Participation, Metaphysics, and Enlightenment: Reflections on Ken Wilber’s Recent Work

Jorge N. Ferrer

In memory of David Fontana (1934–2010), pioneer of British transpersonalism

This paper discusses a number of key issues raised in the recent dialogue on the work of Ken Wilber between John Rowan and Michael Daniels, mediated by David Fontana and chaired by Malcolm Walley (Rowan, Daniels, Fontana, & Walley, 2009). First, it responds to Rowan’s defense of Wilber’s work in the wake of the participatory critique. Second, it addresses the question of the cultural versus universal nature of Wilber’s Kosmic habits in dialogue with Daniels’s contribution. Third, it offers a critique of Wilber’s integral post-metaphysics and contrasts this with participatory spirituality. Fourth, it discusses the nature of enlightenment, as well as meditation, integral practice, and spiritual individuation. The paper concludes with some concrete directions in which to move the dialogue forward.

I am grateful to the editors of Transpersonal Psychology Review for the opportunity to clarify and develop aspects of my participatory perspective in view of the recently published dialogue on Ken Wilber’s latest contributions to transpersonal psychology (Rowan, Daniels, Fontana, & Walley, 2009). For the sake of focus, I limit my discussion to four key issues raised in the dialogue: (a) the participatory critique of Wilber’s work, (b) the cultural versus universal nature of Wilber’s Kosmic habits, (c) the question of (post-)metaphysics in spiritual discourse, and (d) the nature of enlightenment.

The participatory critique of Wilber’s work: Response to Rowan

After an account of his spiritual journey, Rowan defends Wilber’s model against critics who detect an Eastern bias in its allegedly universal spiritual map. To this end, Rowan offers a list of Western sources considered in Wilber’s work; in addition, he endorses Wilber’s claim that Underhill’s stages of the Christian mystical path conform with Wilber’s scheme.
This reply is unconvincing. With regard to Rowan’s first defense, it should be obvious that the mere inclusion of Western sources does not warrant their ‘fair use,’ so to speak. The issue is not that Wilber ignores Western (or indigenous) traditions, but that he regards their goals as ‘lower’ spiritual expressions in a single developmental sequence culminating in a monistically-based integral nondual realization. As I elaborate elsewhere (Ferrer, 2002), there is nothing new about this move. A legion of religious figures—from Ramanuja to Kukai, Vivekananda to Zaehner to the Dalai Lama—situate their favored (and remarkably different) spiritual choices at the zenith of a hierarchy of spiritual insights whose lower steps are linked to rival traditions or schools.¹ In any event, since the nondual realization of the ultimate identity between the self and the divine (and/or the Kosmos) is the explicit goal of certain Eastern schools (e.g., Advaita Vedanta), it is understandable that scholars find an Eastern bias in Wilber’s scheme.²

As for Rowan’s second statement, though both Underhill (1955) and Wilber (1995, 2006) offer universal maps of spiritual development — a highly discredited notion in contemporary scholarship — their final stages are far from equivalent. Wilber erroneously equates Underhill’s ‘divine mysticism’ with his own ‘states of nondual union’. Underhill’s ‘unitive life,’ however, is characterized not by the nondual realization of one’s deepest self as the divine, but by a process of ‘deification’ (theosis) resulting from the ongoing ‘spiritual marriage’ between God and the soul. In Christian mysticism, even for Pseudo-Dionysius, deification or ‘being as much as possible like and in union with God’ (McGinn & McGinn, 2003, p.186) is a gift bestowed by

¹ See Stoeber (1994) for a contemporary argument of the superiority of theistic dual states over monistic nondual ones. Similarly, Buber (1961) regarded the I/Thou relationship with God as spiritually higher than the monistic experience of nonduality, and Zaehner (1957) argued that the monistic ideal is transcended in theistic mysticism, considering Sankara’s monistic liberation (moksa) a primitive stage in the process of deification. More recently, Wilber’s (1995) ranking of nondual mysticism over theism and other contemplative paths has been critiqued and rebutted by Helminiak (1998, pp.213-92), Adams (2002), and, perhaps most effectively, by Schlamm (2001), who uses Rawlinson’s (1997, 2000) typology of mystical orientations to show the arbitrariness and doctrinal nature of such rankings.

² Both Wilber’s account of nondual realization — built upon monistic belief in the ultimate identity between one’s true Self and the divine — and his stage model draw heavily from the writings of Franklin Jones (aka Adi Da), a Western adept of Hinduism (see Daniels, B., 2005). Elsewhere, I argue for the importance of distinguishing between different forms of nonduality usually conflated by Wilber; for example, the Hindu Atman-Brahman nonduality and the Buddhist nonduality of emptiness (sunyata) are conceptually, experientially, and ontologically distinct (Ferrer, 2002; cf. Fenton, 1995). Considering the Soto Zen founder Dogen’s nonduality, Harmless (2008) writes that though ‘he pointed to the radically nondual, it cannot be presumed he is speaking of a oneness within ultimate reality that is anything like what Christians or Muslism speak of, much less what Hindus mean when they speak of a deeper monism’ (p.253).
God based on the soul’s participation in (vs. identity with) divine nature that should not be mistaken with monistic nondual claims (McGinn & McGinn, 2003). In fact, Underhill explicitly rejects monistic interpretations holding that ‘extreme mystics preach the annihilation of the self and regard themselves as co-equal with the Deity’ (Underhill, 1955, p.419) and insists that ‘the great mystics are anxious above all things to establish and force on us the truth that by deification they intend no arrogant claim to identification with God’ (Ibid. p.420). Even if a marginal number of Christian mystics might have reported states of nondual union with God — a view that Underhill did not support — those are arguably different from Wilber’s nonduality. Further, not only nonduality but also mystical union fails to typify the dominant trends of the Christian mystical tradition, which are more adequately described as cultivating the ‘direct presence of God,’ as McGinn (1994a, p.xvii) stated in the introduction to his authoritative multivolume history of Western Christian mysticism. Even if one cites the work of Marion (2000) or other modern Christian authors influenced by Wilber’s model, doing so does not change two thousand years of documented history. In any event, since a variety of nondual states have been reported across traditions, I suggest that instead of an ‘Eastern bias,’ it may be more accurate to talk about a ‘monistic nondual bias’ in Wilber’s approach (see also Ferrer, 2002, pp.89-90).

---

3 This type of move — unfortunately frequent in Wilber’s work — partly explains why Wilber is mostly ignored in the field of religious studies. Although Wilber cannot be unaware that Underhill’s ‘unitive life’ has nothing to do with his own ‘nondual realization,’ he nonetheless equates them to defend the universal validity of his model. Even if Underhill’s map would fit Wilber’s, her overall characterization of Christian mysticism in terms of ‘mystical union’ is today recognized as a historical distortion (Harmless, 2008, pp.251-253; McGinn, 1994a). Historically, the Christian mystical path had many goals (e.g., spiritual marriage, the birth of the Word in the soul, the vision of God, deification, unio mystica, the direct feeling of the presence of God, etc.), but Wilber’s nonduality was not one of them. For instance, St. Bonaventure, one of the greatest cartographers of the Christian path, depicts the final spiritual stage as an ecstatic union with the salvific suffering of Christ: ‘For Bonaventure, union meant sharing in the radical self-emptying, self-abnegating union with Christ crucified’ (Harmless, 2008, p.252). For discussions of the varieties of mystical union between the soul and God in the Semitic traditions, see Idel and McGinn (1996) and McGinn (2005).

4 For a nuanced account of the differences between Eastern and Christian nondualities, see Barnhart (2001). Whereas in the East nonduality (whether of self and God, or self and world) is taken to be the ontologically given nature of things, to be realized by the mystic, when and if insinuated in the West, nonduality becomes a new historical ontological reality that did not exist before. In Christianity, mystical union with God was generally conceived in this same spirit. Commenting on Jan van Ruuesbroec’s mysticism, for example, Dupré (1996) writes: ‘By its dynamic quality, the mystical experience surpasses the mere awareness of an already present, ontological union. The process of loving devotion realizes what existed only as potential in the initial stage, thus creating a new ontological reality’ (p.20).
Rowan proceeds with a three-part defense of Wilber’s work against my participatory critique (Ferrer, 2002). First, he claims to be responding to my challenge of the perennialist idea that mystics are ‘all saying the same thing’ (Rowan et al., 2009, p.10), and without providing supporting evidence, states that ‘it turns out the more precisely the [mystical] experiences are described, the more similar they seem to be’ (Ibid. p.10). Without further explanation, he adds that Wilber’s version of the perennial philosophy is more sophisticated than the one I critiqued. However, among the varieties of perennialism discussed in my work — basic, esotericist, perspectival, typological, and structuralist — only the basic type holds that mystics are ‘all saying the same thing’ (Ferrer, 2000b, 2002). I know of nobody today, including Wilber, who holds this view, so I am puzzled as to why Rowan brings it up in this context. As for Rowan’s additional claim, contemporary scholarship reveals exactly the opposite picture: The more precisely mystical states are described, the more disparate they appear to be, such that features that may have initially appeared similar turn out, on closer inspection, to represent significant divergences. As Mommaers and van Bragt (1995) point out, ‘the mystics themselves would be the last ones to concede a single, common essence in mystical awareness’ (p.45). The supporting literature is too voluminous to cite here, but the reader can consult Hollenback’s (1996) meticulous work, which shows the striking differences between the mystical states and understandings of Western, Eastern, and indigenous figures. I am mindful that Wilber’s model can explain these and other differences by appealing to his four mysticism types (psychic, subtle, causal, nondual), their enaction from the perspective of different structures of consciousness (archaic, magic, mythic, rational, pluralistic, integral, and super-integral), and the interpretive impact of each tradition’s language and doctrines. I will return to this below, but let us first look at Rowan’s second point.

Second, Rowan misconstrues my critique of experientialism — targeted at a subtly dualistic and individualist account of spirituality arguably associated with spiritual narcissism and integrative arrestment (Ferrer, 2000a, 2002) — as suggesting the altogether different point that mystics are conformists. In any event, Rowan champions the view that the great mystics are

5 Unless indicated otherwise, all mention of Rowan, Daniels, and Fontana in this article refers to Rowan, Daniels, Fontana, and Walley (2009).
spiritual revolutionaries, mentioning (as usual in these cases) Meister Eckhart as paradigmatic. Unfortunately, Eckhart is so well known precisely because of his rather exceptional break with tradition and famous Inquisition trial (McGinn, 2001). In other words, heretic mystics are actually the exception to the rule, and most mystics adhere to received doctrines and scriptures (see, e.g., Katz, 1983a, 1983b, 2000). As Harmless (2008) points out, ‘[t]he widespread intertwining of the doctrinal and the mystical is no accident … Mystics often set forth their (or other’s) experiences as the experience of doctrine’ (p.233). The romantic view of the mystic as revolutionary heretic is simply not supported by the historical evidence.

In addition, I am perplexed by Rowan’s claim that the participatory approach renders mysticism dependent on cultural conditions, since my work explicitly critiques this strong constructivist view (Ferrer, 2002, pp.140-144) and presents participatory spirituality as emerging from the interaction among human multidimensional cognition, historical-cultural background, and the generative power of life, the cosmos, and/or the mystery. Furthermore, whereas past mysticism may be largely conservative, participatory approaches (contra Rowan’s depiction) invite us to undertake not only the revision of traditional religious forms, but also the cocreation of novel spiritual understandings, practices, and even expanded states of freedom.

Third, Rowan claims that my critique does not apply to Wilber’s current views and that, as I indicated in Revisioning Transpersonal Theory (Ferrer, 2002), the majority of transpersonal writers ‘still do adhere to a more sophisticated view of the perennial philosophy’ (Rowan et al.,

---

6 Wilber’s (1995) and Marion’s (2000) use of Eckhart as representing a nondual mysticism parallel to Ramana Maharshi’s is distorting. In contrast to Ramana’s absolute monism, Eckhart’s account of the mystical union with God maintains the formal duality between the soul and the divine: ‘Eckhart’s notion of indistinct union … is fundamentally dialectical, that is to say, union with God is indistinct in the ground, but we always maintain a distinction from God in our formal being … Even in the ultimate union in heaven, Eckhart insists, this distinction will remain’ (McGinn, 2001, p.148). See also Harmless (2008, pp.125-132). As Schlamm (2001) points out, Wilber’s treatment of St. Teresa is equally problematic: ‘What Wilber has done is to superimpose his developmental model on to Teresa’s journey … and has thereby distorted both the texture and the content of her spiritual testimony’ (p.30).

7 Though Eckhart developed a new terminology with his language of ‘the ground’ (grunt), the revolutionary nature of his mysticism tends to be exaggerated in popular circles. Eckhart’s metaphysics of emanation and return has a long pedigree in the Christian tradition (e.g., Origen, Pseudo-Dionysius, Bonaventure), his articulation of an indistinct union with God was inspired by the Beguine mystics (especially Marguerite Porete), and his teaching on the unceasing birth of God in the soul goes back to Origen (as Eckhart acknowledges in one of his sermons) (Harmless, 2008; McGinn, 1994b, 2001).

8 This is not to say that there were not heretical mystics who challenged traditional authority (Cupitt, 1998; Kripal, 2006), but simply that, in light of the available historical evidence, those were rather the exception to the rule.
2009, p.10). I am not sure what to make of Rowan’s last remark, but what I wrote almost ten years ago is no longer applicable in a transpersonal community that has mostly broken free from Wilber’s stranglehold. It goes without saying that even if a majority would still support perennialism, this has nothing to do with its validity. Turning to Rowan’s more substantive point, it is true that in my early work, due to the vagaries of publishing that Rowan generously acknowledges, I could not address Wilber-4 (2000); however, I argue that the core of the critique holds for not only Wilber-4 but also Wilber-5 (2006).

Despite Wilber’s (2006) significant revisions (e.g., letting go of ‘involutionary givens’ in transpersonal stages), his current model holds that (1) spiritual development and evolution follow a sequence of (now evolutionarily laid down) states and stages (psychic/subtle/causal/nondual); (2) this sequence is universal, paradigmatic, and mandatory for all human beings regardless of culture, tradition, or spiritual orientation; (3) nondual realization is the single ultimate summit of spiritual growth; and (4) spiritual traditions are geared to the cultivation of particular states and stages. To be sure, the Wilber-Combs lattice complicates this account further by allowing that practitioners from any tradition and at any developmental stage can, in theory, access all transpersonal states (though the states would be interpreted from those corresponding perspectives). Wilber’s current formulation, however, retains a core problem and adds a new one. On the one hand, some traditions still rank lower than others since they aim at supposedly less advanced spiritual states and stages (e.g., theistic traditions rank lower than nondual ones, shamanic ones lower than theistic, etc.). On the other hand, the new grace offered to rival traditions is a Faustian bargain: theistic and shamanic practitioners are told that they too can reach the most advanced spiritual stage, but only if they sacrifice the integrity of their own tradition’s self-understanding by accepting Wilber’s spiritual itinerary and nondual endpoint.

---


10 The Christian theologian Vroom (1996) gets to the heart of this problem: ‘If a Zen master states that faith in God is only halfway down the road to ultimate wisdom because the idea of a separate being, distinguished from the world in which we live, is naive and betrays attachment to the self, then I see no philosophical ground for concluding that Zen and Christianity refer to the same divine or “empty” transcendence’ (p.148).

11 Since Wilber’s nonduality is admittedly different than traditional versions, even nondual practitioners may need to strike this bargain in order to qualify as ‘proper’ suitors of his final realization.
Though different traditions obviously focus on the enacting of particular mystical states and goals (#4 above), I strongly dispute the plausibility and legitimacy of Wilber’s hierarchical rankings (#1–3 above).

Because the participatory approach has been pigeon-holed as relativist and self-contradictory (Wilber, 2002), I should stress here that though my work does not privilege any tradition or type of spirituality over others on objectivist or ontological grounds (i.e., saying that theism, monism, or nondualism corresponds to the nature of ultimate reality and/or is intrinsically superior), it does offer criteria for making qualitative distinctions among spiritual systems on pragmatic and transformational grounds. Specifically, I have suggested two basic guidelines: the egocentrism test, which assesses the extent to which spiritual traditions, teachings, and practices free practitioners from gross and subtle forms of narcissism and self-centeredness; and the dissociation test, which evaluates the extent to which spiritual traditions, teachings, and practices foster the integrated blossoming of all dimensions of the person (Ferrer, 2002, 2008a, 2008b, 2010). Since it is likely that most religious traditions would not rank too highly in the dissociation test (see Ferrer, 2008a), it should be obvious that the participatory approach also leads to a strong ranking of spiritual orientations.

The crucial difference is that the participatory rankings are not ideologically based on a priori ontological doctrines or putative correspondence to a single nondual Spiritual Reality, but instead ground critical discernment in the practical values of selflessness, embodiment, and integration. I stand by these values, not because I think they are ‘universal’ (they are not), but because I firmly believe that their cultivation can effectively reduce personal, relational, social, and planetary suffering. To be sure, this distinction can be problematized since the specificities of the various spiritual transformational goals often derive from ontological views about the nature of reality or the divine. As I elaborate below, however, the participatory ranking is not itself precipitated by the privileging of a single spiritual goal, but rather explodes into a plurality of potentially holistic spiritual realizations that can take place within and outside traditions. Furthermore, most traditions are today reconstructing themselves in precisely these embodied and holistic directions.
To summarize, even after Wilber’s *ad hoc* modifications, his model still privileges nondual, monistic, and formless spiritualities over theistic and visionary ones,¹² even as it seeks to confine the multiplicity of spiritual expressions to a single, unilinear sequence of spiritual development. Insofar as Wilber’s model retains this sequence and associated doctrinal rankings of spiritual states, stages, and traditions, the essence of the participatory critique is both applicable and effective. However, although I consider the critique justifiable, I do not think of it as a definitive refutation of Wilber’s model (though its claimed universality is refutable by evidence). My sense is that both the participatory and Wilberian visions can accommodate spiritual diversity in different ways. In the same way that alternative and even logically incompatible theories can fit all possible evidence—as the Duhem-Quine principle of ‘underdetermination of theory by evidence, shows (Duhem, 1953; Quine, 1953) — it is likely that these alternative, integral meta-theories can fit all possible spiritual data. In contrast to Wilber’s theory, however, I submit that participatory integralism meets this challenge (a) without distorting traditions’ self-understanding;¹³ (b) by engendering more harmonious inter-religious relations (Ferrer, 2010); and (c) by emancipating individual spiritual inquiry and growth from the constraints of an evolutionarily laid-down, pregiven sequence of transpersonal stages (Ferrer, 2002; Heron, 1998). In addition, I contend that the participatory approach is more aligned with the seemingly inexhaustible creativity of the mystery and more parsimonious in its accounting for the same spiritual evidence. Notably, it is unclear whether the ever-increasing conceptual proliferation of Wilber’s integral theory is truly necessary, or whether it may suggest the exhaustion of the model’s explanatory effectiveness and the possible degeneration of his research program.

¹² As feminist analyses suggest, these rankings also might reveal a patriarchal bias. For the patriarchal roots of the historical denigration of visionary forms of mysticism, see Hollywood (2002) and Jantzen (1995), and for a suggestion that the common association between monism and mysticism may be a product of the male psyche, see Jantzen (1990).

¹³ Given its normative challenge to traditions, it can be reasonably said that the participatory approach does not fully honor some traditions’ self-understanding. True enough. On the one hand, however, it can be argued that the world traditions themselves — from Christianity to Yoga, Tantra to Buddhism to Taoism — are nowadays reconstructing themselves precisely in more holistic and embodied directions, and that the participatory call can be seen as giving voice to and strengthening a pre-existing trend within most traditions. On the other hand, and perhaps more crucially, the participatory approach does not require traditions to sacrifice their doctrinal integrity and embrace others’ spiritual ultimate because it holds that *all traditions can potentially become more embodied and holistic in their own terms*. As I elaborate below, if Shamkya Yoga — arguably one of the most explicitly dissociative spiritual traditions of all — can be conceptually and practically reconstructed in embodied and integrative ways (see Whicher, 1999), others can do the same. Whether this outcome may ultimately be possible or not, I firmly believe in the value of approaching this dialogue open to such possibilities.
Kosmic Habits: Cultural or universal?

It should come as no surprise to readers familiar with my work that I concur with virtually everything Daniels says in the dialogue (e.g., about the ideological nature of Wilber’s map; its distortion of the God of the Semitic traditions, etc.). Since Daniels’s perspective is so germane to mine, I will not spend time re-affirming our many areas of convergence and instead focus my efforts on clarifying my view of participatory cocreation and reflecting on the related question of the cultural versus universal nature of Wilber’s Kosmic habits.

As a preliminary aside, I was relieved to finally see in print what has been in the mind of so many in transpersonal and integral circles for years: Wilber-5 is, in part, a ‘participatory revision of Wilber-4.’14 As Daniels notes, the cocreated nature of the spiritual path, the language of participation, and the use of the myth of the given in spiritual critical discourse are central features of the participatory approach introduced in my early work (Ferrer, 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2002). This participatory reform is startling, especially given Wilber’s (2002) dismissive account of *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory* as expressing ‘a green-meme approach to spirituality, a kind of participatory samsara equated with nirvana.’15 As Daniels points out, Wilber often displays the disturbing scholarly habit of incorporating into his theorizing critical points made by others about his work — at times points he previously dismissed as misinformed or conveying less evolved levels of spiritual discernment — and presenting them as autonomous developments of his thinking. In this case, Wilber has assimilated aspects of the participatory approach into his integral vision; from a participatory perspective, however, many problems remain.

Daniels writes that, whereas in my view the different ‘cocreated [spiritual] realities are cultural constructions’ (Rowan et al., 2009, p.21), for Wilber ‘these cocreated structures … become parts of the Kosmos … ontological realities that everybody has to negotiate’ (Ibid. p.21). Stated this way, however, Daniels’s account might mislead readers to associate the participatory approach with cultural constructivism, which I explicitly critique as operating under the spell of

---

14 As described by one member of the Integral Institute, requesting anonymity (personal communication, May 16, 2008).
15 I decided not to respond to Wilber’s (2002) critique because each of his substantial points had already been anticipated and addressed in *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory* (e.g., the ‘green meme’ critique or the charge of performative self-contradiction) (see also Ferrer, in preparation-a).
what Popper (1994) calls the ‘myth of the framework’ (Ferrer, 2002, p.141). In the present context, this myth suggests that mystics and religious practitioners are prisoners of their cultures and conceptual frameworks, and that spiritual knowledge must always be shaped by or screened through such frameworks. In contrast, participatory approaches conceive mystical phenomena as cocreated events emerging not only from culture, but also from the interaction of human multidimensional cognition and a nondetermined mystery or creative power of life, the cosmos, and/or spirit (Ferrer, 2002; Ferrer, 2008a; Ferrer & Sherman, 2008a, 2008b). In other words, participatory spirituality embraces the role of language and culture in religious phenomena while simultaneously recognizing the importance, and at times the centrality, of nonlinguistic (somatic, energetic, imaginal, archetypal, etc.) and transcultural factors (the creative power of life and/or the spirit) in shaping religious experiences. As we put it in the introduction to The Participatory Turn:

The adoption of an enactive paradigm of cognition in the study of religion, however, frees us from the myth of the framework … by holding that human multidimensional cognition cocreatively participates in the emergence of a number of plausible enactions of reality. Participatory enaction, in other words, is epistemologically constructivist and metaphysically realist. (Ferrer & Sherman, 2008b, p.35)

As Gleig and Boeving (2009) write in their essay review of the book: ‘Ontological veracity … is not inherently at odds with a contextualist sensibility. To acknowledge that humans do not only discover but also shape and co-create spiritual landscapes does not annul the metaphysical reality of such mystical worlds’ (p.66).

I suspect that the source of Daniels’s apparent misapprehension of my view may be largely semantic. In particular, I wonder whether it emerges from the implicit equation of ‘Kosmic’ (or ‘ontological’) with ‘universal’ in the dialogue. After all, Daniels writes:

16 Although a philosophical divide is often traced between ‘representationalist realists’ and ‘antirepresentationalist constructivists’ who tend to reject realism (e.g., Rorty, 2004), this generally valid polarization becomes fallacious if taken to be normative. As Engler (2004) shows in an instructive essay, constructivism — though challenging the correspondence between linguistic signs and independent facts — is not necessarily antirealist or relativistic. For a recent, sophisticated ‘realist-constructivist synthesis’ in international relations theory, see Barkin (2010). More attuned to participatory standpoints, Minner (2004) offers an account of knowledge as ‘true construction’ that takes human creative pursuits to be participating in divine knowledge and creation.
I don’t deny that groups of people can cocreate ... morphogenetic fields — or habits of working, or patterns of working ... What I am denying is that they become Kosmic habits — that they become realities that are given in the Kosmos, and are fixed, and everyone has to go through them. (Rowan et al., 2009, p.35)

I concur. Daniels immediately adds, however, that I view cocreated spiritual realities as ‘cultural habits... not Kosmic habits’ (Ibid. p.36). To which I respond that yes, they are cultural but not merely cultural; they are also morphogenetic fields of energy and consciousness, which, though not universal or mandatory, can become more available as we explore new shores of the Kosmos. The key point is that we do not need to conflate ‘Kosmic’ and ‘universal’ if we consider the Kosmos a plural cornucopia creatively advancing in multiple ontological directions. Wilber wants to confine such ontological multiplicity to his unilinear evolutionary sequence, but I believe it is both more accurate and more generous to envision cosmic and spiritual evolution as branching out in many different but potentially intermingled directions (or as an omnicentered rhizome propagating through offshoots and thickenings of its nodes; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). If we accept this view, we can affirm the ontological nature of a plurality of Kosmic habits free from Wilberian dogmatic constraints.

There may also be deeper philosophical issues behind Daniels’s reluctance to grant an ontological status to Wilber’s Kosmic habits. Following Jung, Daniels (2001) proposes that transpersonal psychology should remain metaphysically agnostic toward any ontological reality beyond the physical and psychological (cf. Friedman, 2002) and should focus on the phenomenological study of human experience. This apparently prudent stance, however, is rooted in an implicit allegiance to neo-Kantian frameworks that either bracket or deny the existence of supernatural and metaphysical realities. At its heart rests the Kantian belief that innate or deeply seated epistemic constraints in human cognition render impossible or illicit any knowledge claim about such metaphysical realities. In other words, metaphysical realities may exist, but the only thing we can access is our situated phenomenal awareness of them. The legitimacy of metaphysical agnosticism is thus contingent on the validity of a neo-Kantian dualistic metaphysics, which, although not necessarily wrong (based on its metaphysical status, that is), nonetheless undermines the professed neutrality of metaphysical agnosticism (cf. King, 1999, pp.169-186; Lancaster, 2002). Indeed, as Northcote (2004) persuasively argues, the
methodological suspension of the validity of supernormal claims (e.g., about metaphysical entities or levels of reality), far from warranting objectivism or scholarly neutrality in the study of religion, may actually constitute a bias against ‘the possibility that people’s thinking and behaviour are indeed based on various supernormal forces … a bracketing approach will falsely attribute mundane sociological explanations to behaviour that is in actuality shaped by supernatural forces’ (p.89). Accordingly, Northcote issues a call for dialogue between Western naturalist and alternative perspectives in the appraisal of supernormal claims.

The point here is that unless one subscribes ideologically to a naturalistic metaphysics, it may be prudent — and heuristically fertile — not to reject a priori the possibility of effective causation from the various metaphysical sources described in religious utterances. In addition, Western epistemologies (such as the neo-Kantianism prevalent in modern academia) may not be the last arbiters in the assessment of religious knowledge claims, and in particular of those emerging from long-term contemplative practice. As King (1999) states:

My point is not that Western scholars should necessarily accept the emic [epistemological] perspectives over which they are claiming the authority to speak, but rather that they at least entertain the possibility that such perspectives are a legitimate stance to adopt and engage them in constructive debate. (p.183)

Why do I insist on the ontological (vs. merely cultural) nature of Kosmic habits? As I see it, this is the most plausible explanation for the well-documented transcultural access to apparently ‘given’ spiritual motives and realities (e.g., Grof, 1985, 1988, 1998; Shanon, 2002). The other alternative is to appeal to Jung’s notions of the collective unconscious and universal archetypes, but as Shanon (2002) explains, Jungian explanations fall short. On the one hand, many psychedelic visions are very different from those connected with the Jungian archetypes (e.g., the Hero, the Trickster, the Great Mother); on the other hand, many visions are culture-specific and

---

17 In his acclaimed work, *The Empirical Stance* (2002), the philosopher of science van Fraassen offers the most cogent and, in my opinion, definitive exposition of the ideological nature of associating scientific empiricism with naturalistic and materialistic metaphysical theories.

18 For critical discussions of neo-Kantianism in transpersonal and religious studies, see Ferrer (2000b, 2002) and Ferrer and Sherman (2008b), and for an often overlooked but important analysis of the ‘radically subjectivist neo-Kantianism’ (Nagy, 1991, p.365) that shaped Jung’s metaphysical agnosticism, see Nagy (1991). See also Kelly (1993, pp.22-26) for a proposed dissolution of the Kantianism affecting Jungian’s view of the archetypes.
do not have the universal status of the archetypes, which Jung posited as ‘associated with the common heritage that is shared by all human beings and which may well have evolved throughout the history of the species’ (Ibid. p.391). After a lucid discussion of biological, depth psychological, cognitive, and supernatural interpretations of the related phenomenon of cross-cultural commonalities in ayahuasca visions, Shanon rejects supernatural accounts and leans toward cognitive considerations (Ibid. pp.361-392). His final conclusion, however, is highly attuned to the participatory view of spiritual cocreation:

The cross-personal commonalities exhibited in Ayahuasca visions, the wondrous scenarios revealed by them, and the insights gained through them are perhaps neither just psychological, nor just reflective of other realms, nor are they ‘merely’ a creation of the human mind. Rather, they might be psychological and creative and real. (Ibid. p.401)

The most remarkable feature of the transcultural access to spiritual phenomena is that human beings can enact and understand spiritual insights and cosmologies belonging to specific religious worlds even without previous exposure to them. In Grof’s (1988) words:

In nonordinary states of consciousness, visions of various universal symbols can play a significant role in experiences of individuals who previously had no interest in mysticism or were strongly opposed to anything esoteric. These visions tend to convey instant intuitive understanding of the various levels of meaning of these symbols.

As a result of experiences of this kind, subjects can develop accurate understanding of various complex esoteric teachings. In some instances, persons unfamiliar with the Kabbalah had experiences described in the Zohar and Sepher Yetzirah and obtained surprising insights into Kabbalistic symbols. Others were able to describe the meaning and function of intricate mandalas used in the Tibetan Vajrayana and other tantric systems. (p.139)

Though Grof’s research awaits the more systematic replication necessary to achieve superior scientific status, his data strongly suggest that once particular spiritual realities have been
enacted, they become potentially accessible to the entire human species. This account is consistent with Merkur’s (1998) important synthesis of the psychedelic evidence. After indicating that most interpretations of the psychedelic evidence have been biased in favor of the idea of a universal mysticism, Merkur emphasizes that the empirical data have always pointed to a rich diversity of psychedelic spiritual states. More concretely, Merkur distinguishes 24 types of psychedelic unitive states and suggests that some of them may be more representative of certain religious traditions than others. What characterizes the psychedelic state, he tells us, is that it ‘provides access to all’ (p.155). Furthermore, although some of these states can be arranged in terms of increasing complexity, Merkur points out that ‘their development is not unilinear but instead branches outward like a tree of directories and subdirectories on a computer’ (p.98).

As Daniels points out, however, Wilber’s attempt to make such accessibility mandatory for the entire human species is misleading. Once enacted, spiritual realities become more easily accessible, but this does not mean that they are mandatory, predetermined, organized in a transcultural hierarchical fashion, universally sequential in their unfolding, or limited in number, or that new pathways cannot be enacted through cocreative participation:

Like trails cleared in a dense forest, spiritual pathways traveled by others can be more easily crossed, but this does not mean that we cannot open new trails and encounter new wonders (and new pitfalls) in the always inexhaustible Mystery of being. (Ferrer, 2002, p.151)

In my view, then, cocreated spiritual realities (a) can become ontologically ‘given’ in the cosmos; (b) are not fixed but are dynamic and open to human participatory endeavors; (c) are not mandatory; and (d) are always options among other new pathways that can be potentially enacted. Thus, when Fontana cautiously left open ‘for general debate as to whether these Kosmic habits are cultural, or whether they are indeed Kosmic’ (Rowan et al., p.37), participatory scholars might have responded that they are both cultural and Kosmic, but in the open and pluralistic fashion outlined above.

Post-metaphysical versus participatory spirituality
In his recent work, Wilber (2006) introduces an integral post-metaphysics that conceives spiritual worlds not as pre-existing ontological levels but as co-created structures of human consciousness. As we have seen, once evolutionarily laid down, Wilber believes that these structures become Kosmic habits or ‘actually existing structures in the Kosmos’ (Wilber, 2006, p.247), though by this he means that they exist within the inner realms of the individual. In his own words:

The claim of Integral Post-Metaphysics is that the invaluable and profound truths of the premodern traditions can be salvaged by realizing that what they are saying and showing applies basically to the Upper-Left quadrant [i.e., the interior of the individual]. (Ibid. p.46)

I have often been asked what I think about Wilber’s post-metaphysical spirituality. My answer: It is not only unoriginal, but also arguably reductionist. I fail to see novelty in it because many contemplative traditions — such as Yogacara (Mind-Only) Buddhism or most Tibetan Buddhist schools — explicitly account for spiritual realms in terms of subtle dimensions of consciousness, not as external metaphysical levels of reality. Wilber seems to be reacting against a special brand of Neo-Platonic metaphysics (the Great Chain of Being), but his post-metaphysical formulation does not add anything to the way some other traditions have understood spiritual realities for centuries. I am somehow surprised each time Wilber borrows age-old notions and presents them as not only the newest spiritual vision, but one that supersedes all previous visions.19

---

19 I am puzzled by Rowan’s claim that Wilber ‘invented the idea of these quadrants [AQAL model]’ (Rowan et al., p.41). Put together Schumacher’s (1977) ‘four fields of knowledge’ — interior/exterior of myself, interior/exterior of other beings and the world — or any pantheist’s inner/outer dimensions (see Clarke, 2004), and Jantsch’s (1980) micro/macro evolutions, then add a pinch of Koestler’s (1976) holonic logic, and voilà, you have the basic AQAL framework. Wilber (1995) gives due acknowledgment to most of these influences in his elaboration of the AQAL model, except perhaps to Schumacher, whose own four-quadrant model is closest to Wilber's. Note also how heavily Wilber draws his critique of the modern ‘flatland,’ neo-perennialism, and ‘three-eyes’ epistemology from Schumacher’s (1977) ‘loss of the vertical dimension’ (pp.10-14; emphasis in original), evolutionary ‘Levels of Being’ (pp.15-26), and theory of *adaequatio* (pp.39-60), respectively. Conceptually speaking, therefore, much of what is valuable in the model is not new; unfortunately, what is new is arguably problematic (e.g., Wilber’s developmental map and hierarchical spiritual gradations). Nonetheless, although I take issue with Rowan’s claim that Wilber invented something new in the AQAL model, Wilber has played an important role in spreading these ideas and some integral scholars are exploring the applicability of the AQAL model to important issues (e.g.,
Before explaining why Wilber’s post-metaphysics may be reductionist, let me distinguish between two related but independent meanings of the term *metaphysics*. On the one hand, the notion of metaphysics in Western philosophy is generally based on the distinction between appearance and reality, with a metaphysical statement being one claiming to portray that ‘Reality’ presumably lying behind the realm of appearances (van Inwagen, 1998, p.12ff). In addition to this use, on the other hand, many religious traditions also use ‘metaphysical worlds’ to refer to levels or dimensions of reality existing beyond the sensible world or within the subtle ontological depths of human consciousness. The first usage is the main target of Derrida’s (1976) attack on the metaphysics of presence. On a strong reading, this critique leads to the *a priori* denial of the ontological status of any transcendent or metaphysical reality; the weaker reading simply requires a declaration of metaphysical agnosticism.20

Several years before Wilber articulated his integral post-metaphysics, the participatory approach eschewed the dualism of appearance and reality, as well as endorsed modern and postmodern critiques of traditional metaphysics of presence (Ferrer, 2002). In contrast to Wilber, however, I believe that it is entirely possible to consistently drop the mentalist dualism of appearance and reality, and *simultaneously entertain the plausibility of a deep and ample multidimensional cosmos in which the sensible world does not exhaust the possibilities of the Real.*

In this light, a major problem with Wilber’s formulation becomes apparent: It creates a *false dichotomy between pregiven ontological levels and his post-metaphysical account of spiritual worlds within the interior realms of the individual.* This dichotomy is fallacious because, among other possibilities, it overlooks the possible presence of subtle dimensions of reality coexisting with our own and potentially housing spiritual worlds and indwelling nonphysical entities.21 As anyone who has engaged systematically in entheogenic inquiry knows, for example, subtle realities and ostensibly autonomous spiritual entities can be encountered not only within one’s

---

20 For two recent anthologies exploring the implications of post-metaphysical thought for religious studies, see Wrathall (2003) and Bloechl (2003). Early discussions appeared in Ruf (1989).

21 My views on this subject have been enriched by the dissertation research of Alex Rachel (in preparation), *Intimate Worlds: An Inquiry Into the Relationship Between the Human Embodied Self and Nonphysical Entities.*
inner visionary landscapes (e.g., Strassman, 2001), but also in front of one’s open eyes in the world ‘out there’ (Shanon, 2002) — and these external visions can sometimes be intersubjectively shared (Ferrer, in preparation-b).

This discussion raises the thorny issue of the ontological nature of subtle or nonphysical entities. Are they cocreated, fully independent, or paradoxically both? I do not have a definitive answer to this question, but I offer three remarks. First, I see no conflict between maintaining that entities such as angels or dakinis may have been historically cocreated and that they can also have autonomy and agency independent from human experience. In my view, these beings (as well as other cocreated spiritual phenomena) are not necessarily reducible to human byproducts, but emerge from subtle, complex, and probably collectively maintained enactive interactions between human multidimensional cognition (not reducible to the mind), cultural memes, and the creative power of life, reality, and/or the spirit. Second, if one accepts the possibility of an afterlife scenario in which personal identity is somehow maintained, it becomes possible to contemplate the feasibility of human encounters with noncocreated entities such as deceased saints, bodhisattvas, ascended masters, and the like (I leave open the possibility that what we call angels or dakinis may be evolved incarnations of these deceased personhoods in other dimensions of the cosmos). Finally, as many traditions maintain, we could also entertain the possibility of parallel realms or dimensions of reality inhabited by fully autonomous entities endowed with self-awareness and volition. In the case of angels, dakinis, and the like, however, I confess that their cultural specificity (forms, qualities, etc.) makes me wonder about their cocreated nature.

In any event, if we accept the plausibility of a multidimensional cosmos — as many shamanic, esoteric, and contemplative traditions affirm — Wilber’s integral post-metaphysics is

---

22 See Shanon (2002, pp.69-85) for descriptions of a variety of these ‘open-eye visualizations.’ In my experience, the psychoactive brew ayahuasca (yagé) and the cactus San Pedro are especially conducive to such external visions. In a subsequent paper, I examine the epistemological challenge of intersubjective external visions for scientific materialism (Ferrer, in preparation-b).

23 See Barnard (2007) for a powerful participatory case regarding the feasibility of a diversity of cocreated post-mortem scenarios. In a similar spirit, Loy (2010) writes, ‘[t]he Christian Heaven, the Pure Land of Buddhism, are we suddenly whisked away to them, or do we gain them by becoming the kind of person who would live in such a place? … If the world is made of stories, who knows what our best stories might accomplish? If we ourselves are Buddha, who but us can create Pure Land?’ (pp.102-103).
reductionist in its relegation of all spiritual realities to the inner depths of the individual. If he is also suggesting that all spiritual realities and entities are human co-creations, his proposal could also be charged with anthropocentrism.

A participatory understanding, in contrast, allows a bold affirmation of spiritual realities without falling into a reified metaphysics of presence, nor into any of today’s fashionable post-metaphysical reductionisms (whether biological, cultural, or Wilberian-integral). On the one hand, a participatory account of religious worlds overcomes the static and purportedly universal metaphysical structures of the past because it holds that culturally mediated human variables have a formative role in the constitution of such worlds. Whereas the openness of religious worlds to the ongoing visionary creativity of humankind entails their necessary dynamism, the contextual and embodied character of such creative urges requires their plurality. On the other hand, the participatory embrace of the human’s constitutive role in religious matters need not force us to reduce all spiritual realities to mere products of a culturally shaped human subjectivity, nor to confine them necessarily to the interior worlds of the individual.

The question of enlightenment

I close this essay with some reflections on the nature of enlightenment (see also Ferrer, 2002, pp.174-178). Although Daniels suggests more pluralistic possibilities, I was struck by the generalized assumption in the dialogue regarding the unity of enlightenment or the belief that there is a single kind of ultimate spiritual realization. In what follows, I question such an assumption and provide a participatory account of spiritual individuation that allows and supports multiple forms of more holistic spiritual awakenings, which nonetheless can share qualities such as selflessness and embodied integration.

Let me begin by considering Wilber’s definition: ‘Enlightenment is the realization of oneness with all states and structures that are in existence at any given time’ (2006, p.95). To clarify what he means, Wilber proposes a ‘sliding scale of Enlightenment’ according to its ‘Emptiness’ and ‘Form’ aspects. Since the structures of consciousness unfold evolutionarily in the world of Form, one can realize the same Emptiness at any point of history, but later practitioners can embrace
Form in fuller ways: ‘A person’s realization today is not Freer than Buddha’s (Emptiness is Emptiness), but it is Fuller than Buddha’s (and will be even fuller down the road)’ (Ibid. p.248).

Wilber’s approach has three important shortcomings. First, it reduces the rich diversity of spiritual soteriologies and goals (deification, *kaivalyam*, *devikut*, *nirvana*, *fana*, visionary service, *unio mystica*, etc.) to a rather peculiar hybrid of Buddhist emptiness and Advaita/Zen nondual embrace of the phenomenal world. I critique this reductionism elsewhere (Ferrer, 2000b, 2002) so I will not press the issue again here, but readers can consult the works by Heim (1995), Hollenback (1996), and Kaplan (2002), among many others, for detailed accounts of a variety of remarkably different spiritual goals and realizations. Even a single tradition usually houses different goals and corresponding liberated states. Consider Buddhism, in the words of the Dalai Lama (1988):

*Questioner*: So, if one is a follower of Vedanta, and one reaches the state of *satcitananda*, would this not be considered ultimate liberation?

*His Holiness*: Again, it depends upon how you interpret the words, ‘ultimate liberation.’ The moksa which is described in the Buddhist religion is achieved only through the practice of emptiness. And this kind of nirvana or liberation, as I have defined it above, cannot be achieved even by Svatantrika Madhyamikas, by Cittamatras, Sautrantikas or Vaibhasikas. The follower of these schools, *though Buddhists*, do not understand the actual doctrine of emptiness. Because they cannot realize emptiness, or reality, they cannot accomplish the kind of liberation I defined previously. (pp.23-24)

Like the Dalai Lama, Wilber may retort that many traditions are not aimed at (what he considers to be) ultimate liberation.²⁴ Such a response, however, begs the question by assuming

---

²⁴ Note here that the Dalai Lama’s account of liberation is different from Wilber’s: ‘Liberation in which “a mind that understands the sphere of reality annihilates all defilements in the sphere of reality” is a state that only [italics added] Buddhists can accomplish. This kind of *moksa or nirvana is only* [italics added] explained in the Buddhist scriptures, and is achieved *only* [italics added] through Buddhist practice’ (Dalai Lama, 1988, p.23). While celebrating the existence of different religions to accommodate the diversity of human karmic dispositions, the Dalai Lama contends that final liberation can only be achieved through the emptiness practices of his own school of Tibetan
the validity of the very framework being challenged: Wilber’s ranking of spiritual states/stages and account of final liberation. We are back to square one.

Second, serious questions can be raised about Wilber’s claim that the Buddha achieved complete freedom. In contrast to later articulations of emptiness (sunyata), the Buddha’s nirvana is described in the Buddhist canon as an utterly disembodied state of blissful consciousness in which all personality factors — including sensations, desires, feelings, and thoughts — have been totally extinguished (Harvey, 1995). This should not come as a surprise: Most traditions spawned in India regarded embodied life as illusory or a source of suffering, thus seeking liberation in its transcendence. The dominant view in the Indian tradition is to consider spiritual freedom (moksa, mukti) as the release from the cycle of transmigratory experience (samsara), the body as bound and even created by karma and ignorance, and bodiless liberation (at death) as superior to living embodied liberation (Ford, 1998). Immersed in this cultural-religious matrix, the Buddha also believed that the body and sexuality (and aspects of the heart, such as certain passions) were hindrances to spiritual flourishing (Faure, 1998), and early Buddhism pictured the body as a repulsive source of suffering, nirvana as extinction of bodily senses and desires, and ‘final nirvana’ (parinirvana) as attainable only after death (Collins, 1998). Though some exceptions may be found, this trend generally led the various Buddhist schools and vehicles to the repression, regulation, and/or transmutation of body and sexuality at the service of the ‘higher’ goal of the liberation of consciousness.

So, was the historical Buddha entirely ‘Free,’ as Wilber believes? My answer: Only if you understand spiritual freedom in the disembodied, and arguably dissociative, way pursued by early Buddhism.²⁵ Despite his downplaying the spiritual import of sexuality and the vital world, Sri Aurobindo (2001) was correct when he pointed out that a liberation of consciousness in consciousness should not be confused with an integral transformation that entails the spiritual

---
²⁵ I mean no disrespect or condescension. When looking at our religious past, it is important to avoid falling into what Owen Barfield called a ‘chronological snobbery’ that excoriates past spiritualities as deficient when considered from the perspective of our present standards (cited in Lewis, 1966, p.125). My point is that many, though by no means all, past disembodied spiritual trends may have been appropriate and even inevitable in their particular historical and cultural contexts.
alignment of all human dimensions (pp.942ff). With this in mind, I have proposed an *integral bodhisattva vow* in which the conscious mind renounces full liberation until the body, the heart, and the primary world can be free as well from the alienating tendencies that prevent them from sharing freely in the unfolding life of the mystery here on earth (Ferrer, 2008b, 2011). Since the conscious mind is the seat of most individuals’ sense of identity, an exclusive liberation of consciousness can be extremely deceptive insofar as one can believe that one is fully free when, in fact, essential dimensions of the self are underdeveloped, alienated, or in bondage — as the numerous sexual, emotional, and relational difficulties of traditionally ‘enlightened’ teachers attest (Feuerstein, 2006; Forsthoefel & Humes, 2005; Kripal, 1999; Storr, 1996).

Third, despite Wilber’s (1995) plea for the integration of ascending and descending spiritual trends, his account of spiritual freedom in terms of Buddhist emptiness reveals an ascending and ‘monopolar’ bias. Since the ascending bias has been already discussed (Daniels, M., 2005, 2009), I focus here on the monopolar charge. As Heron (1998, 2006) explains, in addition to spiritualities that blatantly devalue body and world, monopolar spirituality is a more subtle type of disembodied orientation that sees spiritual life as emerging from the interaction of our immediate present experience with the structures or levels of transcendent consciousness (cf. Ferrer, 2008b; Ferrer, Albareda, & Romero, 2004; Romero & Albareda, 2001).

The shortcoming of this monopolar understanding is that it ignores the existence of a second spiritual pole — immanent spiritual life or energy — that is intimately connected to the vital world and arguably stores the most generative power of the mystery (Ferrer, 2003; Ferrer & Sherman, 2008b). Wilber’s account is monopolar insofar as it conceives enlightenment in terms of a realization in consciousness that overlooks the crucial role of immanent life for genuinely integral spiritual growth and creative spiritual breakthroughs.

Wilber’s proposed logic of ‘transcend and include’ as the formula of spiritual development gives the game away. When the mind emerges, it is said to transcend and include the body, vital energy, and emotions; when the witness consciousness emerges, it is said to transcend and

---

26 In this context, spiritual practice is aimed either at accessing such overriding realities (‘ascent’ paths, e.g., classic Neoplatonic mysticism) or at bringing such spiritual energies down to earth to transfigure human nature and/or the world (‘descent’ paths, e.g., central elements of Sri Aurobindo’s integral yoga) (cf. Heron, 1998, 2006). Here, monopolar ‘descent’ is different from the traditional ‘descending’ paths that search for spiritual fulfillment in nature or the world (Daniels, 2009; Wilber, 1995).
include the mind; when higher structures of consciousness emerge, they are said to transcend and include the witness; and so forth. Wilber regards the body and sexuality as sacred in the sense of having spiritual ‘ground value’ (i.e., they are expressions of absolute Spirit, emptiness, or God) and in that they can be sacralized in the nondual integral embrace; however, this account is very different from recognizing the centrality of intrinsically spiritual, immanent sources for holistic transpersonal development. When both consciousness and energy (and matter) are understood as equally fundamental spiritual players, *integral spiritual development unfolds in a dialectical interaction with both transcendent and immanent spiritual sources that the logic of ‘transcend and include’ fails to capture* (see Ferrer, 2003; Ferrer, Albareda, & Romero, 2004; Heron, 1998, 2006). A fully embodied spirituality, I suggest, emerges from the creative interplay of both immanent and transcendent spiritual energies in individuals who embrace the fullness of human experience while remaining firmly grounded in body and earth (Ferrer, 2008b). Openness to immanent spiritual life naturally engenders a richer plurality of creative spiritual realizations — often connected with transformative personal life choices — that cannot be reduced to the homogenous ‘one taste’ of Wilber’s nondual realization.

I strongly suspect that this one-sidedness is behind Wilber’s (2006) elevation of meditation as the royal path to spiritual growth. He writes:

> No other single practice or technique — no therapy, not breathwork, not transformative workshops, not role-taking, not hatha yoga—has been empirically demonstrated to do this. (...) the reason meditation does so is simple enough. When you meditate, you are in effect witnessing the mind, thus turning subject into object — which is exactly the core mechanism of development. (Wilber, 2006, p.198)

As Daniels (2009) indicates, however, meditation is, at least historically, an ascending spiritual practice. Further, remember that the particular meditative techniques favored by

---

27 As Kelly (1998) and Washburn (1998) point out, however, Wilber’s holarchical logic cannot account for important aspects of human development.

28 It is noteworthy that meditation and other contemplative practices are being re-envisioned today from the perspective of more holistic understandings; see for example, Ray’s (2008) embodied reconstruction of Buddhist meditation, Rothberg’s (2006, 2008) relational and socially engaged expansion of Buddhist practice, Whicher’s
Wilber originated in religious systems seeking to liberate human beings from the suffering and/or illusory nature of both body and world through identification with the Self, the achievement of nirvana, and so forth. It may be countered that all contemplative traditions privilege one or another type of ascending meditation practice, to which I would respond that this is likely to be so because most past religious traditions were strongly patriarchal and leaned toward disembodiment and dissociation — see Ferrer (2008b) for documentation of this claim. Consistent with his spiritual rankings, Wilber’s enthroning of meditation as the spiritual practice par excellence privileges contemplative traditions over alternative visionary, wisdom, devotional, and socially engaged ones. In his concluding comment, Fontana gets to the heart of the matter when, in light of the four yogas of Hinduism — karma (yoga of action), bhakti (yoga of devotion), jnana (yoga of wisdom), and raja (yoga of meditation) — he suggests that meditation may be the path only for raja yogis (Rowan, et al., 2009, pp.58-59).

I am not questioning the value of meditation. I practiced Buddhist meditation (Zen and vipassana) regularly for about fifteen years, studied with meditation teachers, and attended many meditation retreats. Though I no longer practice daily, I sit sometimes and many features of meditation (e.g., mindfulness, inquiry) are central to the way I relate to my life and the world. In my experience, Buddhist meditation is extremely helpful to (a) become clearly aware of, learn to relate more adequately to, and free oneself from conditioning habits and plainly neurotic loops of the mind; (b) become more accepting, peaceful, and equanimous with one’s own and others’ experiences and reactions; and (c) enact and participate in a Buddhist engagement of the world marked by an awareness of impermanence, no-self, emptiness, and the interrelatedness of all phenomena that can lead to the emergence of beautiful spiritual qualities such as compassion and sympathetic joy. Though potentially deeply beneficial and transformative, however, traditional Buddhist meditation training has obvious limitations in fostering a truly integral spiritual development. This is evident, for example, in the control of body posture and potential repression of somatic intelligence (cf. Ray, 2008), the strict regulation of sexual behavior and prohibition of the creative exploration of sensual desire (Faure, 1998; Loy, 2008), the individualist focus and lack of relational and collective practices (Rothberg, 2008), the aversion

toward the expression of strong emotions such as anger (Masters, 2000), and the overall lack of discrimination between attachment and passions.

Perhaps aware of these limitations, Wilber currently recommends an Integral Life Practice (ILP) in which practitioners select ready-made practices from different modules corresponding to trainable human capacities, such as body, mind, spirit, sex, and relationships (see Wilber, 2006; Wilber, Patten, Leonard, & Morelli, 2008). As Wilber (2006) writes, ‘[t]he basic rule is simple: pick one practice for each module and exercise them concurrently’ (p.202). Wilber (2006) and his associates particularly recommend what they consider ‘gold star practices,’ many of which involve acceptance and instruction in Wilber’s system. For example, the ‘gold star practice’ for the mind is the ‘Integral (AQAL) Framework’ (or the ‘downloading’ in the practitioner’s mind of the ‘Integral Operating System’); for spirit, starred practices include ‘Integral Inquiry’ (i.e., a Wilberian synthesis of selected meditative practices) and ‘The 1-2-3 of God’ (Ibid. p.203). In addition to important doctrinal elements embedded in the system, Wilber’s ILP can easily turn into a ‘mentally’ devised integral training in which the practitioner’s mind decides what are the best practices or techniques to develop his or her body, sexuality, heart, and consciousness. The problem here is that insofar as they are always mentally or externally guided, these human dimensions cannot mature autonomously, and thus the need for their mental or external direction becomes permanently justified. What is needed to break this deeply-seated feedback loop, I believe, is to create spaces in which these human dimensions can mature according to their own developmental principles and dynamics, not according to the ones the mind considers most adequate (see Ferrer, 2003; Ferrer, Romero, & Albareda, 2005; Romero & Albareda, 2001).

A last point about Wilber’s view of meditation: As the above reflects, I wholeheartedly agree with Fontana that meditation may not be the most effective or appropriate spiritual practice for everybody (for some it can be even counter-indicated; see Treleaven, 2010). I want to add here that to elevate one’s own spiritual choice as the universally superior one is a symptom of what I have called spiritual narcissism, which is unfortunately pandemic in the human approach to religious diversity (Ferrer, 2010, 2011). From a participatory perspective, however, it is no longer a contested issue whether practitioners endorse a theistic, nondual, or naturalistic account of the mystery, or whether their chosen path of spiritual cultivation is meditation, social engagement, conscious parenting, entheogenic shamanism, sacred sexuality, or communion with
nature. (Of course, it may be desirable to complement each pathway with practices that cultivate other human potentials — hence the importance of non-mentally guided integral practice). The new spiritual bottom line, in contrast, is the degree to which each spiritual path fosters both an overcoming of self-centeredness and a fully embodied integration that make us not only more sensitive to the needs of others, nature, and the world, but also more effective cultural and planetary transformative agents in whatever contexts and measure life or spirit calls us to be.

An important practical outcome of adopting this participatory approach is that, like members of a healthy family, practitioners can stop attempting to impose their doctrinal beliefs on others and instead possibly become a supportive force for their spiritual individuation. This mutual empowerment of spiritual creativity may lead to the emergence of not only a human community formed by fully differentiated spiritual individuals, but also a rich variety of coherent spiritual perspectives that can potentially be equally aligned to the mystery. I stress ‘potentially’ to suggest that every spiritual tradition — even those traditionally promulgating arguably dissociative (or unilaterally transcendentalist, or disembodied, or world-denying) doctrines and practices — can be creatively (and legitimately, I would argue) re-envisioned from the perspective of more holistic understandings. As mentioned earlier, Whicher’s (1999) integrative, embodied reinterpretation of Patanjali’s dualistic system of classical yoga — whose aim was self-identification with a pure consciousness (purusa) in isolation (kaivalyam) from all possible physical or mental contents (prakrti) — offers an excellent example of such hermeneutic and spiritual possibilities. Therefore, I maintain that the participatory approach allows us to affirm both the uniqueness and potential integrity of each tradition in its own right.

This account of spiritual individuation is, I believe, consistent with Daniels’s intuition that spiritual realization will be different for different people. If we consider human beings to be unique embodiment of the mystery, would it not be natural that as we spiritually individuate, our spiritual realizations might also be distinct even if they are aligned with each other and
potentially overlapping in many regards? After affirming a participatory account of spirituality that welcomes a multiplicity of paths, Hollick (2006) writes:

It is tempting to suggest that ‘balanced’ spiritual growth would see each of us develop more or less equally along each path … But I don’t think that’s how it works. We are all unique, and carve out our unique combinations of paths towards our unique revelation of Spirit. (p.354)

To conclude, from a participatory perspective, Wilber’s nondual realization can be seen as one among many other spiritual enactions — one that it is not entirely holistic from any contemporary perspective recognizing the equal spiritual import of both consciousness and energy, both transcendent and immanent spiritual sources. I suggest that the cultivation of spiritual individuation — possibly regulated by something like the integral bodhisattva vow to minimize the pitfalls of past spiritualities — may be more effective than traditional paths to enlightenment in promoting not only the fully harmonious development of the person but also holistic spiritual realizations. This may be so because most traditional contemplative paths cultivate a disembodied, and potentially dissociative, spirituality even while providing access to such spiritual heights as classical mystical visions, ecstatic unions, and absorptions. Reasonably, one might ask whether the path of spiritual individuation may render such spiritual heights less likely — perhaps — but I wonder aloud whether our current individual, relational, social, and ecological predicament calls us to sacrifice some ‘height’ for ‘breadth’ (and arguably ‘depth’). Put bluntly, in general it may be preferable today to shift our focus from those spiritual heights in order to ‘horizontalize,’ or pursue spiritual depths in the nitty-gritty of our embodied existence. Even if slowly and making mistakes, I personally choose to walk toward such uncharted integral horizons rather than the ‘road more traveled’ of disembodied spirituality.

**Conclusion**

29 My emphasis on spiritual individuation should not be confused with what Bellah (1985) called ‘Sheilaism’ — named after Sheila, a respondent who claimed to have her own private religion. By contrast, my sense is the perspectives of spiritually individuated persons may naturally align with one another and shape spiritual networks and communities even across doctrinal differences — a communion or genuine unity-in-diversity of multiple spiritual perceptions.
In closing, three directions may be particularly productive in moving this dialogue forward. First, it may be important for Wilber to unpack more explicitly the ontological implications of his integral post-metaphysics. In particular, I wonder whether he truly means to relegate spiritual realities to the individual’s interiors, or whether this is an unintended upshot of his seeking to avoid the pitfalls of classical metaphysical systems. In addition, it is not clear whether he believes that all spiritual realities and entities are human cocreations or whether he is leaving room for the possibility that some may (co-)exist autonomously.

Second, I issue a plea to the transpersonal community to scrutinize the neo-Kantian assumptions lying beneath agnosticism toward the extra-physical and extra-psychological ontological status of spiritual realities. I believe it is fundamental to be aware that such a stance, far from warranting neutrality or impartiality, is the fruit of a modern, Western, and dualistic epistemological ethos that automatically renders suspect mystical claims about the nature of knowledge and reality. In their noble attempts to promote the scientific legitimacy of the field, some transpersonal psychologists — from Washburn (1995) to Friedman (2002) to Daniels, M. (2001, 2005) — may have prematurely committed to a neo-Kantian dualistic epistemology that is in fact ideologically tied to a naturalistic, and often materialistic, metaphysics. Whether such a naturalistic worldview will ultimately be cogent is unknown, but transpersonal scholars should be able recognize and make explicit the metaphysical presuppositions implicit in such methodological agnosticism; in this way, we can avoid assuming or defending its purportedly scientific, metaphysically neutral status and thereby falling prey to one of science’s most prevalent ideologies (see van Fraassen, 2002).

Finally, I firmly believe that both the scholarly credibility and future relevance of transpersonal psychology will be enhanced by a more thorough discernment of the merits and shortcomings of our past spiritual endeavors, a discontinuation of the common transpersonal practice of mystifying the mystics, and the undertaking of a critical exploration of the types of spiritual understandings and practices that may be most appropriate for our contemporary global situation.

Acknowledgements
I want to thank William Barnard, Michael Daniels, Charles Flores, Ann Gleig, Glenn Hartelius, Sean Kelly, Brian L. Lancaster, Kenneth Ring, and Jacob Sherman for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

Author’s Note

Jorge N. Ferrer, PhD, is chair of the department of East-West Psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco. He is the author of Revisioning Transpersonal Theory: A Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002) and coeditor (with Jacob Sherman) of The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008). A leading scholar on ‘Transformative Practices’ and ‘Integral Epistemology’ at the Esalen Center for Theory and Research, California, he received the Fetzer Institute’s 2000 Presidential Award for his seminal work on consciousness studies. In 2009, he became an advisor to the organization Religions for Peace at the United Nations on a research project aimed at solving global inter-religious conflict. Prof. Ferrer offers talks and workshops on transpersonal studies, participatory spirituality, and integral education both nationally and internationally. He was born in Barcelona, Spain.

Correspondence

Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to the author at jferrer@ciis.edu.

References

monastic dialogue between Christian and Asian traditions (pp.291-308). New York: Continuum.


