

The Integral and the Spiritual in Ken Wilber and Jean Gebser

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Ken Wilber is a theorist whose writings cover enormous ground, drawing upon the work of other scholars from a wide range of disciplines. Jean Gebser's work is one of Wilber's major sources, and he's a theorist of tremendous scope in his own right; but in comparing his work to Wilber's interpretation of that work, I've found that Wilber doesn't always do it justice. I intend to examine them both, using their original works and the interpretation of Gebser by Georg Feuerstein, finding both the commonalities and differences between the two, and attempting to translate differing terms into a common language. In the process I hope to discover the rays of truth lighting the works of both men in an attempt to further the common cause they share, that of the evolution of consciousness.

Wilber can be difficult to get a handle on because of the evolution of his own theories. His position in *Up From Eden* is very similar to that elaborated on in the later *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, but they differ in important ways. The greatest innovation of his later work, when it comes to making a comparison with the work of Jean Gebser, is Wilber's admittance of a structure of consciousness lying between the rational and the higher spiritual levels; namely, the centauric, which corresponds roughly to Gebser's integral-aperspectival structure. Wilber now claims that many people are beginning to move into this stage of consciousness, just as Gebser claims we are seeing signs of humanity moving into the integral consciousness; yet Wilber doesn't grant this stage the same importance as does Gebser, who doesn't discuss the subject of structures beyond the integral. Wilber claims that this is a weakness in Gebser's approach, that he collapses all higher levels into the integral; but this is a subtle subject, and Gebser a subtle writer, so before accepting Wilber's claim we need to take a closer look at what each man means by their various terms.

Both Wilber and Gebser acknowledge that the most influential if not the largest portion of humanity lives in the light of the rational structure of consciousness. Yet each man means something different by the term "rational". Ken Wilber uses the word in the same way that Gebser uses "mental": to describe the structure itself; whereas Gebser calls only the deficient form of the larger mental structure of consciousness the rational, which came into being during the Renaissance and has increasingly become the dominant mode of consciousness in the West. Therefore when Wilber uses the term "rational", one can substitute Gebser's term "mental", since Wilber doesn't distinguish a deficient form of that structure.

Although both men acknowledge the dominance of the mental structure in the world today, Gebser seems to think it is shared by all of humanity, although many people continue to emphasize one of the previous structures of consciousness: the archaic, the magical, or the mythical. Georg Feuerstein makes this clear using the cultures of the East as an example, saying, "The Eastern branch of the human family

animates, for historical reasons, a type of mental consciousness that is still heavily steeped in the magical and mythic worldviews. By contrast, the Western hemisphere is largely ruled, to its own detriment, by the mental-rational consciousness."¹

Wilber appears to disagree with this assessment, claiming instead that a good portion of humanity is still firmly embedded in one of the previous structures without having attained true egoic rationality. He says, "The single greatest *world transformation* would simply be the embrace of global reasonableness and pluralistic tolerance—the global embrace of egoic-rationality (on the way to centauric vision-logic)."² This makes it clear that Wilber believes that a large part of humanity hasn't yet stabilized in the mental/rational structure of consciousness, and that they need to do so before we can move forward.

Although I agree that the people of the world could stand to think a little more clearly, perhaps learning to use more effectively the gifts of the mental/rational structure of consciousness, I also think Wilber is over-simplifying the matter. An equally great transformation might occur if those who claim to embrace "global reasonableness and pluralistic tolerance" didn't in the process shut out the perfectly valid means of knowing associated with previous structures of consciousness. Wilber would most likely concur, as he asserts that, "...it is not the existence of the egoic structure itself that constitutes our cage, but only the exclusive identification of our awareness with that structure. The structure itself houses numerous benefits..."³ Here it's useful to bring in Gebser's notion of the rational structure of consciousness, which is the deficient form of the larger mental structure. The danger Wilber acknowledges above is the dominant characteristic of Gebser's rational structure, that being exclusive reliance on the mental structure, thus pushing the equally valid previous structures into the background. The archaic, magical and mythical structures (and the various shades in between that Wilber uses) also house numerous benefits, and the rational ego ignores them at its peril.

What, then, would be the way of being that could integrate all previous structures, including the mental? Both Wilber and Gebser have a similar answer, though their answer is not necessarily identical. Gebser would attribute that ability to the integral-aperspectival structure of consciousness; Wilber calls it the centauric, or vision-logic, and equates it with Gebser's integral structure. Yet there is a depth to Gebser's integral that I don't see in Wilber's vision-logic. Wilber explains, "Where rationality gives all possible perspectives, vision-logic adds them up into a totality...[It] can hold in mind contradictions, it can unify opposites, it is dialectical and nonlinear, and it weaves together what otherwise appear to be incompatible notions..."⁴ He goes on to say that, "...it is not just the mind looking objectively and

¹ G. Feuerstein, *Wholeness or Transcendence?*, p. 287

² K. Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, p. 201

³ K. Wilber, *Up From Eden*, p. 303

⁴ K. Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, p. 185

'representationally' at external objects—the 'reflection paradigm'—but the mind looking at the mind intersubjectively."⁵

Feuerstein describes Gebser's integral structure as, "...an integrating type of consciousness that transcends the inherent limitations of all preceding (but still co-present) structures of consciousness. This new consciousness apprehends the world as it is, 'in truth.' It is a consciousness of the spiritual."⁶ The key differences in these statements are in the words "spiritual" and "truth". Wilber's description seems to be of a higher order of mentality than that which we've grown used to in these deficient, "rational" times; but is it truly a new structure of consciousness? It may indeed be a type of consciousness that both acknowledges and transcends previous structures; but Gebser's integral-aperspectival structure goes a step further. It is a direct knowing that, like Wilber's vision-logic, makes use of and transcends all previous structures; but its emphasis on making transparent that which is ever-present, "the spiritual", would of necessity include the impressive process that Wilber describes above. Gebser explains, "Aperspectivity is the 'verition,' the 'awaring in truth' of the whole and consequently of its spiritual manifestation...To attain this consciously, without abandoning the earlier consciousness structures, is to overcome rationality in favor of arationality, and to break forth from mentality into diaphaneity."⁷

Here is where Wilber might beg to differ with this assessment, and insist that Gebser is biting off more than he can chew. Wilber describes structures of consciousness beyond the integral (or his own vision-logic), and would claim that only there does one begin to access the truly spiritual (or transpersonal). This is not a point I can argue for or against, as the reality and/or nature of these higher levels is not easily verified except perhaps by certain practices this writer is not practiced in. I will say, however, that there is undoubtedly a felt depth to Gebser's words that indicates to me that he tasted a way of being that made use of the benefits of Wilber's vision-logic while simultaneously transcending them. It is possible, I suppose, that he unknowingly accessed one or more of the even higher stages of consciousness that Wilber speaks about. That's not something that I can determine, however important that may be. At this point it's more useful to take a closer look at where these authors say humanity is currently at in the evolution of consciousness; otherwise it's rather difficult to say with any certainty where we might be headed.

The differences between Gebser's and Wilber's notions about what phenomena to accord to the mental/rational structures or the integral/centauric structures become apparent if one looks at fear of death and existential angst. Both men approach the subject, but each is describing a different structure of consciousness. Gebser associates it with the mental structure. As Feuerstein explains it, "Self-conscious humanity must face its inevitable mortality—a realization that provokes deep sorrow. It is this sorrow, in the face of life's utter impermanence

⁵ Ibid, p. 189

⁶ G. Feuerstein, *Structures of Consciousness*, p. 219

⁷ J. Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, p. 412

and instability, that is given increasing expression as the mental structure of consciousness approaches and unfolds."⁸

Wilber would not disagree with the above quote. On the contrary, he devotes an entire chapter in *Up From Eden* to the sorrow that ensued upon the development of the mental-egoic structure of consciousness. And yet, unlike Gebser, he claims that the existential sorrow continues in a new form in the centauric/vision-logic structure of consciousness. He states, "As vision-logic adds up all the possibilities given to the mind's eye, it eventually reaches a dismal conclusion: personal life is a brief spark in the cosmic void. No matter how wonderful it all might be now, we are still going to die: *dread*, as Heidegger said, is the authentic response of the existential (centauric) being..."⁹

Nowhere in Gebser's work do I find any indication that "dread" is the authentic response of a being that is living in the new structure of consciousness. While I can't deny that Wilber's point is valid (to a point), I don't believe that that particular insight is a by-product of a profoundly new structure of consciousness. Rather, it seems to be the final dead end of the rational (Gebser's term) perspective. Existential dread is precisely what one feels when one KNOWS there are higher possibilities, but hasn't yet made the quantum leap to actually be living among them, and clings instead to the last tattered shred of ego. As Gebser puts it, "An acknowledgement (even if it represents a complete awareness of the evidence) is never sufficient in itself. In order to raise it into effectiveness, it must be experienced."¹⁰ Gebser doesn't tend to look too kindly on the "existentialist" school, and while I appreciate the perspective of Heidegger, Sartre, etc. (if only for knowledge of the dead end roads), I find it rather ridiculous that their paths are indicative of an entire structure of consciousness.

No, Gebser (and Feuerstein) seem to think that the integral structure of consciousness is more than just the reintegration of mind and body that many people are now experiencing, with its concomitant fear of bodily death, although it assuredly includes that. Wilber does explain that particular aspect of the new structure beautifully when he says that, "...centauric-integral awareness integrates the body and mind in a new transparency; the biosphere and noosphere, once finally differentiated, can now be integrated in a new embrace."¹¹ But again, he doesn't seem to accord this reunion the profound spiritual import that Gebser does.

This might be a by-product of Wilber's writing style, which is very easy to follow and makes liberal use of the words "merely" and "simply" to describe incredibly awesome features of existence. It may be that Wilber really does have such a commanding grasp of the true functioning of reality that he can explain it very simply in layman's terms. Regardless of that possibility, I'm more inclined

⁸ G. Feuerstein, *Structures of Consciousness*, p. 97

⁹ K. Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, p. 263

¹⁰ G. Feuerstein, *Structures of Consciousness*, p. 27

¹¹ K. Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, p. 189

toward Gebser's perspective because his cryptic style stretches my mind and heart a bit more. Feuerstein describes Gebser's methods by saying that, "...he tends to avoid definitions, which are perspectival fixations in the domain of language. In his writings he takes on the formidable task of trying to communicate intelligibly while not allowing himself to be hampered by the rational conventions of our language."¹² Yet it isn't Gebser's difficulty that makes him stand out; it's the space I feel him attempting to draw us into.

It's not surprising, given Gebser's tricky method of attempting to take us beyond the rational, that he has an appreciation for Zen Buddhism and its methods for eliciting what he claims is the integral-aperspectival structure of consciousness. He notes that, "...because of the rational consequences [of realizing the mental structure], Zen students seek to free themselves from it in order to attain, ultimately, a sudden leap or mutation to a *satori*, an elevated suprawakefulness of consciousness evoked by one of the seemingly 'senseless' *koans*...We have defined this consciousness structure of integrative effectiveness as the 'arational-integral.'"¹³ Here again Wilber might differ in opinion as to which structure of consciousness is being awakened during a *satori*; he might claim that one of the three or four transpersonal levels he uses is at play here, possibly even the non-dual. But once again we have a question that the meditationally challenged among us (including this author) have difficulty answering.

It's interesting that Wilber assumes there *are* these specific, higher structures of consciousness (that can be talked about, however pathetically, within the confines of rationally-oriented language), and that they are all steps on the way to ultimate, non-dual realization. I don't doubt that there may be; I do doubt that we can pin them down that easily and set up a hierarchy between them that has much validity beyond our current more or less rational mode of consciousness. The apparently linear structure of Wilber's system has been troubling to many (him too, I would imagine), and while it may be a useful map, I find it rather dismaying to know that our next breakthrough is just another in a long line of transmutations of suffering.

The mutation of consciousness that Gebser speaks of seems far subtler than that of the transformation to the "centauric" level that Wilber associates it with. One's perspective on evolution in time and spiritual progress itself evolve when accessing Gebser's integral structure. As Feuerstein puts it, "Manifestly it is possible to live...a spiritual life at different levels of intensity. Then there appears to be what the rational consciousness interprets as a linear movement of progress. However, from the viewpoint of the integral consciousness, this movement is simply one of the gradual maturation in one's responsiveness and responsibility toward the spiritual."¹⁴ One then wonders about the importance of the higher, "transpersonal" levels of consciousness if there really is an integral way of being accessible to humankind wherein both where we've been and where we're going are laid plain before our eyes

¹² G. Feuerstein, *Structures of Consciousness*, p. 43

¹³ J. Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, pp. 222-223

¹⁴ G. Feuerstein, *Structures of Consciousness*, p. 171

(or perhaps our “vertex”, the organ Gebser associates with the integral structure of consciousness).

When you get down to it, though, it really doesn't matter how many structures of consciousness there are or what features to accord to each. The key thing that Wilber and Gebser would both agree on is that there is indeed a direction in which we can evolve, and it's far more important to take that next step than to surmise about where that next step might take us. If a map is useful, great, but arguing over accuracy of the maps won't get us anywhere. What can we each do in order to take that next step, if there really is anything we CAN do?

For Wilber, meditation seems to be the key. He often invites his readers to take up the practices that lead to the spiritual insights of which he speaks, rather than jumping to criticism; and most of those practices are various forms of meditation. He explains, “[Meditation] is simply what an individual at this present stage of average-mode consciousness has to do in order to go beyond that stage in his or her own case. It is a simple and natural continuation of evolutionary transcendence: just as the body transcended matter, and as mind transcended the body, so in meditation the soul transcends the mind and then the Spirit transcends the soul.”¹⁵ Unfortunately I don't think it always works out that easily. Perhaps one is more likely to evolve with a meditation practice, but it's anything but inevitable. Feuerstein says, “Gebser mentioned the interesting and typical example of a long-standing European devotee of Ramana Maharshi who, despite serious dedication and intensive meditation in apparently ideal surroundings, had failed to achieve the much-desired ecstatic experience.”¹⁶

If meditation itself is not the key, what is? The above example gives a clue, in that it is NOT chasing after the “ecstatic experience”. Gebser's opinion is that, “What is needed is care, much patience, and the discarding of many preconceived opinions, wishful dreams, and blind demands; and it calls for a certain detachment toward oneself and the world, a gradually maturing balance between all inherent components and consciousness structures...This integral attitude may be fruitfully combined with certain practices, such as meditation...Yet these techniques are of secondary importance, and their only value lies in facilitating that inner attitude.”¹⁷ I'm certain that Wilber would agree wholeheartedly, and might point out that facilitating that inner attitude is exactly what meditation IS. But he never says as much, maybe not realizing how many people are willing to go through the motions of spiritual practice in order to impress somebody, or to avoid dealing with the reality of their everyday lives, or a million other inauthentic reasons. Wilber appears to have born with a kind of spiritual dedication that he might take for granted, not realizing that with many of us meditation is not always the right answer, if it happens to come from the wrong place.

Above all, the key seems to be dedication: dedication to realizing the highest possibilities of humankind and beyond. Snatching up the flashes of

¹⁵ K. Wilber, *Up From Eden*, pp. 340-341

¹⁶ G. Feuerstein, *Wholeness or Transcendence?*, p. 284

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 288

dedication we experience throughout the course of our lives, whether seated in meditation or stuck in a god-awful traffic jam, and working them for all they're worth. Feuerstein puts it well when he says, "The breakthrough into the integral or aperspectival consciousness...requires...a particular kind of exertion or work, namely the persistent and consistent application of oneself to the rendering transparent of the human personality so that consciousness can coalesce, grow together, with the spiritual."¹⁸

And yet this equation wouldn't be complete without a certain factor that gives space for those moments of dedication to occur; it is what Gebser calls "primal trust". As he puts it, "Primal trust is neither a state nor a condition. It is poise, inner poise; at the same time it is a being-held. It is rest as well as motion; better still: it is rest *and* motion...the ability 'to act without acting'...primal trust is participation, conscious participation, in the spiritual and it is an unbroken, irresolvable being-held in the spiritual."¹⁹ Cultivating this, now, is the noblest goal I can think of, whether it allows one to be integral, non-dual, or whatever else the most righteous next step might be.

I've done a lot more criticizing than praising Wilber's viewpoint in this paper, but that's at least partially because his work is still in progress, so its aliveness makes me more eager to point out what I see as its holes. Above all, though, it's counterproductive to expend one's energy in constant criticism, which many seem to do with Wilber (often criticizing his tendency to criticize), neglecting the fact that he's bringing us great gifts, flawed though they may be. I find the gist of Wilber is found not when he's theorizing, but when he's speaking directly to that part of us that sees, and KNOWS, what is really going on here. This can be found in the forward to *Up From Eden*, portions of nearly every chapter of *The Eye of Spirit*, and numerous other places. He asks, "And do you remember the Author of this Play? As you look deeply into your own awareness, and relax the self-contraction, and dissolve into the empty ground of your own primordial experience, the simple feeling of Being—right now, right here—is it not obvious all at once?"²⁰

In essence, the details don't matter: both Gebser and Wilber are assisting the rest of us in finding our way back to the heart of the matter, graciously giving of themselves in their own unique fashions. Georg Feuerstein notes that, "...initiation is not about any communication of knowledge but involves rather the transmission of spiritual grace."²¹ It's important to keep that in mind when reading the works of Jean Gebser or Ken Wilber, because the most crucial quality shared by their writings is the unmistakable spiritual grace coming through them both.

¹⁸ G. Feuerstein, *Structures of Consciousness*, p. 163

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 126

²⁰ K. Wilber, *Up From Eden*, pp. xvi-xvii

²¹ G. Feuerstein, *Wholeness or Transcendence?*, p. 285

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