline just how much religion and spirituality sit as cornerstones within many African cultures. For example, within most traditions there is a strong belief in our connection not just to family and community, but also to our ancestors, the spirits that guide us, and then unto God itself. In selecting just a small cross section, Mbiti

(1989) in his detailed text where he stresses that for Africans this is a religious universe, also outlines how 'for many peoples like the Bachwa, Bemba, Lugbara, Nuer and others, (they) refer to human beings (or special groups of them) as 'the children of God', or 'sons of God', or 'people of God'...' (p.49). He also stresses how God appears through nature and in animals within many African traditions. Following on from this, there is a distinct link between the ideas of using myth and symbols within the world of psychotherapy (Jung 1964) and the position of the same within African spirituality. For example, Imbo states 'there is an ethnophilosophy in the proverbs, myths, folk tales, sculptures and traditional cultures' (1998, p. xi). Okpewho (1983) also talks about the importance of myth to an African ontological sense of being, for example within the Ndembu of Zambia, where there are a 'forest of symbols' in their ritual life. He then goes on to expand on his idea whilst stating 'the symbolic activities of a non-literate culture bear such a kinship with the kind of rational exercise found in literature culture, have we any right to judge the one any less scientific than the other...?' (1983, p.30).

Next, spirits are often considered to be divinities that have been created by God and through whom God acts. For example, as Mbiti (1989) states 'the Ashanti have a pantheon of divinities through whom God manifests Himself. They are known as Abosom; are said to 'come from Him' and to act as His servants and intermediaries between Him and other creatures' (p.75).

It is also important to acknowledge the importance in African cultures of the role of the ancestors and their continued influence over us. For example, Sangomas of South Africa, or traditional healers, are often charged with offering access to individuals to their ancestors. But as Thornton (2011) states, 'healers are not 'possessed' by spirits, but rather claim to 'possess ancestors' or to have ancestors. This is not simply a claim to special spiritual access, but is also a claim to an identity and a specific cultural and intel-

lectual heritage' (p. 26). This importance is also relevant across most of Africa. Another example comes from Kwame (2014), who during a TED Talks discussion on religion, explores his own roots and the Ghanaian ritual of pouring a portion of his drink on the ground and offering respect to the ancestors before a meal or event. Taken together, our identity is therefore formed by the recognition of who we are in the eyes and via our relationships with all these different conscious and metaphysical levels of being.

At this very basic level, an afrocentric ontology is therefore one that is hugely communal, and allows for an identity which is formed out of our relationship to our spiritual others who sit around us at all times. Although similar in ways to the ideas of social constructionism here in the West (Andrews 2012), where identity is formed through the influence of culturally pre-determined social constructs upon the individual, there is a distinct variation in the ideas of just what metaphysically helps us to form this identity. As Harris though states in returning us to our afrocentric perspective, 'consciousness determines being. Consciousness in this sense means the way an individual (or a people) thinks about relationship with self, others, with nature, and or with some superior idea or being' (Asante, 2008, p.113). In my view, these more collective experience of spiritual illumination, experiences that sit alongside those of American Indian and Aboriginal traditions, have much in common with say the experience of a Christian Mass, the collective chanting of Buddhist priest or the whirling of Sufi Dervishes in that they are relational. Where they differ though is in the encouragement of understanding out relationship to others, other parts of our past and present, other parts of the world around us, and therefore in totality other aspects of God.

### **The dream**

I need to clearly state though that the very brief examples of African spirituality are not meant to reduce or simplify the African spiritual experience in any fashion as, as previ-

ously stated, it is almost impossible to truly understand the range and diversity of African spiritual traditions. The hope here is to open the transpersonal to an exploration into the uniqueness of an African heritage often overlooked by the 'major' religions. An awareness of this heritage, for example when considered in connection with this author's dream, then allows clients from a more afro-centric background access to a deeper sense of themselves via their own aspect of the unconscious via the myths and stories located within their own collective unconscious heritage.

In order to encourage this exploration further let me present a modified version of the dream, below. This appeared in an article I published several years ago which I would like to reprint here. The dream reads:

*I'm standing at the top of Victoria Falls in the middle of the Zambezi River. I'm on a rock in the middle of this massive waterfall. To my left all I can see is water, tumbling over the edge and into the depths far below, and to my right the same. I look down. All I can see is billions of gallons of water racing away from me, further and further away from me, so I jump. Feet first I jump down, my back to this thunderous wall of water, and I fall, I keep falling, feeling nervous at first, but then gradually more relaxed with what I've done.*

*Then, suddenly, I land on a wooden platform imbedded into the waterfall.*

*As I look around I notice a waterwheel to my left turning slowly as the water tumbles past. I realise this is a house built into the wall of the waterfall, so I walk inside. Two naked people, one male one female, both white, spot me and run away in different diagonal directions as I walk towards them. I don't call out to them, I just let them go, before making my way back outside. Again I'm back on the platform, at its edge, the waterwheel to my side, and ready to jump.*

*So I do.*

*And again I fall feet first downwards, with my back to the waterfall, its raging noise tremendous, its torrent of water spraying me delicately. And even though I'm falling, even though I feel nervous, I know, somehow, that everything is going to be alright. (Turner, 2007)*

As a transpersonal psychotherapist who has undertaken years of transpersonal psychotherapy, it seemed strange looking back at the lack of a cultural understanding of this dream in my previous work. It is a dream that could be explored from within the more traditional therapeutic angles of metaphor and the use of symbols so common to Jungian analysis (Jung, 1964; Stevens, 1990) where the metaphors are explored for meaning by the client and the analyst, and rooted in a Greek mythological paradigm.

This is a dream that has followed me for a number of years, and been explored on a various occasions both by myself in solitude and within my own psychotherapeutic journey to varying affect. During this time, the meanings given to this dream have ranged from this author needing to connect with his deeper unconscious, to the attainment of one's natural power. For myself though, the most powerful aspect of this dream was its metaphorical premonition of my undertaking my own spiritual journey, with this author travelling to East Africa one summer. From Dar Es Salaam, in Tanzania, I then undertook a train ride on the Tazara train line, where I was unable to access a first class cabin as they were all booked by a family from South Africa. I was therefore placed in second class with five other men for the duration of my journey where I met three Tanzanian men and two Zambians, all of whom were travelling to Zambia for a religious conference. This lovely coincidence gifted me a journey therefore punctuated by some in depth conversations about religion and spiritual beliefs across East Africa.

On arrival in Zambia, I said my farewells before undertaking a number of bus journeys down to Livingstone, via Lusaka. Several

hours outside of Livingstone, the bus broke down at the side of the road, where I met and talked for several hours with two Catholic nuns who were also travelling to the Falls on holiday before returning to Italy to retire. Another lovely coincidence. On my arrival at the falls, several days later, the first thing I did was to walk along the wall opposite the actual waterfalls, and to find a place to sit and meditate. It was then that for me I was at my most emotional, whilst I sat there opposite the power of God itself, whilst tourists meandered past in the woods behind me, and rainbows danced across the scene before. Given the power of the dream, and the spiritual connections, for myself this was a myth in a dream that took me on a life changing journey to a point where I could sit there and watch as children played in the waters of the Zambezi (the author was far too cowardly to jump).

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## Conclusion

For this author, accessing this dream via a more afrocentric ontology was especially important as it presented within its use of metaphor a journey full of self-discovery where some of his own unconscious colonial shackles fell away, and led to the undertaking of his own life changing spiritual journey to Mosi-ao-Tunya (otherwise known in the West as Victoria Falls). It is this understanding of African spirituality, together with this by no means unique experience that I feel is important for the Transpersonal to acknowledge if it is to truly engage with its spiritual (br)other.

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# A startling new role for Wilber's Integral Model; or how I learned to stop worrying and love perennialism – A response to Abramson

Glenn Hartelius

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*Critics of Ken Wilber's work are unfailingly charged with misunderstanding his views. In a recent paper by John Abramson (2014), published in this journal under the title, 'The misunderstanding and misinterpretation of key aspects of Ken Wilber's work in Hartelius and Ferrer's (2013) assessment,' Hartelius and Ferrer's paper, 'Transpersonal Philosophy: The Participatory Turn,' appearing as Chapter 10 in The Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Transpersonal Psychology, has met with this same charge. This paper argues that what Abramson (2014) has done is (1) to attempt to inflate semantic issues into the appearance of substantive ones, (2) to conflate Wilber's assertions with the logical arguments that would establish those assertions, (3) to critique the authors for using points made by Wilber himself, (4) to subtly assert the rightful primacy of Wilber's model by implying that any debate about it should take place on the territory of its assumptions, (5) to lodge complaints that the authors have failed to co-create some compromise between participatory and integral approaches, and (6) to hold out the prospect that a full account of Wilber's work would 'comprehensively dispel' (p.4) the misunderstandings to which Hartelius and Ferrer (2013) are allegedly subject. Through this retort, Abramson (2014) has attempted to create the appearance that Wilber's work remains a viable framework for enterprises such as transpersonal psychology – something that seems highly unlikely. This paper further argues that Wilber does not offer a grand scholarly theory of everything, but a problematic metaphysical theory that may nevertheless continue to serve a limited popular audience.*

## Introduction

WHEN I WAS in my late teens, I became curious about religions other than the one in which I had been raised. I pondered how fortunate I was to be born into the 'right' tradition, and wondered what would have happened had I been born into some other spiritual community – would I have believed as ardently that it was the correct way? Which one of these possible versions of myself was right? In the midst of these ruminations, I found a magazine on a coffee table while waiting for an appointment, and flipped it open to a figure that illustrated Fritjof Schuon's (1953/1984) perennialist model: six traditions—labeled Hinduism, Buddhism, The Chinese Tradition, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—were represented as vertical wedges of a triangular mountain,

and halfway up the mountain's flank was drawn a horizontal line. Below the line, where the traditions diverged most widely, was the word exoteric. Above the line, where they converged into a single point, was the word esoteric. I took it in in a glimpse, and the vision seized me. Later I listened to lectures by the comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell (e.g., 1949/1968), which seemed to affirm my earlier conversion to what I did not yet know to call perennialism.

I found comfort and meaning in the simple affirmation that those of other spiritual traditions were walking a path that led where mine led. It seemed humane, kind, honorable. It felt deeply true. I could respect a God who looked at the heart, and did not quibble over outer forms of practice. Then I went to graduate school, and saw for

myself that however appealing a perennialist model might be, its metaphysical claims would not stand up to critical scrutiny and its attempt at inclusiveness held the seeds of hierarchical dogmatism. Schuon's simple model served me well as a first approximation, but I gradually relinquished it in favor of participatory thought, which seemed to accomplish similar ends in a manner better suited to the needs of a transpersonal approach to psychology.

Participatory philosophy has been well received by some as a cogent, alternative transpersonal framework within which to consider human spirituality (e.g., Dale, 2014; Daniels, 2005; Ferrer, 2002; Heron, 2006; Lahood, 2007). In this stance, the world is an open-ended living system that is continuously co-creating itself (cf. Varela, Maturana, & Uribe, 1974). Building on insights from romantic philosophy (cf. Sherman, 2008; Tarnas, 1991), a participatory view holds that the mind is not separate from the material world – it is not in some other dimension, nor is it sequestered from a separate objective reality (Skolimowski, 1994). Instead, mind and nature are woven from the same fabric (cf. Bateson, 1979) – mind is made of the same stuff as the world, and consciousness in some form penetrates through all of physicality (Chalmers, 1995; De Quincey, 1994; Heron, 1992). When a human mind knows the world, it is not peering in from another sort of reality: it is a located aspect of the world that is engaged in knowing itself (Velmans, 2008). Because the knower is always located (cf. Haraway, 1988), and because whatever spiritual forces may be abroad in the world exist in this dimension and not some other, each spiritual encounter is also a situated event (Ferrer, 2008) – and therefore by definition likely to have its own specific character (Kripal, 2003; Irwin, 1996). The diversity of human spiritual experience, then, does not reflect imperfect interpretations of an encounter with the same transcendent reality, but personally or communally shaped understandings of distinct spiritual encounters

(Dale, 2014; Ferrer, 2002; Irwin, 1996, 2008). Participatory thought does not attempt to impose a rubric to which all such events must conform – however awkwardly; instead, it seeks to outline a philosophical context within which the diversity of spiritual traditions, experiences, and phenomena can be accepted and celebrated while simultaneously offering grounds for critical discernment regarding spiritual phenomena (Duckworth, 2014; Ferrer, 2009; 2011b; Ogilvy, 2013).

Until the arrival of participatory thought in the transpersonal field just after the turn of the century (Ferrer, 2002), Ken Wilber's evolving philosophical framework was at times seen as the primary philosophical foundation of transpersonal psychology (Rothberg, 1986). In the 1990s, serious critiques of Wilber's model were published first in the journal *Revision*, and later collected into Rothberg and Kelly's (1998) book, *Ken Wilber in Dialogue*. Ferrer (1998) wrote a review critical of Wilber's (1998) book, *The Marriage of Sense and Soul*, and then published a paper outlining shortcomings of a perennial philosophy (Ferrer, 2000) – an approach that Wilber had explicitly employed in some of his work prior to that date. Ferrer's work met with some resistance from Wilber, who reportedly made efforts to impede its publication within transpersonal literature (Ferrer & Puente, 2013); shortly thereafter, Wilber announced his departure from the transpersonal movement – likely for complex reasons.

Given the prominent role of Wilber's work within transpersonal psychology, and the at times heated scholarly debate that surrounded the introduction of participatory thought as an alternate philosophical frame, it seemed fitting that the chapter on participatory philosophy in *The Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Transpersonal Psychology* (Friedman & Hartelius, 2013) briefly reprised this history and both recounted and extended some major critiques of Wilber's work from a participatory perspective (Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013). Abramson's

(2014) response to this work purports to outline 'the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of key aspects of Ken Wilber's work' by the authors of that chapter.

There is a goal that Ferrer and Hartelius share with Wilber and Abramson, namely the development of ways to situate the study of the whole person, including human spirituality. What is perhaps most troubling, both in Wilber's work and Abramson's (2014) arguments, is that despite this commonality the tenor of discourse appears to have more in common with political debate than with scholarly argument. That is, Wilber and Abramson have attempted to score rhetorical points in ways that at times seems disingenuous, rather than engaging forthrightly. One problem with this style is that refutation of such arguments requires going through the issues with considerable care and detail. This could give a casual reader the very impression that Abramson (2014) has expressly set out to convey: namely, that the critiques offered by Hartelius and Ferrer (2013) – most of these stemming from the work of Ferrer (e.g., 2000, 2002, 2011a) – are complex and subject to technical debate, rather than simple points that strike at the root of Wilber's system.

A second unfortunate element is the repeated charges that Wilber's points have been overlooked, misunderstood, or omitted, and that the offered accounts of his work are inaccurate and misleading. Ferrer has responded to Wilber's work at length both in his 1998 review and extensively in his 2002 work, *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory* (e.g., pp.66–69; 179–181; 223–226). After nearly a decade of silence, Ferrer (2011a) dedicated an entire essay to respond to Wilber's most recent revision of his model (Wilber-V), concluding with an explicit call to dialogue. Wilber has not responded to any of these rejoinders or invitations to clarify his perspectives. Abramson's (2014) tut-tutting about Ferrer dropping the dialogical ball is misplaced and seems an attempt at discrediting a critic. In addition, Abramson's arguments are insubstantial, and the outcome is

that the case he has made against these critiques of Wilber is very thin indeed.

What Abramson (2014) has done is (1) to attempt to inflate semantic issues into the appearance of substantive ones, (2) to conflate Wilber's assertions with the logical arguments that would establish those assertions, (3) to critique the authors for using points made by Wilber himself, (4) to subtly assert the rightful primacy of Wilber's model by implying that any debate about it should take place on the territory of its assumptions, (5) to lodge complaints that the authors have failed to co-create some compromise between participatory and integral approaches, and (6) to hold out the prospect that a full account of Wilber's work would 'comprehensively dispel' (p. 4) the misunderstandings to which Hartelius and Ferrer (2013) are allegedly subject. His purpose seems to be to deflect or dilute these critiques and demonstrate 'to those with only an acquaintance with Wilber's work that Hartelius and Ferrer have a case to answer' (p. 4). Through this retort, Abramson (2014) has attempted to create the appearance that Wilber's work remains a viable framework for enterprises such as transpersonal psychology – something that seems highly unlikely.

The first part of the following response is organised in the same manner as Abramson's (2014) paper: six sections and a conclusion, each addressing the corresponding section in Abramson. This is followed by a discussion section that examines the issue of whether the charge that Wilber has been misunderstood is valid or whether this can more coherently be understood as part of a strategy to deflect legitimate criticism. A concluding section considers the possible future role of Wilber's work.

### **1. A single nondual reality**

Abramson (2014) opened with an assertion that Hartelius and Ferrer 'appear to have overlooked' Wilber's rejection of criticism that 'his work involves a perennialist version of a single nondual ultimate reality' (p.4). As

evidence for this position, Abramson began with a quote from the fictional character Joan Hazelton, drawn from what appears to be a section of writing that did not make it into Wilber's (2002) novel, *Boomeritis*: 'I don't know a single major theorist who actually believes that' (Wilber, 2007b, p.6; cited in Abramson, 2014, as Wilber, 2002c). While it seems unusual to use the dialogue of characters in a novel as evidence for scholarly argument – and it should be noted that despite this, Ferrer (2011a) has responded briefly even to this obscure passage – there are problems beyond this fact. First, the character quoted in this case is not speaking about a perennialist version of a single nondual ultimate reality, but characterising 'an increasingly intense commitment to a single absolute universal truth' (Wilber, 2007b, p.6; cited in Abramson, 2014, as Wilber, 2002c). The issue of whether or not there exists universal truth is distinct from postulations of an ultimate nondual dimension. Second, even if this bit of dialogue did reflect Wilber's position on the somewhat different matter of a perennialist ultimate, an assertion of this sort would not change the fact that his model is dependent on a nondual dimension that is entirely indistinguishable from a perennialist ultimate.

Abramson did also provide a quote in which Wilber (2000) argued against critics identifying him with perennialist philosophy by claiming, in Wilber's words:

*the only item of the perennial philosophy that I have actually defended is the notions of realms of being and knowing... . Most of the other aspects... such as unchanging archetypes, involution and evolution as fixed and predetermined, the strictly hierarchical (as opposed to holonic/quadratic) nature of reality etc. – I do not believe are universal or true. (p.158)*

This claim is problematic. First, the issue here is not what Wilber has *defended*, but what his proffered model necessarily relies upon –

and his model relies upon a nondual ultimate that, as noted, is very much identical with a perennialist ultimate. Second, the 'other aspects' referred to by Wilber (2000), such as 'unchanging archetypes, involution and evolution as fixed and predetermined,' and 'the strictly hierarchical ... nature of reality' (p.158) are not, in fact, characteristic of perennialist approaches other than earlier versions of his own work. Read literally, this is not even a direct denial by Wilber that his work is perennialist in nature, much less a substantive defense against the simple observation that his model remains essentially perennialist in structure.

Abramson (2014) continued with the claim that Wilber's work does not postulate a single nondual reality. This is an inflation of semantic differences, playing on an extremely minor point. Abramson again cited from a sidebar to Wilber's (2002) novel to demonstrate Wilber's position (2007a) that 'ultimate reality is nondual—it is 'not two, not one'' (p.15), a position consistent with the traditional teachings of Advaita Vedanta (e.g., Whitfield, 2009). The issue is clearly directed at reference to a single nondual reality. Yet this was merely to distinguish Wilber's position from the ontologically pluralistic views of Ferrer (2002, 2008, 2009, 2011b). That is, within Wilber's thought it is the nondual – whatever its nature – that is the *only* final or complete destination for all humankind, even if most spiritual traditions remain unaware of this. The particular phrasing did not reflect a failure to understand that such a nondual dimension could be described as neither one nor two, or from either an absolute or relative point of view. Abramson might as relevantly have complained that the title of Wilber's 1999 book, *One Taste*, should actually have been, *Not One Taste, Not Two Tastes*. To attempt to parlay this very small matter into some substantive point of misunderstanding is misleading.

In a rather more surprising twist, Abramson (2014) claimed that 'Wilber's and

Ferrer's position on a single truth... is very similar' (p.5). As evidence for this, Abramson offered a 36-word quote from Ferrer (2002), which he compared in a strained way with his interpretation of Wilber's thought. Yet any wider reading of the two theorists will quickly demonstrate that it is futile to argue that an ultimate nondual reality – from whatever perspective – is somehow the same as ontologically rich multiplicities of embodied enactments. This argument fails entirely.

Abramson (2014) then turned to Ferrer's (2002) treatment of Murti (e.g., 1955/2013), offering short critiques of Murti's critics such as Streng (1967), Richards (1978), Tuck (1990), Huntington (1989/2007), and Garfield (1994) – several of which are lacking in his reference section. A complete consideration of these debates is well beyond the scope of this response, but Abramson's purpose here is to suggest that Murti has contemporary supporters, and that some of his critics have misunderstood him. What can be said is that Abramson (2014) pursued these arguments in much the same way as those illustrated above, basing broad conclusions on very limited samples. He is correct in noting that there are a few contemporary supporters of Murti's absolutist perspectives, but this does not mean that the issue is an open one within wider scholarly circles any more than **the fact that** the existence of climate deniers is evidence that the reality of global warming is still up for any real scientific debate.



## **2. Wilber's division between subject and object**

Abramson (2014) claimed that Hartelius and Ferrer (2013) have overlooked Wilber's statements that subject and object are not necessarily separate. In fact, the relevant passage draws on Ferrer's (2002) critique of perennialism. Ferrer pointed to the simple and logical fact that a perennialist model requires an objective, transcendent ultimate that is apprehended deep within personal subjectivity. That ultimate must be objective

in order for it to be the consistent destination of all traditions. However, if that ultimate is objective in nature, then by definition it is distinct from the subject who perceives it. If Abramson does not believe that Wilber's work is perennialist, then this critique would not apply to Wilber's work. However, if the structure of Wilber's work is indistinguishable from the structure of one or another version of perennialism as outlined by Ferrer (2002), then Wilber's assertions alone are not sufficient to change the fact that it can legitimately be described as perennialist, nor to override the shortcomings of such a model.

There is a slightly different facet to this issue also. What Hartelius and Ferrer (2013) pointed out was that it is through Wilber's postulated nondual ultimate that his subjective and objective quadrants are unified. If Wilber's post-metaphysical has truly moved away from a metaphysical ultimate, then the nondual can no longer serve as the unifying dimension out of which both subjective and objective quadrants equally arise, and one is back to the overtly Cartesian situation in which these two domains are entirely distinct; in this situation the subjective will again be devalued in a modernist context. In other words, without a nondual dimension that serves to place subjective and objective quadrants on equal ontological footing, Wilber's AQAL model does not redeem the reality of the interior quadrants from a modernist stance. On the other hand, if the nondual is retained as the vehicle for resolving this issue, then Wilber's system is still deeply metaphysical, as well as remaining subtly Cartesian (cf. Ferrer, 2002). Neither strategy fully resolves the problems inherent in the Cartesian dynamics of modern philosophy, and one has the additional handicap of resting on a metaphysical base.

## **3. Wilber's 2002 critique of Ferrer**

There is a complaint expressed by Abramson (2014) that Wilber's 2002 critiques of Ferrer have not been addressed. The first problem here is that the section

quoted as Wilber's (2007b) words are again the dialogue of the fictional character, Joan Hazelton, who does not name Ferrer at all. To suggest that this outtake from a novel is critique of Ferrer that requires a specific scholarly response is mistaken.

Yet since Abramson (2014) has raised the issue, it is possible to set aside the unusual provenance of this quote and respond to the argument. What Wilber (2007b) wrote was that 'pluralism plus history is genealogy,' suggesting that pluralism itself is static, that history 'moves beyond pluralism,' and that genealogy 'transcends and includes' pluralism (p.9). However, even if a reconstructive genealogy of history and worldviews might be able to situate various types of pluralism or universalism, there are a number of competing genealogies – of which Wilber's is just one. The implication here is that Wilber's genealogy is the *actual* genealogy – which is another way of saying that a pluralistic system is only meaningful if it is situated within Wilber's integral model. This is not a substantive critique, but the imposition of a meta-narrative – a Wilber genealogy – which the narrating fictive character has just said that one should not do.

#### **4. The universality of Wilber's Kosmic habits**

In this section, Abramson asserted that Hartelius and Ferrer (2013) were incorrect in claiming that all of Wilber's kosmic habits are universal. In fact, Hartelius and Ferrer made no such claim. The phrase quoted by Abramson as evidence for this complaint drew on Ferrer's (2002) description of a general type of perennialism – *structuralist* perennialism – that could be applied to systems other than Wilber's as well. Abramson (2014) then went on to acknowledge that in Wilber's model, some deep structures are universal – which is precisely the mark of structuralist perennialism. However, Hartelius and Ferrer did not make any claim that all of Wilber's kosmic habits are universal. It is not clear how Abramson arrived at this objection.

The larger issue here is not whether *all* of Wilber's kosmic habits are universal, but whether *any* of them are universal. A system in which the actions of some individuals or groups can, through their repeated actions, create some sort of deep structure that now must be navigated by all humans (cf. Ferrer, 2011a; Rowan et al., 2009) reveals the persistence of the subtle Cartesianism that has been Ferrer's (2002) consistent critique of perennialist systems. If even *some* cultural habits become kosmic habits that others are required to negotiate, then these habits are not merely ontologically real, but *objectively* real in a Cartesian sense. Ferrer (2002, 2011a) acknowledged that cultural habits may create new options or pathways for cocreative participation, but explicitly rejected the notion that any of these new potentials can become mandatory. The fact that Wilber has introduced more flexibility into his system by allowing that 'kosmic habits can be local rather than universal' (Abramson, 2014, p.9) does not solve the deeper issues associated with the subtle Cartesianism inherent in the structure and assumptions of his model.

#### **5. Wilber's Kosmic habits and the upper left quadrant**

Here Abramson (2014) reported that Wilber 'is incredulous that Ferrer... can deduce that he has shifted the ontological status of kosmic habits to the inner realm (upper-left quadrant) of an individual' (p.10). This complaint is highly disingenuous, almost to the point of dishonesty.

As context, the issue here is that when Wilber described the deep structures of reality leading to Gebser-like stages of civilization as pre-given ontological structures, these so-called deep structures were rightly critiqued as metaphysical. In order to protect them from this critique, Wilber replaced these pre-given ontological structures with levels of being that are collectively constructed by humans. It would seem that this necessarily moved such structures from the right-hand quadrants (objective) to the left-hand quadrants (subjective).

The veracity of this observation is further reinforced by a passage, cited by Hartelius and Ferrer (2013) from the most recent major Wilber (2006) book, in which he stated,

*The great chain of being... which represents the essence of those premodern traditions, is actually dealing with realities and phenomena that are almost entirely in the upper-left quadrant. (p.44, emphasis in original).*

There are three reasons to read this as Wilber's own opinion, and not – as Abramson (2014) has claimed – referring to how premodern traditions assigned themselves. First, Wilber has made a direct claim here about the status of premodern traditions. Second, his language is very particular, claiming that such phenomena are almost *entirely* in his upper-left quadrant. Surely, no premodern tradition made any claims about being 'almost entirely' within individual subjectivity; this is Wilber's assignment. Third, Wilber (2006) continued on, saying, 'This [referring to the upper-left quadrant assignment] is not a negative put-down, but a positive address: these folks were consummate phenomenologists' (p.44). It is clear that, within the constraints of maintaining his position that all phenomena occur in all four quadrants, Wilber has placed these phenomena 'almost entirely' within the quadrant representing individual subjectivity.

In fact, Hartelius and Ferrer (2013) were careful to stop after this point and offer a more generous reading of Wilber, suggesting that since the quadrants are interconnected or perhaps even entangled through the nondual, it seemed possible that *assigning* a particular phenomenon to a quadrant does not necessarily *reduce* it to that quadrant. There are problems here, however. First, Wilber has not himself suggested such an interpretation, and second, if assigning spiritual phenomena 'almost entirely' to the upper-left quadrant is not a reduction, then it is hard to see how modern science is reductionistic by assigning reality only to the right-hand quadrants, as Wilber has frequently claimed.

In the end, Wilber cannot have it both ways – at least not within the structure of his AQAL model that, for all its revisions, remains subtly Cartesian (cf. Ferrer, 2002). By simple logic, either his Kosmic habits (deep structures) are subjectively constructed, and therefore not metaphysical, or else they are assertions about the objective nature of reality, and therefore metaphysical. In the first case they are reduced 'almost entirely' to the left-hand domain of subjectivity; in the second case, they are unacceptable in a modern scholarly context – as Wilber has himself acknowledged.

## **6. Wilber's definition of Integral Post-Metaphysics**

There is something refreshingly revealing about Abramson's concerns that a specific passage of Wilber was omitted from Hartelius and Ferrer's (2013) paper. It is true that the paper omitted Wilber's definition of integral post-metaphysics. This was not an extensive account of every aspect of Wilber's integral post-metaphysics, and the particular passage offered by Abramson was not quoted – a passage deeply embedded within the technical concepts of Wilber's complex worldview that would scarcely be accessible to anyone outside of Wilber's adherents. This is a lucid example of how Wilber and his supporters insist that the debate with Wilber's ideas be conducted within a comprehensive understanding and presentation of Wilber's writings. That is, any discussion of Wilber's work should be situated on the cartography of Wilber's worldview – an apparent attempt to dictate that, in order to debate with Wilber, one must be familiar with all of his writings, up on his very latest change of opinion, and that one must cite and address everything that Wilber or any of his supporters believe should be cited or addressed.

To demand that any debate about Wilber's work be situated within Wilber's model is to assert by implication that Wilber's meta-narrative has superior legitimacy. This is foundational to Wilber's work, for he seems to have positioned himself as

one of the ‘few people’ (Abramson, 2014, p.11) who can legitimately talk about nondual reality. He is among those few who are at a higher evolutionary level, and whose narrative is therefore privileged beyond that of those whose misfortune it is to be classified, in Wilber’s system and by virtue of their disagreement with him, as on a lower rung, or at the level of an inferior meme. While every reasonable effort should be put forward to understand Wilber’s writings within the larger context of his model and his contemporary thought – which changes more rapidly than that of most writers – the meta-narrative that Wilber’s work cannot be critiqued except by readers who agree that it says what Wilber claims it says, is one that deserves to be rejected.

### **Abramson’s conclusion**

In his conclusion, Abramson (2014) suggested that there should be some co-creative participation between Ferrer and Wilber – apparently Abramson’s transpersonal version of pleading for everyone to just get along. Although dialogue between diverse viewpoints is commendable and Ferrer (2011a) explicitly offered three specific directions to move forward the dialogue with Wilber, co-creation does not imply compromise with every unworkable alternative. ‘Being participatory’ is not some new ‘thing,’ some new transpersonal cult, but a call to move beyond transpersonal cults. It especially does not mean that an approach eschewing ultimate knowledge needs to come to terms with one that asserts itself as the ever-changing vehicle of unchanging ultimate knowledge.

In fact, the point of a participatory approach is precisely not to engage in competitive debates about ultimate reality, but to largely set such debates aside in favor of an avowedly limited perspective that allows for the legitimacy of spiritual experience without resorting to absolutist claims (Ferrer, 2002; cf. Friedman, 2013); given his reflections on Murti and Wilber, it seems that Abramson would deem such absolutist

claims licit. Participatory is not vying with Wilber – whether or no his works are perennialist in either claim or substance – for being the top dog in defining ultimate reality within a transpersonal or integral community. In my view, it is proposing a framework within which transpersonal work can move forward to do good scholarship and research on spiritual, mystical, and other exceptional human experiences within a scientifically-informed society, free from the impediments of metaphysical claims to privileged knowledge about ultimate reality.

### **Has Ken Wilber been misunderstood by Hartelius and Ferrer?**

Hartelius and Ferrer (2013) argued that Wilber’s work continues to be perennialist in its structure; to degree that Abramson (2014) accurately reflects Wilber’s views, his paper supports this claim. For example, Abramson attempted to defend Murti’s (1955/2013) absolutist, essentialist model of ultimate reality, explicitly equating this perennialist-like ultimate with Wilber’s view. Abramson (2014) cited Wilber as suggesting that the ‘Mystery’ has no specific qualities, then described Wilber’s nondual as having the very specific qualities of the Self of Advaita Vedanta; Abramson then equated this same Mystery with the quite different but also very specific quality of Buddhist dependent origination known as Emptiness – which is precisely a perennialist strategy. He acknowledged that Wilber’s model sees some deep structures of reality as universal, which is both a metaphysical assumption and characteristic of structuralist perennialism.

Neither Wilber nor Abramson (2014) seem prepared to accept the notion that if one makes perennialist claims, it is reasonable that one’s work will be characterised as perennialist. True, Wilber (1997) has distanced himself from traditional perennialism, but this is not the same thing as being non-perennialist. Wilber (1997) has clearly articulated what has been aptly characterized as a neoperennialist stance (Ferrer, 2002); while the latter is perhaps more apt as a

term, this does not in any way detract from the critique by Hartelius and Ferrer (2013) that his work is perennialist in nature, and subject to the limitations of such systems.

Wilber's protestations about having his work identified as perennialist deserve careful attention. This strategy is similar to that used by President Bill Clinton when he stated emphatically he had not had sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky. As he later acknowledged, he took the position that if she orally copulated him, it was her who was having sexual relations with him, not the other way around – even though in any conventional understanding, Clinton was in fact plainly involved in sexual relations with Lewinsky. His statement appeared to convey a plain and simple message that was contrary to the actual facts. Though the context is philosophy and not sexual misconduct, Wilber has similarly denied that his work is perennialist on the basis of his own narrow and unconventional technical definition of perennialism. In any ordinary usage of the term, his system is accurately and usefully described as perennialist.

The same can be said of Wilber's claim that he is post-metaphysical. Ferrer (2011a) has demonstrated in detail the manner in which Wilber has defined metaphysical in a very limited way, so that he can claim to be post-metaphysical – while his postulated nondual dimension remains clearly metaphysical to any informed reader not looking through Wilber's customised lens. Though it is entirely valid to create and use technical definitions for specific terms or constructs, Wilber has complained that his work is misunderstood whenever critics employ commonly ascribed scholarly meanings, rather than using his own idiosyncratic definitions.

If Wilber's unique definitions were superior for advancing scholarship, then his concerns might be more worthy of a hearing. Because they are unconventional in a way that seems designed merely to turn aside critiques of his work, they fail to convince. There are undoubtedly occasions on which Wilber's work has been legitimately misun-

derstood, but upon careful review it does not seem that there are significant instances of this by Hartelius and Ferrer (2013). There are clear points of difference on assumptions, definitions, and conclusions, but these do not appear to be misunderstandings.

Given the frequency of this charge of misunderstanding, it seems fair to ask whether supporters of the Wilber model are actually requiring something more than understanding. The fact that Wilber has rarely accepted critiques openly (Ferrer & Puente, 2013; Rothberg & Kelly, 1998; Rowan, Daniels, Fontana, & Walley, 2009), has been perceived as intolerant of the opinions of others (e.g., May, Krippner, & Doyle, 1992), and has attempted to block publication of work by critics (cf. Ferrer & Puente, 2013) suggests a stance in which perhaps anything short of agreement will be characterized as misunderstanding (cf. Rothberg & Kelly, 1998). While it is impossible to know all of the motivations for the claims that Wilber's work is misunderstood, the patterns of response are consistent with a belief that if only a reader understood Wilber's model in its entirety, they would surely find it compellingly true; conversely, if there is disagreement, it must be because the model has not been understood in its fullness, in its latest iteration, or through the lens of some obscure passage.

While Wilber and his supporters seem to hold a peculiarly adversarial stance toward critics, Wilber's model has nevertheless proven inspiring for thousands of readers. Perhaps it is time for the integral model to be considered in a different light.

### **A startling new role for Wilber's integral model**

Wilber's model was and is a developed version of what Ferrer (2002) has called structuralist perennialism. When the model was met in scholarly circles with critiques that it relied on metaphysical assumptions such as an objectively real nondual ultimate, Wilber began what has been a series of maneuvers to position his work in ways that

side-stepped this and other critiques. This has complicated what was otherwise a rather straightforward way of representing a number of personal, social, cultural, and natural-world variables in a simple and concise manner – even if it fails to integrate them as well as it purports to do. Yet the new and convoluted version is no less perennialist than the simpler one – this being said with the disclaimer that the term perennialist is being used in its broader and more conventional sense rather than in Wilber’s specialised sense. While a perennialist model has certain necessary shortcomings relative to applications within modern psychology or religious studies, it is still perfectly serviceable as a meaning-making frame.

In fact, there is something intuitively attractive about the notion that a person from a different spiritual tradition is involved in a process very much like one’s own quest. It is an easily-grasped approximation that allows the individual to feel resonance with those of other paths within the simple language of lived experience. In this first-approach application, perennialism is a humane and relational alternative to prejudice, orthodoxy, and religious extremism. With its postulated nondual dimension it is an affirmation of the value of lived experience, of interconnectedness, of spirituality. Relieved of the notion that his work will usher in an entirely new era, Wilber’s model is a sophisticated version of perennialism that serves these worthy human purposes quite well.

Wilber’s construction teaches as much by where it falls short as by where it succeeds. For example, the moment the shared spiritual goal of humanity is characterised in any way – even as nondual – this seemingly inclusive model immediately transforms into a hierarchical ranking of different spiritual paths (Ferrer, 2002). This suggests that articulating any specific universals in human spirituality may be quite difficult indeed. Even if the ultimate spiritual goal is ineffable but remains factually the same for all traditions, it must be in some sense objective; this in turn requires that it must have specific qual-

ities that would confirm some spiritual paths as actually superior to others. Furthermore, if the qualities of this goal can only be perceived within the deep interiority of great mystics or saints or synthesizers, then spirituality is necessarily authoritarian in structure – emancipation, liberation, or redemption requires submission to a spiritual reality defined by others. One might say that Wilber’s model has shone a light on perennialism in a way that shows the need for a philosophy that would go quite beyond both postmodernism and perennialism – a need that might go unrecognised without the work that Wilber has done.

Something similar is true of states of consciousness, for if attainment of spiritual goals involves the achievement of a particular state, then a perennialist frame permits no diversity of phenomenology (Ferrer, 2011a); it imposes an arbitrary conceptual framework on phenomenological experience that necessarily claims to supercede any traditional interpretation, while simultaneously denying that a framework is being imposed. It discounts contradictory data as evidence of faulty interpretation—meaning that the interpreters are not using the designated perennialist frame. Perhaps more seriously, any description of an ultimate state will necessarily be simplified and generalised so as to fit with the descriptions of multiple traditions. In this case, it may become more difficult to distinguish simple embodied states from those that may require many decades of intensive spiritual practice to achieve, if they are achieved at all. This, in turn, may inflate the descriptions of easily accessible states in such a way that beginners who achieve them may think that they are much farther along the spiritual path than they actually are (e.g., Blackstone, 2006; Krystal, 2003). In this way a perennialist approach to ultimate states may foster spiritual inflation and discredit more credible research on such phenomena.

Wilber’s body of work also demonstrates that any model overtly situated on a metaphysical claim is unlikely to be suitable for

the purposes of contemporary scholarship or science. Metaphysical systems are currently out of fashion because there is no way to support them with publicly observable evidence. Once hidden causes or concealed dimensions of reality are called on to account for how the world appears to external senses, it is difficult to offer anything other than verbal arguments that the nondual is a better causative agent than the caprices of Zeus or Baal or the Flying Spaghetti Monster. This fact does not prevent people from many cultures and levels of education from believing in and acting based on providence, luck, small superstitious practices, or the blessings of saints. Yet the context of scholarship, specifically, does not allow for metaphysically-based systems. Nor does Wilber's (e.g., 1990, 1995, 1997) proposal for his version of a radical empiricism solve this, for it does not meet the standards necessary for a credible research method for obtaining information from inner domains (Ferrer, 2002).

As critics have pointed out, Wilber's model is imperfect in a variety of ways (e.g., Ferrer, 2000, 2002, 2011b; Lahood, 2010a, 2010b; Rothberg & Kelly, 1998). A number of the basic representations of facts in science and research are more flawed than should be acceptable from even a popular author (Falk, 2009). As Hartelius and Ferrer (2013) observed, it is still thoroughly metaphysical and perennialist in its structure, which makes it of minimal use in a scholarly

context. But as an approximation for a popular audience not overly concerned with philosophy, conceptual consistency, or accuracy in every detail of scientific fact or theory, it does offer an inspirational vision that promotes the validity of inner experience and human spirituality, and espouses the relatedness of various spiritual traditions.

Wilber's integral model is a myth for the modern world – in the best sense of that term. It draws on the language of science and psychology, but it is not scientific, and it is not a psychology in any conventional sense. As a philosophy it is unique but not novel. As a guide to spirituality, it is more conceptual than practical – yet it does convey the passionate effort of one man to make meaningful sense of life within modernity. It is no shame that Wilber's model falls short on the likely-impossible task of providing a valid theory of everything (cf. Wilber, 2000). Rather than attempting what it does poorly – such as convoluting itself to try to be many things that it is not – perhaps Wilber's integral model should embrace what it does well, and leave it at that.

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# The Emperor's New Clothes: Ferrer isn't wearing any – Participatory is perennial. A reply to Hartelius

John Abramson

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## Introduction

I would like to thank Hartelius for his substantial and informative response to my article, 'The misunderstanding and misinterpretation of key aspects of Ken Wilber's work in Hartelius and Ferrer's (2013) assessment'. It opens the debate I have requested and my thanks to the editor for the opportunity of continuing this here. I would also like to acknowledge Hartelius' gripping style of delivery during which I have been variously likened in my manner of writing

- to Bill Clinton's denial of having sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky about my insistence that Wilber does not assert a single nondual ultimate.
- Compared to a climate change denier when I contended that Hartelius and Ferrer had missed the point about T.R.V. Murti's and Wilber's 'absolute'.
- Accused of almost reaching the point of dishonesty when I identified Wilber's complaint that Ferrer can deduce that he has shifted the ontological status of Kosmic habits to the inner realm (upper left quadrant) of the individual.

Hartelius has therefore employed sex, ecology and (lack of) spirituality in his criticisms. I respond to these below in the first part of my response to Hartelius, but for the present, although I realise Hartelius' 'sex' comment was no doubt said tongue in cheek there is nevertheless something in it, and perhaps more than Hartelius realises. However, the opposite applies to his remarks concerning 'ecology' and 'lack of spirituality'. Besides responding to Hartelius (2015) I intend to attempt to move the debate on by setting out some of my own crit-

icisms of Wilber's and Ferrer's work.

Hartelius characterises me as a supporter of Wilber in the sense that he suggests I am wedded to his views and am, for example, willing to unearth 'a passage deeply embedded within the technical concepts of Wilber's complex worldview that would scarcely be accessible to anyone outside of Wilber's adherents'. In this instance Hartelius conflates the need to be clear about what is being discussed i.e. Wilber's definition of integral post-metaphysics, and the ease with which such a definition can be accessed. Hartelius refers to this as 'a lucid example of how Wilber and his supporters insist that the debate with Wilber's ideas be conducted within a comprehensive understanding and presentation of Wilber's writings'. But this is not the case; I just identify what Wilber means when he refers to integral post-metaphysics. I go along with Hartelius insofar as Wilber's definition is hard to find but his inflationary extension of this is unwarranted.

I agree, of course, that Hartelius is entitled to present whatever his interpretation of my motivation in writing my article might be. But *I insist* my motivation is to overcome misunderstandings I perceive of Wilber's work and *I suggest* that, in the case of considering integral post-metaphysics, starting with a definition is reasonable. As to whether I am a supporter of Wilber's work and wedded to his views; I am the former and am not the latter. I am a supporter of Wilber's views partly because, as Ferrer has to some extent intimated, he is a genius<sup>7</sup> in the field of transpersonal psychology<sup>8</sup>. And by 'supporter' I mean it is worthwhile making an effort to understand, in the first instance,

Wilber's work in the terms he presents it but certainly not an unqualified acceptance that Hartelius attributes to me. I am not wedded to Wilber's views because although I almost invariably find them stimulating they can, on investigation, appear misconceived. Examples of two such instances are:

- Wilber's technique of ranking spiritual states and stages (e.g. nondual higher than theism) is flawed.
- Wilber has, I argue, fundamentally misunderstood the relationship between spiritual states and stages of development (cf. the Wilber-Combs matrix; Wilber, 2006, p.88–93). Insofar as I am correct about this, an important implication of this misunderstanding is that Wilber is largely misguided in one current area of his work i.e. promulgating a 'Fourth Turning of Buddhism' (cf. Wilber, 2014).

### **The Emperor's New Clothes**

An elucidation of these criticisms of Wilber's work will be the subject of later sections. But first some areas of disagreement with Ferrer's work will be discussed intertwined with relevant rejoinders to issues raised by Hartelius (2015).

In my opinion, from a certain definition of perennialism<sup>9</sup>, Ferrer's depiction of the mystery is arguably perennialist. Since the participatory paradigm involves intimate participation with the mystery, my argument therefore extends to attributing perennialism to Ferrer's participatory turn. As both Hartelius and Ferrer make clear, 'perennialism begins with the assumption that there is a single truth underlying various traditions' (Hartelius and Ferrer, 2013, p.190).

And Ferrer's depiction of the Mystery includes precisely this assumption:

*There is a way, I believe, in which we can legitimately talk about a shared spiritual power, one reality, one world or one truth... a common spiritual dynamism underlying the plurality of spiritual insights and ultimates. (Ferrer, 2002, p.190; cited in Abramson 2014, p.5; emphasis added)*

In my 2014 article, I used this quote to compare Wilber's and Ferrer's position on a single truth. But now I wish to draw its arguably more startling significance i.e. as a pointer towards the perennial nature of Ferrer's account of the mystery. Hartelius rejected my proposition of a linkage between Wilber and Ferrer's position on a single truth based in part on a complaint that I based this on 'a 36-word quote [as above] from Ferrer (2002)' (Hartelius, 2015). Hartelius implies that this was an isolated comment by Ferrer, but similar references connecting the mystery to a single truth are *very common* in Ferrer's writing e.g. 'There is a way, I believe, in which we can legitimately talk about a shared spiritual power, one reality, one world or one truth...' (Ferrer and Sherman, 2008, p.156; Ferrer, 2005, p.127); the mystery is the 'generative power of life, the cosmos, and/or the spirit' (Ferrer, 2011, p.2); 'the mystery that is source of all' (Ferrer, 2002, p.xiv); 'the Mystery out of which everything arises' (Ferrer et al., 2005, p.311; Ferrer and Sherman, 2008, pp.40,137,152; Ferrer, 2006); 'a mystery out of which everything arises' (Ferrer, 2013, p.102); 'the ultimate unity of the mystery' (Hartelius and Ferrer, 2013, p.197); the participatory approach does not

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<sup>7</sup> 'As I believe Wilber himself would admit, his particular genius manifests not in invention, but in the integration of others' ideas.' Ferrer (2011b, p.13)

<sup>8</sup> Many scholars within transpersonal psychology continue to make use of Wilber's work, or at least to criticise it, notwithstanding his now longstanding disassociation from the field in favour of integral spirituality.

<sup>9</sup> i.e. perennialism In the sense of all religions stemming from 'one truth' which I agree with Hartelius is the generally held view of perennialism. Specifically this one truth is broadly as described under the heading of perspectivist perennialism, which is one of five types of perennialism's described by Ferrer (2002, pp.78–79) i.e. 'many paths and many goals', but excluding Hick's (1992) depiction of ultimate reality as Noumenal. A more complete account of how I choose to define perspectivist perennialism is developed below.

seek... [to refute] ...an ultimate beyond all possible ultimates... rather it rejects dubious perennialist equivalences among religious ultimate's' (Ferrer, 2011a, p.19).

The above analysis and the weight of the above quotes from Ferrer and Hartelius suggest that 'In any ordinary usage of the term, ... [Ferrer's] system... is accurately and usefully described as perennialist'. This quote is from Hartelius, 2015, and relates to his justification to tie Wilber's system to perennialism. However, as will now be apparent, this same justification by Hartelius apparently ties Ferrer's account of the mystery to perennialism. After all as Hartelius says 'if one makes perennialist claims, it is reasonable that one's work will be characterised as perennialist' (Hartelius, 2015).

The question might naturally arise of why an explicit perennialist charge has not, to my knowledge, previously been made in relation to Ferrer's account of the mystery. However, George Adams' review of 'The participatory turn' (Ferrer and Sherman, 2008) can be interpreted to go some way towards this:

*... in terms of the work still facing Ferrer, there is the challenge of clarifying his position regarding the nature of the spiritual reality which is the object of religious experience. Ferrer declares that his approach is free of any ontological objectivity ('no pre-given ultimate reality exists' (Ferrer and Sherman, 2008, p.142)), but he frequently uses terms such as 'mystery', 'spiritual power', 'reality', and other designations that imply that there is some sort of spiritual reality out there (or in here), however varied are its expressions. In other words, there is an implied ontological objectivity in Ferrer's model, even if it is an objectivity that avoids essentialist reifications and that cannot be divorced from the elusive variability and*

*radical creative indeterminacy of the sacred. Further clarification of Ferrer's understanding of this sacred reality is called for, however challenging that task might be while operating from a participatory model. (Adams, 2011).*

Compare Adams' assessment that Ferrer:

*... frequently uses terms such as 'mystery', ... 'reality', ... that imply that there is some sort of spiritual reality ... In other words, there is an implied ontological objectivity in Ferrer's model. (Adams, 2011)*

with Hartelius' comment about perennialism's shared spiritual goal, or ultimate of all possible ultimate realities:

*Even if the ultimate spiritual goal [of perennialism] is ineffable but remains factually the same for all traditions, it must be in some sense objective.<sup>10</sup> (Hartelius, 2015)*

Hartelius' point is that the assertion of perennialism of one truth, or an ultimate spiritual goal, for all traditions necessarily implies that this one truth/ultimate spiritual goal 'must be in some sense objective'. In other words an objective one truth/ultimate spiritual goal is perennialist. But Adams charges Ferrer with an implied objectivity of Ferrer's account of the Mystery which is the same, according to my analysis, as Hartelius' implying the Mystery is perennialist.

### ***T.R.V. Murti's absolute, Ferrer's mystery and perspectivist perennialism's ultimate reality***

I argued that Ferrer's account of the mystery is perennialist, which Ferrer associates with Wilber's work, which in turn is associated with T.R.V Murti's absolute. I will now consider how this impacts on Hartelius'

<sup>10</sup>In my opinion the sense in which perspectivist perennialism, as defined here, is objective should be related to the perspective of the two truths of Buddhism. Using that perspective, the sense is conventional rather than the ultimate. That is, although I agree with Hartelius and Ferrer (but only from a conventional perspective) that perspectivist perennialism does imply a single truth – as indeed my analysis suggests that so does the mystery; neither perspectivist perennialism or the mystery suggest one truth from an ultimate perspective. (cf Abramson 2015, p.5).

assertion that I am a 'climate change denier' when I contended that Hartelius and Ferrer had missed the point about T.R.V. Murti's and Wilber's 'absolute'. As a starting point for this, Ferrer introduces the role of the absolute in perennialism:

*[P]erennialists often assert that, because multiplicity implies relativity, a plurality of absolutes is both a logical and a metaphysical absurdity: 'The absolute must of necessity be one and, in fact, the one as asserted by so many metaphysicians over the ages' (Nasr, 1996, p.19). This commitment to a monistic metaphysics is closely related to the perennialist defense of the universality of mysticism. As Perovich (1985), a perennialist philosopher, puts it: 'The point [of the perennial philosophers] in insisting on the identity of mystical experiences was, after all, to bolster the claim that the most varied mystics have established contact with 'the one ultimate truth' (p.75). (Ferrer, 2000, pp.17,18)*

There is an apparent confusion here concerning Ferrer's, Nasr's and Perovich's use of the term absolute, at least as far as Murti/Wilber understand the term absolute, and similarly how I define absolute in the context of the ultimate realities of perspectivist perennialism. T.R.V. Murti's account of 'the absolute' is of an absolute beyond all possible absolutes (1960, pp.320,321,327). Thus there is a two stage structure of absolutes according to Murti and this is mirrored in both:

- a) Ferrer's account of two stages of ultimate realities stemming from the mystery, and
- b) Perspectivist perennialism's account depicting different dimensions i.e. God, Nirvana, Brahman, Allah, Tao, Nondual etc. of the same ultimate reality<sup>11</sup> (cf. Ferrer's 2002 illustration on p.79)

All three systems i.e. Murti's, Ferrer's, and perspectivist perennialism's have an ultimate beyond all possible ultimates, which for Murti is an absolute that is beyond all Hindu and Buddhist religious absolutes, for Ferrer is the mystery, and for perspectivist perennialism is what Ferrer describes as a ground of being (Ferrer, 2002, p.78). All three also have multiple ultimates that are sourced from these i.e. multiple absolutes (Murti), multiple ontological ultimate's (Ferrer) and using Ferrer's terminology, many goals of perspectivist perennialism. Examples of Murti's 'second stage' absolutes are the absolutes of Advaita Vedānta in Hinduism, and Vijñānavāda and Mādhyamika in Buddhism. These three examples from Murti are included in the multiple 'second stage' ultimate realities of Ferrer's participatory model and perspectivist perennialism except they are referred to as ultimate realities rather than Murti's reference to them as multiple absolutes. The participatory and perennial models also encompass additional ultimate realities to that recognised by Murti e.g. God, Allah.

I conclude from the above analysis that

- there is congruence between the two stage structure of the account of ultimate realities in Ferrer's work and in perspectivist perennialism. This congruence can be extended to Murti's system but with the import caveats that Murti refers to absolute rather than ultimate reality and he restricts 'second stage' ultimate/absolute realities to those in the Hindu and Buddhist religions. This supports my contention that Ferrer's account of the mystery is perennialist<sup>12</sup>.
- Ferrer's (Ferrer, 2000, pp.17–18) above use of the quote by Nasr that mentions 'The absolute must of necessity be one' is problematic because it should be qualified to relate to the 'absolute that is

<sup>11</sup>This is another way of referring to an ultimate reality that is beyond any religious ultimate realities.

<sup>12</sup>On one of Ferrer's definitions of perennialism i.e. perspectivist perennialism's; but one such definition is sufficient to label Ferrer's account of the mystery as perennialist.

beyond all religious absolutes'. That is, Ferrer, following Nasr, has conflated the 'absolute that is beyond all religious absolutes' with the multiple absolutes of the different traditions.

- this is a further reason to support the contention I made in Abramson, 2014, pp.5–8 that Ferrer's dismissal of Murti's 'absolute' is almost wholly unwarranted i.e. Ferrer appears to overlook that his account of the 'one truth' mystery that is the source of all ontological ultimate realities is structurally very similar to Murti's 'the absolute' that is the source of all Hindu and Buddhist absolutes. I have more to say about Ferrer's dismissal in a latter section.

In discussing perennialism Hartelius appears, like Ferrer, to have conflated the 'ultimate reality beyond all possible ultimates', which he refers to as an ineffable ultimate spiritual goal, with the multiple ultimate realities of the different traditions.

Ferrer pointed to the simple and logical fact that a perennialist model requires an objective, transcendent ultimate that is apprehended deep within personal subjectivity. That ultimate must be objective in order for it to be the consistent destination of all traditions. (Hartelius 2015).

Besides the conflation I have referred to, Hartelius also apparently fails to realise he is misapplying conventional logic in relation to ultimate reality. As I mentioned in Abramson, 2014, p.5 Hartelius and Ferrer have failed to understand that drawing an absolute and relative distinction is an essential element in understanding ultimate reality and as Mipham, 2005, p.99, cautions

us, failure to do this will result 'in hopeless confusion'<sup>13</sup> if we fail to differentiate conventional from ultimate perspectives on reality. With both a lack of such differentiation and conflation present in the above quote by Hartelius, it will take some unpicking.

As Hartelius implies, it is 'simple and logical' reasoning that would lead to a conclusion that a perennialist model requires an objective transcendent ultimate. But simple and logical reasoning in relation to ultimate reality is precisely what Mipham warns us will lead to confusion. The premise, for example, of a) perspectivist perennialism, b) Murti's account of the absolute and c) Ferrer's account of the mystery is that their respective understanding of an ultimate reality beyond all other ultimates cannot be directly known<sup>14</sup>. To assign objectivity to this ultimate by conventional logic is fanciful. As Ferrer would say in respect of the mystery e.g. Ferrer, 2002, p.180 (citing Sells, 1994); and as Murti would say in respect of 'the Absolute' e.g. Murti, 1960, p.320; and as can also be said of the ultimate beyond all possible ultimates of perspectivist perennialism; nothing can be said of these ultimates – including that.

In the light of the preceding analysis it is informative to review Ferrer's opinion about the key differences between the participatory model and perennialism:

*[H]ere is where participatory thinking radically departs from perennialism, I maintain that there is a multiplicity of transconceptual disclosures of reality. Perennialists erroneously assume that a transconceptual disclosure of reality must be necessarily 'one', and, actually, the one metaphysically*

<sup>13</sup>The context in Abramson, 2014 was Wilber's account of what Hartelius and Ferrer described as a single nondual reality – but Mipham's sentiment applies equally to Hartelius' account of a 'transcendent ultimate'.

<sup>14</sup>In this connection it is notable that Wilber claims nondual emptiness is an ultimate beyond all possible ultimates i.e. the very ground of all other ultimates. As Buddhist texts make clear, nondual emptiness can be directly known through, for example, meditative equipoise. But I agree, with Hartelius and Ferrer that, in my terminology, nondual emptiness is a 'second stage' ultimate reality, intrinsically undifferentiated in its spiritual efficacy with other 'second stage' ultimates. This is consistent with the point made here i.e. all 'second stage' ultimates can be known (usually in higher states of consciousness) but the 'first stage' ultimate that is beyond any of them cannot be known, by humans at least, in its entirety.

*envisioned and pursued in certain traditional spiritual systems. Put somewhat differently, perennialists generally believe that plurality emerges from concepts and interpretations, and that the cessation of conceptual proliferation must then result in a single apprehension of 'things as they really are.' (Ferrer and Sherman, 2008, p.139).*

Ferrer is *precisely wrong* about his claim that participatory thinking radically departs from perspectivist perennialism. This is so for the simple reason that the transconceptual disclosure of reality in perspectivist perennialism is *multiple* and indeed parallels that of the participatory model. What is apparent here is lack of differentiation between transconceptual disclosure of realities on the one hand and an ultimate beyond all possible ultimates on the other. Ferrer could *conventionally* refer to the latter as 'one' in perspectivist perennialism. But as I have been at pains to point out, this is not a difference with the participatory model; it is a similarity i.e. the mystery can be conventionally referred to as 'one' and as the many citations I provide in the 'The Emperor's New Clothes' section testify; Ferrer does exactly that.

### **T.R.V. Murti's model of ultimate or absolute reality**

As Murti (1960) explains, transconceptual disclosure of reality depends on the tradition that is practised to enable one to disclose that reality. The analogy he uses is the way 'the centre of a circle is reached from the periphery by different radii' (p.327) and each tradition is attempting to reach the centre of the circle i.e. 'the absolute', by its exclusive radii. Murti further explains that the centre of the circle can be approached but not reached by any of the possible radii i.e. authentic paths, but that 'persons adopting different radii may genuinely feel that they are on the right path to the centre and others are not. For each votary may see the centre looming ahead of him; but he cannot, from the nature of his predicament,

see that others also may be reaching the centre through their particular modes of approach.' (p.321).

Murti's model is consistent with the first and second stage ultimate realities that I have referred to previously i.e. Murti's 'centre of a circle' would correspond to the unknowable ultimate beyond all possible ultimates and different radii of the circle correspond to, for example, the ultimate realities of the traditions. Interestingly, given Ferrer's critical view of Murti's absolute e.g. Ferrer, 2002, pp.102,103; Murti's model seems appropriate to describe the relationship between Ferrer's account of the mystery i.e. 'centre of the circle', and the ontologically real ultimates stemming from the mystery i.e. 'the possible radii'.

Murti's model is one way of pointing to ultimate reality. In the context of this response to Hartelius it helps illustrate some import commonality between Murti's, Ferrer's, and perspectivist perennialism's account of reality. I will now introduce another such model has, I argue, some additional explanatory advantages over Murti's model; albeit it is rather more complex.

### **A model of ultimate reality using the properties of infinity**

This model uses some properties of infinity to provide a pointer to ultimate reality. It presupposes no mathematical knowledge and only requires an appreciation of certain properties of infinity that are illustrated in the following two citations:

*Spatial infinity is beyond conception... neither reason nor imagination can grasp it, for any conception necessarily limits what is, by definition illimitable... The science of mathematics accepts the notion of infinity even though it is beyond and apparently contrary to reason. It is a concept accepted without being understood: a baffling yet necessary idea, something known about without in any real way being known. (Hill, 1997, p.46)*

... what Cantor's research demonstrates is that there are multiple infinities, multiple kinds of infinities, infinities that can be rigorously differentiated, infinities that are greater than other infinities. (Sallis, 2012, p.199)

Reasons for the effectiveness of choosing the properties of infinity as a pointer to ultimate reality include:

- infinity is unbounded (Hill, 1997, p.46). In that respect it is like the absolute which has no boundary (Murti, 1960, p.285, n.3).
- infinity is beyond reason (Hill, 1997, p.46) and again, this is a property of the absolute (Murti, 1960, p.135)
- there are multiple kinds of infinity (Sallis, 2012, p.199) and there are multiple kinds of absolute (Murti, 1960, Chapter 13).
- there are infinities that can be rigorously differentiated (Sallis, 2012, p.199) and there are Absolutes e.g. the absolutes of Advaita Vedānta, Vijñānavāda and Mādhyamika, that are rigorously differentiated (Murti, 1960, Chapter 13).
- there are infinities that are greater than other infinities. (Sallis, 2012, p.199) and The absolute (Murti, 1960, p.320) is beyond (or greater than) all religious absolutes.

Thus the properties of infinity, which are established by rigorous mathematical proof, appear to be a useful guide to the properties of absolute reality. Indeed, Infinity is referred to extensively in some Buddhist scriptures that refer to absolute reality. Some extracts from 'The Flower Ornament Scripture' and Thomas Cleary's commentary, gives a flavour of this:

*Yet another function of the scripture, often unsuspected or considered gratuitous hyperbole, is to affirm the infinity of the path. (Cleary, 1993, p.51)*

*... the real potential of humanity is so much greater than imagined as to be virtually infi-*

*nite, even if that infinity can never embrace the infinity of infinities. (Cleary, 1993, p.52)*

*By transcendence of all perceptions of form... they attain to and abide in the realm of infinity of space, aware of infinite space. Totally transcending the realm of infinity of space, they attain to and abide in the realm of infinity of consciousness, aware of boundless consciousness. By totally transcending the realm of infinity of consciousness, they attain to and abide in the realm of nothingness, aware of the absence of anything at all. [[trans] Cleary, 1993, p.724)*

### **Murti's account of the absolute**

Hartelius' depiction of me, and those holding the opinion I express on this issue, as akin to climate change deniers demands a robust response. As I indicated in Abramson (2014), I believe Ferrer's dismissal of Murti's (and Wilber's) account of the absolute, although apparently well argued and well supported by other scholars, is radically flawed. Once the blinkers Ferrer is unaware he is wearing are removed, his arguments are exposed as a full explanation of just one side of what has been widely recognised for centuries among scholars and practitioners as an unresolved issue.

Some 25 per cent of my 2014 article was related to Murti's absolute and this material was summarily dismissed in Hartelius' 2015 response. Hartelius' adopts the tactic of failing to address the points I make in a scholarly manner and instead responds with an unsubstantiated claim that the case I make is akin to that of a climate denier. This does no service to an informed debate and I will therefore attempt to put a further reason for Hartelius and Ferrer to look again at the evidence I have presented.

One of the notable scholars that Ferrer (2002, p.103) cites in his dismissal of Murti's account of the absolute is Jay Garfield (1994). Indeed Garfield, together with many other distinguished scholars<sup>15</sup> is opposed to Murti's account of the absolute. But Garfield<sup>16</sup>, together with many other

scholars who are opposed to Murti's absolutist views, nevertheless recognises the legitimacy of the polarised views regarding an absolute in Buddhism (e.g. Thakchöe, 2007, p.90; Newland and Tillemans<sup>17</sup>, 2011, p.4). Is Hartelius saying these scholars, not to mention Capriles (2009), Chatterjee (1962), Coward (2003), Hookham (1992), Lindtner (1982), Sebastian (2008) and Sprung (1979) whom I mentioned in Abramson (2014, p.6) are all, by taking an interpretation of an absolute in Buddhism seriously, are akin to climate deniers?<sup>2</sup>

### **The Wilber-Combs lattice is misconceived (Part 1)**

In this section I critique a key aspect of Wilber's work i.e. the Wilber-Combs Lattice. The issue that Ken Wilber and Allan Combs (independently) addressed that resulted in the Wilber-Combs Lattice was the way Western stages of development (e.g. Hy and Loevinger, 1996; Cook-Greuter, 2011) relate to Eastern spiritual states (e.g. using Wilber's terminology, gross, psychic, subtle, causal and nondual states of consciousness). The background to Wilber's and Combs' work on this was presented in a previous issue of this journal by Michael Daniels in Rowen et al., 2009, pp.12–16. I will therefore just give a very brief resume of this.

For the purpose of my critique I would just note that in the two decades leading up to the turn of the century, Western researchers such as Wilber and Combs integrated western stages of development<sup>18</sup> with eastern states of consciousness by stacking the latter on top of the former. This implied that someone experiencing a higher stage of consciousness would necessarily have had to be at among the less than 1 per cent of the

population thought to be at the highest level of development. Remarkably, this odd implication did not prevent this 'stacking' model prevailing through the 1980's and 1990's. But then it became apparent to Wilber (and independently to Combs) that a higher state of consciousness can be experienced at any stage of development (Wilber, 2006, p.89) – and they jointly promulgated the Wilber-Combs Lattice that reflects this (see table 1).

Thus the Wilber-Combs lattice represents a considerable advance in terms of an explanatory model compared to the clearly flawed earlier model. For example it illustrates that although anyone can potentially experience any state of consciousness, they will always report that in the terms of the stage of consciousness that they have attained. However Daniels (Rowen et al., 2009, pp.13–16) raises an important objection regarding the particular structure stages in the above model. He points out that the bottom five are Piagetian (p.14) whereas the top five are taken from Aurobindo's work. And he is adamant that Wilber (2006) gives no justification for including the Aurobindo stages. Wilber appears to be making a similar mistake to that when he stacked eastern states on western stages. That is, Aurobindo's stages of development are intimately related to the sequential states of psychic, subtle, causal and nondual and therefore it appears Wilber is once again stacking states on stages by introducing the five Aurobindo stages onto those of recognised western Piaget/Loevinger stages of development.

### **The Wilber-Combs lattice is misconceived (Part 2)**

Just as Wilber (2006) explains how he and Combs missed something that, in retrospect,

<sup>15</sup>e.g. the nine scholars who together with Garfield comprise the Cowherds (2011) among many others. But as I point out (Abramson, 2014) there are many contemporary scholars who accept Murti's account of the absolute.

<sup>16</sup>e.g. see Garfield's foreword to Thakchöe, 2007, or Garfield, 1994, pp.vii,viii where Garfield suggests Murti's interpretation of Nāgārjuna is as valid as his.

<sup>17</sup>Newland and Tillemans refer (p.4) to the 15th century Madhyamika Gorampa, who had similar views to Murti on the absolute.

<sup>18</sup>the highest stage of development in the Western models at that time was 'somewhere around... Loevinger's integrated' (Wilber, 2006, p.88).

Table 1: The Wilber-Combs lattice (adapted from Wilber, 2006).

		State-stages			
		Gross	Subtle	Casual	Nondual
Structure-stages	Supermind	*	*	*	*
	Overmind (previously Causal)	*	*	*	*
	Meta-Mind (previously Subtle)	*	*	*	*
	Para-Mind (previously Psychic)	*	*	*	*
	High Vision-Logic (Higher Mind)	*	*	*	*
	Low Vision-Logic	*	*	*	*
	Pluralistic	*	*	*	*
	Rational	*	*	*	*
	Mythic	*	*	*	*
	Archaic	*	*	*	*

was obvious i.e. that the attainment of states and stages can be achieved independently of each other, I suggest their Wilber-Combs lattice has overlooked another apparently obvious error in its construction. Although they correctly note from the evidence of eminent researches such as Cook-Greuter (2011) that stage development is sequential and that stages cannot be skipped; they fail to recognise that this un-skipable stage progression can occur *independently within the gross, subtle and causal realms*. Wilber says as much in his book ‘one taste’:

... that ego and soul and spirit can in many ways coexist and develop together, because

*they are relatively separate streams flowing through the waves in the great nest of being. And there can be, on occasion, rather uneven development in between these streams.... This is why some early cultures apparently showed advanced psychic capacities but rather poor frontal development. (Wilber, 2000, p.275).*

In addition, the evidence Wilber uses from western researchers to support his contention that stages of development cannot be skipped are almost wholly within the gross realm. Thus for example in some recent results from Cook-Greuter (2011, p.59) only 0.06 per cent of the protocols came from Stage 10 (i.e. the subtle realm).

If my reasoning stands up to scrutiny, it seems to imply that there should be three relatively independent sets of Wilber-Combs lattices in respect of a person's development of their ego in the gross realm, their soul in the subtle realm and their spirit in the causal realm. It would answer Daniels' point about why Wilber has added Aurobindo's stages of development on top of those of Piaget/Loevinger because only the Piaget/Loevinger stages would be in the first of the three Wilber-Combs lattices and Aurobindo's stages would be appropriately split up between the other two.

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# Participatory thought has no emperor and no absolute – A further response to Abramson

Glenn Hartelius

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ABRAMSON HAS ANSWERED the current paper (Hartelius, this issue) with a response entitled, ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes: Ferrer isn’t wearing any – Participatory is perennial’ (this issue). This brief further rejoinder to Abramson will consider which pieces of discussion appear to be settled, which remain, and which are somewhat new. It will also review what Ferrer has meant by his use of the term *mystery* and how this differs radically from a perennialist ultimate or absolute.

Abramson begins with comments about the images that were employed to illustrate certain points in my response. While I consider these among its least important aspects, it is unfortunate that Abramson seems to have taken these as characterisations of himself; this is not the case. I have compared Wilber’s protestations at having his work identified as perennialist with Clinton’s denial that he had sexual relations with Ms. Lewinsky; I have compared the significance of Murti’s absolutist perspectives with that of climate deniers; I characterised as ‘disingenuous, almost to the point of dishonesty’, Wilber’s incredulity when his shift of the status of his Kosmic habits ‘almost entirely’ to the upper left quadrant was noted, given that this statement was quoted directly from Wilber’s own most recent major book. On reflection, these comparisons seem fair; yet none are characterisations of Abramson. His responses are most appreciated.

It also seems necessary to point out that I have no particular opinion about Abramson’s motivations, nor about his level of commitment to Wilber’s ideas. However, Abramson seemed to suggest repeatedly, and

a bit unreasonably, that our brief review of Wilber’s work might lack validity unless we considered very specific sections of Wilber’s writing. For example, Abramson (2014) listed as one of our six major ‘misunderstandings’ of Wilber’s work the fact that we had omitted specific passages in which Wilber offered definitions of integral post-metaphysics (pp.10–11), putting this omission forward as part of the evidence that we had ‘a case to answer’ (p.4). Had the original paper to which Abramson responded (Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013) been focused on integral post-metaphysics, then Abramson’s requirement that it start with Wilber’s definitions, however obscure, would be more reasonable. However, the title of that paper was, ‘Transpersonal philosophy: The participatory turn’; accordingly, it focused primarily on participatory thought and the context and local history out of which it arose.

Of the six alleged misunderstandings listed in the titles of Abramson’s (2014) numbered sections, the only one that Abramson maintains in his response is the complaint that Wilber’s specific definition of integral post-metaphysics was omitted from our paper; a matter that has just been addressed. On the other hand, agreement appears to have been reached on the rather central contention that Wilber’s work remains perennialist in nature, even in its latest iteration – at least from a conventional perspective. Given that Abramson protested such a characterisation in various ways throughout his initial critique, his reversal on this point is quite significant. It seems that dialogue does produce progress.

In addition, Abramson has agreed that perspectival perennialism does imply a

single objective ultimate when viewed from a conventional perspective. He also seems to accede that appeal to a nondual ultimate is necessary in order to reconcile an experiential Cartesian divide between subject and object, and that an objective perennialist ultimate is not credible. He has not raised further charges regarding Ferrer's failure to address Wilber's critiques; the account of Ferrer's thorough responses to Wilber's comments seems to have silenced this concern. There is also no further protest regarding the fact that if any of Wilber's Kosmic habits are universal, then they are necessarily objective in character – at least from a conventional perspective – and subject to Ferrer's critique of the subtle Cartesianism that pervades any perennialist approach. Nor does Abramson rebut the point that it was Wilber himself who assigned his Kosmic habits 'almost exclusively' to his upper-left quadrant.

It would seem, then, that the two main issues remaining in contention from Abramson's initial critique are, (a) his concern that ultimate reality cannot be correctly understood from a conventional perspective, and (b) his assertion that Murti's absolutist model should be considered seriously as representing a correct view of ultimate reality. This central concern with ultimate or absolute reality carries over into Abramson's relatively new thesis – namely that Ferrer's positions are also perennialist in nature. It is gratifying that Abramson has developed these remaining points in greater detail, in service of the discussion.

It is possible to note, in brief, that Hartelius and Ferrer both hold that ultimate or absolute reality is a fictive construct that is of little use in contemporary scholarship. Abramson, while noting that "nothing can be said of these ultimates," continues from there to say quite a bit about the nature of ultimate reality, including setting forth Murti's model, and then proposing his own model of ultimate reality based, interestingly and somewhat inexplicably, on mathematical concepts of infinity. I do not share

Abramson's conviction that this subject is of any great importance, and he is correct in noting that I did not address in detail his points regarding Murti; the response sidestepped these views as largely irrelevant to current scholarly debate, for reasons already put forward. Scholars of various spiritual traditions are likely to remain locked in debate about whether or not some particular tradition such as Buddhism conceives of a spiritual ultimate, but this does not make the issue of absolute reality of any greater importance to contemporary religious studies.

Despite the marginal status of speculations about absolute reality, Abramson seems determined to project this issue onto Ferrer's work. What Abramson has demonstrated is that Ferrer has frequently used the term *mystery* to refer to the fact that spiritual striving often seeks, apprehends, or imagines something beyond what is known or familiar: an elevation to something higher, a descent to something more original, progress toward something more edifying, or communion with something less obvious. It would be difficult to speak of human spirituality without some such construct. In reference to this issue, Ferrer (2008) has noted that...

*virtually all the same participatory implications for the study of religion can be practically drawn if we were to conceive, or translate the term, spirit in a naturalistic fashion as an emergent creative potential of life, nature, or reality. Methodologically, the challenge to be met is to account for a process or dynamism underlying the creative elements of religious visionary imagination that cannot be entirely explicated by appealing to biological or cultural-linguistic factors (at least as narrowly understood by proponents of reductionist approaches). Whether such creative source is a transcendent spirit or immanent life will likely be always a contested issue, but one, we believe, that does not damage the general claims of the participatory turn. (Ferrer & Sherman, 2008, p.72 [n.155])*

Rather than an ultimate beyond all ultimates, Ferrer's mystery refers generally to all that may lie beyond human knowledge with respect to the great diversity of spiritual encounters and aspirations. It is convenient to address the unknown(s) relating to this multiplicity with a single term, just as one might say that stars, comets, asteroids, planets, moons, black holes, quasars, pulsars, and nebulae may be thought of as residing in the 'same' sky even though they are riotously various and spread over inconceivable distances. To do so does not by any stretch of imagination suggest that these cosmic phenomena are all manifestations of the same transcendent celestial object. Ferrer has made it clear that mystery...

*does not entail any kind of essentialist reification of an ontologically given ground of being, as expressions such as 'the sacred', 'the divine', or 'the eternal' often conveyed in classic scholarship in religion... . In contrast, we deliberately use this conceptually vague, open-ended, and ambiguous term to refer to the nondetermined creative energy or source of reality, the cosmos, life, and consciousness. Thus understood, the term mystery obstructs claims or insinuations of dogmatic certainty and associated religious exclusivisms; more positively, it invites an attitude of intellectual and existential humility and receptivity to the Great Unknown that is the fountain of our being. (Ferrer & Sherman, 2008, p.64)*

Here is Ferrer's comment on what clearly differentiates a participatory approach from perennialist strategies:

*From my perspective, what differentiates perspectival perennialism from my participatory approach is (a) the rejection of the myth of the given (note that even when traditionalist scholars speak about an ineffable or transconceptual spiritual ultimate, they immediately – and arguably contradictorily – qualify it stating that it is nondual or that Advaita Vedānta offers, through its notion of*

*nirguna Brahman, the best articulation of the perennial wisdom, and so forth); (b) the adoption of an enactive paradigm of cognition, according to which the various spiritual ultimates are not perspectives of a single spiritual ultimate but enactions; and, most crucially, (c) the overcoming of the dualism of the mystery and its enactions, through which the participatory approach avoids the traditionalist (and neo-Kantian-like) duality between religions' relative absolutes and the absolute supposedly existing behind them. In other words, participatory enaction affirms the radical identity of the manifold spiritual ultimates and the mystery, even if the former do not exhaust the ontological possibilities of the latter. (J. Ferrer, personal communication, June 10, 2015)*

The following passage articulates both this rejection of the myth of the Given, and the embrace of an enactive paradigm of cognition:

*The participatory vision should not then be confused with the view that mystics of the various kinds and traditions simply access different dimensions or perspectives of a ready-made single ultimate reality. This view is obviously under the spell of the myth of the given and merely admits that this pre-given spiritual referent can be approached from different vantage points. In contrast, the view I am advancing here is that no pre-given ultimate reality exists, and that different spiritual ultimates can be enacted through intentional and creative participation in an indeterminate spiritual power or mystery. (Ferrer, 2008, p. 142)*

A participatory stance holds that mystery is its enactions, rather than a hidden force behind them (Ferrer, 2011a, 2011b; for a deeper discussion, see Ferrer, forthcoming). Thus, when Abramson accuses Ferrer with conflating 'the 'absolute that is beyond all religious absolutes' with the multiple absolutes of the different traditions (p.38–48), he is missing that, in Ferrer's work,

such a move is not a conflation but a deliberate overcoming of an arguably pernicious spiritual dualism (e.g., see Ferrer, 2011a). This dualism is pernicious because it not only binds scholars and practitioners alike to objectivist and hierarchical frameworks, but also paves the way for interreligious exclusivism and spiritual narcissism (i.e., once a supra-ultimate absolute is posited, practitioners can – and do – claim their own religion’s absolute to be the closer or better or more accurate account of the supra-ultimate absolute). A further advantage of dismantling this dualism is the preservation of the ontological ultimacy of enactments of religious ultimates (e.g., God, emptiness, the Tao) in their respective universes, avoiding the traditionalist and neo-Kantian demotion of those ultimates to penultimate stations (see Ferrer, 2010, forthcoming).

There is a great distance between an interconnected world in which immanent spiritual encounters cannot be entirely discrete, and a perennialist Kosmos in which the source of all spiritual experience must be an identical transcendent spiritual ultimate or absolute. That Abramson conflates these very different positions based on superficial linguistic similarities, and thereby frames Ferrer’s work as perennialist, is not credible. It is also not unexpected, since a perennialist approach typically projects its own presuppositions – welcome or not – onto the traditions of others, in much the way that the United States Central Intelligence Agency once believed it could detect a communist plot behind every instance of local unrest anywhere on the globe. (Let me make clear that by using this familiar historical analogy to illustrate the dynamics of a perennialist strategy, I am not suggesting that Abramson is either a government agent or a communist.)

To be sure, Ferrer (2002, 2008, 2011a) has consistently held a ‘more relaxed spiritual universalism’ that affirms an underlying undetermined mystery or creative power as the generative source of all spiritual enactments while simultaneously (a) eschewing dubious equations among

spiritual ultimates (e.g., the Tao is God or Buddhist emptiness is structurally equivalent to the Hindu Brahman), (b) avoiding the promotion of any single spiritual ultimate (e.g., nonduality or God) as universally superior, and (c) rejecting universal, paradigmatic, or mandatory sequences – whether involuntarily or evolutionarily laid down – of spiritual stages or states for all human beings regardless of culture, tradition, or spiritual orientation. But as noted previously, unity of context (e.g., many different ‘celestial phenomena’ can populate ‘the same sky’) does not imply unitive content, and it is the latter that characterises perennialism. Reference to an undetermined mystery is not the same as postulating a transcendent spiritual absolute: The former is akin to observing that not knowing something is a common human experience; the latter is more like suggesting that every time someone says the equivalent of, ‘I don’t know’, they are referencing a shared universal ignorance. Ultimately, I suggest that a more productive and relevant discussion should not focus on terminology or semantics but on the deeper, practical issues at stake in Wilber’s and Ferrer’s respective works.

I must object, parenthetically but strenuously, that Abramson (this issue) has misquoted and misrepresented me as follows: “In any ordinary usage of the term, ... [Ferrer’s] system... is accurately and usefully described as perennialist.’ This quote is from Hartelius, 2015” (p.38–48)  The use of bracketed insertions is only used correctly when it inserts what seems implied by the author in that context; one may argue for a novel application of an author’s point, but to use a bracketed insertion to create the appearance that the author himself makes a point that is foreign to his discourse is improper. I have never suggested that Ferrer’s work is perennialist in nature, and I vigorously disagree with such a position.

It should be noted that Abramson has also appended a critique of the Wilber-Combs lattice. This seems marginally relevant to his initial critique of the chapter by

Hartelius and Ferrer (2013), but perhaps it is meant to establish Abramson's *bona fides* as someone not wedded to Wilber's views. In any case, it is better left to Wilber or Combs to address his suggestions on this topic.

The subject of human spirituality is a deeply important one that deserves consideration within psychology as well as religious studies. Transpersonal psychology has struggled with this issue for more than 45 years, and with the introduction of participatory thought may be on the threshold of making

some real contribution to wider fields of scholarship. Spirituality is a topic that extends from the center of human experience to its very edges, often in the context of great passion and commitment. Abramson's engagement in this enlivening discourse is accepted with respect and appreciation, even if few of his positions or arguments convince.

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