

# THE DEIFIED SELF: A "Centaur" Response to Wilber and the Transpersonal Movement



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## Summary

This article is an existential-phenomenological ("centaur level")<sup>1</sup> response to Ken Wilber's concept of deified or ultimate consciousness. Ultimate consciousness, according to Wilber, is the supreme expression of human awareness. It is the point at which highly developed people (i.e., mystics) totally transcend space and time, and are aware (at once) of all perspectives in the universe. Three areas of this concept are evaluated and questioned: the human capacity to achieve ultimate consciousness, the relevance of ultimate consciousness for human problems, and the final appeal of

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ultimate consciousness. The author concludes that the concept of ultimate consciousness is (1) presumptuous and most probably unachievable for human beings; (2) even if achievable, irrelevant to people's day-to-day concerns; and (3) ultimately monotonous and uninteresting (if not terrorizing and overwhelming). A plea is made for a more realistic view of consciousness, one in which boundaries permit optimal freedom of expression.

From the outset, I wish to make clear that I have deep respect for Ken Wilber's insights and his ability to convey them. I am in agreement with the thrust of his thesis, that is, that Western psychologies are but parts of a much greater spectrum of consciousness (Wilber, 1977). I also agree that the Western tendency has been to restrict and fragment the world in narrow categories, as in the emphasis on material well-being, social classes, overt behavior, rules, and regulations (Wilber, 1979, 1983a).

However, I do not agree with Wilber's ultimate stand, namely, that people are capable of attaining divine consciousness—a totally unrestricted, transcendent oneness with all time and space (Wilber, 1979, 1983a, 1983b). To me, this is the spearhead of another disturbing trend in this society: the overreaction to past narrowness and stagnation (see Schneider, 1986). Whereas past theorists seemed to have portrayed human experience too mechanistically, Wilber and kindred thinkers have overcompensated and depicted it too broadly.

Although the main focus of my response centers on the work of Wilber, by implication, I am also questioning the writings of many others who side with the transpersonal movement in psychology (e.g., Hendlin, 1983; LeShan, 1974; Ram Das, 1974; Vaughan, 1983; Vaughan & Walsh, 1983; Washburn, 1980; Welwood, 1983; and others). It is my growing belief that total transcendence of self is a misleading and rather undesirable psychological ideal or principle. While several recent articles have alerted us to possible problems inherent in the total transcendence concept (e.g., Chaudhuri, 1975; Deikman, 1982; Hendlin, 1983; Rowan, 1983; Welwood, 1983), this article goes beyond them in central respects. For example, while I share several theorists' (e.g., Deikman, 1982; Hendlin, 1983; Welwood, 1983) concern about "instant" or casual attempts to perfect

consciousness, I do not agree with their implied view that there is a “proper” (or transegoic) path to such a state. Second, although I concur with Chaudhuri (1975) and others (e.g., Bucke, 1923; Rowan, 1983; Sutich, 1975) who question people’s capacity to attain ultimate consciousness, I disagree with their tacit idealization of the condition.

The basis for my argument derives from recent trends in the philosophy of science (see Postscript, below), Becker (1973), and existential-phenomenological philosophy (see also Buber 1965a, 1965b; Fromm, 1964; Hoffer, 1951; May, 1981; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Rank, 1932; Royce, 1964; Sadler, 1969; Tillich, 1952). I realize that Wilber (1979) termed this viewpoint “centauric”—confined to the body/mind of an individual—and less consciously evolved than the transpersonal. However, in my opinion, existential-phenomenology is more accurately attuned to the human situation than Wilber’s alternative. The existential-phenomenological level is not just confined to an individual; it can (if a person is evolved enough) encompass collective experiences, deeply spiritual or transcendental moments, indeed, many of the moments Wilber ascribes to mystics. It just does not embrace total fusion with the universe.

Put another way, the existential-phenomenological stand precludes ultimate knowledge or certainty. It holds that every view is dialectical—an inextricable blend of values (i.e., personal, cultural) and environmental contexts. As soon as attempts are made to extricate the environmental or cosmological from values, then not only do linguistic referents fail (i.e., words like *love*, *bliss*, *whole*, and so on) because they are bound by the culture and person who uses them, but perspectives of any kind lack meaning (Bharati, 1976; Louch, 1966; Toulmin, 1982). Simply put, the burden of proof regarding value-free claims rests with the claimants. They must show that theirs is the absolute true reality—which is, of course, a perilous as well as improbable task.

While I do not doubt Wilber’s sincerity in this matter, nor the personal basis for his writings (Wilber, 1982b), I am skeptical of his conclusions. It is one thing to describe luminous spiritual moments. However, it is quite another matter to claim that one subsumes all such moments. May (1981) stated this point concretely:

We never wholly leave the ego-self behind, and we still have to live in the real world with its rationality and irrationality, and with our responsibility toward this world. (p. 182)

The void may seem to be contact with pure being, but I prefer a more modest judgment, that one gets glimpses of being, awareness that there *is* a beckoning path to pure being even though none of us gets very far on it. (p. 184)

The existential-phenomenological contention, and my own, is that arguments like Wilber's end up unrealistic and, even if attainable, perhaps not all that attractive. I have organized this criticism into three main parts. First, I question whether people can attain the unmitigated openness that Wilber espouses. I question the presumptuousness and extremity of such a claim. Arguing that people are immortal and universally transcendent is like claiming that people can stare directly into the sun, or that people are on an experiential par with all forms of life in the universe. The seriousness of this claim, I contend, has not received the critical attention it deserves. Second, I question the relevancy of Wilber's vision for the world (especially the contemporary one). Wilber's mystics, it seems to me, are only effective to the degree that they show us how to deal with technology: help people with their jobs, families, or friends. Further, when mystics are helpful in this way, it seems to me that they end up back at the very centauric level they supposedly had transcended. Third, even if everyone could attain ultimate consciousness, I wonder how appealing it would be. Wouldn't such a society lack fruitful contrasts? Wouldn't it be dull to live in a world of total openness, total composure, and bliss? Wouldn't the human spirit be unfocused, uninspired? I believe that ultimate consciousness, if Wilber's notion were truly engaged, might foster generations of persons who would no longer know joy because they had forgotten sorrow; who would no longer value love because they had forgotten commitment; who would no longer question life because they had forgotten how to think critically; and who would no longer feel impassioned because they had forgotten struggle and strife. Let me explain these points in greater depth.

## THE PERSON/GOD PROBLEM

I agree with several of Wilber's (1977, 1979) key premises: (a) At a certain level of consciousness, we view the world in polarized ways. We repress diverging or opposing perspectives that are threatening to us. Thus we feel we are good and not bad, strong not weak, masculine not feminine, and so on. However, when we do this, we either lose our vitality or become haunted by the return of what we denied. (b) The "healthier" person represses fewer opposing perspectives. He or she is more liberated, expansive, and enriched. He or she is also less haunted by the dire consequences of denial (Frager & Fadiman, 1977; Pazy, 1985). These points are credible.

However, Wilber (1979) wants to assert much more than the above. He goes on to claim that the ideal healthy person (mystic) permits all perspectives within his or her purview. The mystic can be completely "free of personal problems, tensions, and anxieties" because he or she is not plagued by the ills of repression or opposites (Wilber, 1979, p. 124). Moreover, we all have the potential to view the world like mystics (Wilber, 1979, 1983a). We can do this by attending to the world in the present—prior to reflection on or identification with any particular state. After a great deal of practice, our own categories would then dissolve, and we would become open processes, "at one" with all the modes of being in the universe (Wilber, 1979, 1983a).

However, are people really capable of such openness? What would it really mean to disidentify with all of one's cherished boundaries and live completely in the present? Becker's (1973, p. 27) sketch of the situation seems more accurate than Wilber's: "I believe that those who speculate that a full apprehension of man's condition would drive him insane are right, quite literally right."

Becker implies here that unrepressed, total awareness is hell. He's saying that even the most liberated must be circumscribed lest they collapse. Such people are courageous enough to go as far as they go. They travel vast distances with their minds and hearts. They risk greatly for their projects, often feeling overwhelmed, uncertain, and socially isolated. Yet, for as far as the healthy or noble go in their encounter with boundaries, there

seems to be a threshold. There seems to be a point at which even they can no longer face uncertainty. Even such a courageous explorer of consciousness for his times as Freud, as Becker (1973) observed, was unable to venture to the next logical step past his sexuality theory (i.e., to a more existential view), and suffered anxiety or fainting spells when threatened with unwelcome awareness. Gandhi, similarly, was sexually and emotionally inhibited in certain ways (Erikson, 1975). There seems, as Becker (1973) declared, to be a “breaking point” for most people, no matter how liberated or sophisticated.

This breaking point might be called one’s ultimate point of worship, religion, or concern (Becker, 1973; Fromm, 1950, 1964; Yalom, 1980). It is the place at which a person’s thoughts, feelings, or actions are curbed by awe, destiny, or some kind of God (see Fromm, 1950; May, 1981). It is difficult and dangerous to break boundaries at this place. These boundaries are at the very core of our feelings about what it means to be human, to have a self, and to belong to the world. When taken seriously, these outermost boundaries do not seem merely illusory (Wilber, 1981). Rather, they would appear to be the very “containers” of our being, our sanity. Becker (1973) elaborated:

One of the reasons that [the schizophrenic’s] world is so terrifying is that he sees [transference object] unblurred by repression. . . . It is . . . the fear of the reality of the intense focalization of natural wonder and power; the fear of being overwhelmed by the truth of the universe as it exists. (pp. 147-148)

Mark Vonnegut (1975), a “reformed” schizophrenic, personalizes the point:

Many of the things that were happening to me were things I was supposed to like: ego death, communicating with the supernatural, hypersensitivity of all sorts. If there’s anything worse than bragging about such things, it’s not liking them. (p. 268)

He goes on:

Most descriptions of mystic states, while they include feelings of timelessness, actually cover very little clock time. For the schizophrenic it’s a twenty four hour day, seven days a week. Realizing

the transient nature of material things helps for a while, but it's got its limits. (p. 269)

Thus, what does it mean to achieve ultimate consciousness? What does it mean to live completely open to all perspectives in the universe? I realize that Wilber (1982a) (and kindred theorists, e.g., Hendlin, 1983; Washburn, 1980) distinguished the schizophrenic's unbounded visions from the mystic's achievement of transcendence. Wilber (1982a) called the former's experience "prepersonal"—regression to infantile subconsciousness except with "higher [developmental] structures" mixed in. (p. 28). He called the latter's perception "transpersonal"—transcendent of all "lower levels" and universally conscious (Wilber, 1982a). He viewed the psychotic's world as chaotic and irresponsible; the mystic's as composed and responsible (Wilber, 1982a).

However, I have several major criticisms here. First, "regressed" psychotics are not necessarily so delirious. Data are equally convincing that they may be sensitive and acutely aware (Campbell, 1979; Fromm-Reichman, 1950; Laing, 1969). Moreover, a careful reading of the case evidence does not—as Wilber (1982a) would have it—clearly differentiate (prepersonal) psychotics from truly (transpersonal) visionaries. The current "confusion" regarding these modes is justifiable. The most disordered schizophrenics, apparently, can display the most logical—even profound—insights (Campbell, 1979; Jung, 1961; Laing, 1967, 1969; Perry, 1976; Vonnegut, 1975); whereas the greatest visionaries, correspondingly, can present the most disturbed behaviors (Arieti, 1976; Bharati, 1976; Ehrenwald, 1984; Farson, 1974; Hilgard, 1959; Huxley, 1954; Jamison & Goodwin, in press; Koestler, 1964; May, 1969; Pickering, 1974; Prentky, 1979; Silverman, 1979).

This latter point was underscored recently when a team of researchers (i.e., Jamison & Goodwin, quoted in Leo, 1984) found that fully 38% or 18 out of a sample of 47 prominent British authors and artists were hospitalized for severe mood disorders. That rate is six times the hospitalization rate of the general population for such disorders. While these people were not mystics (in the full Wilberian sense), they did transcend ordinary consciousness in many ways. Numerous other partially transcendent people (e.g., Blake, Byron, Kant, James, Jung, Newton,

Michelangelo, Nietzsche, Darwin, Beethoven, Mozart, Van Gogh, Hemingway, Woolfe, Rousseau) also appear to have been as marred as they were magnificent.

While (to my knowledge) little is known about the lives of the mystics Wilber cites, some data indicate that their lineage may not be as pure as he implies. For example, Bharati (1976), Butler (1983), Kakar (1982), Lattin (1985), Marin (1975, 1979), Rodarmor (1983), and Weinberger (1980) provided evidence that at least some spiritual leaders (often of unquestioned rank) had very “clay feet.” In particular, this research suggests that such “gurus” as Chogyam Trungpa, Baker Roshi, Da Free John, Muktananda, and others used drugs, alcohol, sex, and physical power in exploitative and injurious ways. Bharati (1976, p. 91), reputed mystic and anthropologist, goes even farther:

I have witnessed, with much initial dismay, that some of the best mystics were the greatest stinkers among men. Self-righteous, smug, anti-women, anti-men, politically fascist, stubborn, irrational. . . . The naive assumption is that yogic vision, the zero experience, also brings about knowledge of all things to be known. This is nonsense.

Moreover, if mystics attained anything approaching ultimate consciousness, I doubt that they would be composed. For if mystics were truly open to all perspectives, wouldn't they also be conscious “occupants” of all perspectives; and if this were so, how could life be calm? Not only would mystics “know” their own and others' depths, they would “dwell” in the churnings of the cosmos—“black holes,” exploding stars, colliding planets, and struggling life forms. I don't see how any human ego—advanced or superadvanced—could handle that kind of thrashing.

Wilber seems to misrepresent the capacity of mystics here. I'm sure that they are able to reach great heights of human awareness, that they transcend many of the mundane rules and categories of conventional life, but I question whether they are tension-free, all knowing, and in touch with the “Whole.” Sainly dreams, visions, and altered “states” alone do not convince me of total transcendence. By contrast, I think that even mystics (like most of us) are curbed at some point. They may achieve some shedding of personal, cultural, and physical bounds, but there are always



bounds beyond those, always verbal or nonverbal limits (see Bharati, 1976; Kakar, 1982; Louch, 1966; on the cultural and personal relativity of mystical states). If this is not the case, then we are no longer speaking of human beings. We are speaking of energies or “true” divinities.

My view draws additional support from Gestalt theory (for which Wilber, 1979, himself seems an advocate). Gestalt asserts that perception is governed by a foreground or focal point and a background or periphery (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). The two modes of perceiving are thought to alternate continuously with one another (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Now, the problem with Wilber’s thesis in terms of Gestalt is that while the focal point of one’s perception may be expansive or liberating, it is, by definition, also shaped by a ground. No matter when or where someone attends to the world (even if prereflectively), it is always contained by subtler, deeper perspectives (i.e., grounds) that are beyond one’s awareness (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). The whole process is an endless regress of perspectives within perspectives; never an ultimate unified perspective. Chaudhuri (1975, p. 14) affirmed this point when he wrote that “there is no last word on wisdom, only the latest.”

One of the foremost meditation researchers, Dan Brown (1977) was similarly reserved:

The only thing you can know for certain is the workings of your own mind. . . . Any other knowledge about the self or the world is not genuinely knowable or, in the terms of constructivist perception, it is simply more or less veridical. (p. 260)

This comment is reminiscent of Kant’s distinction between phenomena and noumena. The former was viewed as that which could be known via the orderly structure of the mind; the latter as the chaotic and unknowable element beyond the mind (Kant, 1929).

Even Wilber (1983a) curiously concedes part of this point when he speaks about precognition (knowing the future). He said that

if precognition is absolutely real and absolutely possible, then all events are already absolutely determined for all time. There is then no such thing as free will, no such thing as actual creativity or

true free emergence, there isn't even such a thing as Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. . . . I don't buy it myself. (p. 192).

Yet Wilber appears highly inconsistent here. How can he claim in one breath (as above) that the future is unknowable, and in the other that history is "the unfolding of the relationship between man and the ultimate whole" (Wilber, 1981, p. 6)? How can he "know" what the "end" of history will bring us yet not believe in precognition? How can certain privileged people (saints) embrace the infinite (noumena) and yet be unable to tell us what we will have for breakfast in the morning? If all things are interconnected, then doesn't one event, by definition, prefigure every other event—including future ones? Moreover, if mystics cannot know the future, then how could they be conflict-free? This notion, it seems to me, contradicts Wilber's (1979) contention that the great mystics resolve the self/not-self split. For if the future is unknowable, then by definition, a tension exists between the familiar and foreseeable and the potentially disconcerting and threatening.

Finally, Wilber's claim that mystics are directly in touch with the infinite/eternal ground of experience is not only contradictory to Gestalt, constructivist, Kantian, and aspects of his own theorizing; it also opposes modern scientific and philosophical trends that discredit notions of ultimate or absolute truth (Kuhn, 1970; Rorty, 1979; Rucker, 1982; Toulmin, 1982). While mystics may be in touch with much greater portions of experiential ground than most of us, according to our critique, they (like the rest of us) can only *potentially* contact the infinite.

## THE PROBLEM OF RELEVANCE

Even if ultimate consciousness could be achieved—what then? How would the infinite and eternal knowledge of mystics, saints, and gods help us here on earth?

Some 30 years ago, Tillich (1952) made the profound observation that Eastern mysticism is not the solution to Western problems. If I could amend this claim, I would say that Wilber's mystics/gods have limited relevance for most life as we know it on this planet. Let's look at this problem more concretely.

Assume, for the moment, that there are (and have been) a group of people who are “free of repression/oppression . . . and obsessive/compulsive overindulgence;” who demonstrate “unrestrained communication,” and “free exchanges of mutual self-esteem;” and who show “every person to be an ultimately equal member of the mystical body of Christ/Krishna/Buddha” (Wilber, 1981, p. 326). Moreover, assume that there are mystic-gods who are even more advanced than that (i.e., ones who are divinely conscious) and about whom Wilber (1981, p. 326) himself declined to speculate.

Given these conditions, what could we now say about human evolution? Have such deities improved our lot? Were they here when we had wars, racial clashes, or great famines? Are they among us now to help with nuclear disarmament, terrorism, job and marital stress? It seems to me that these deities are, by definition, far removed from day-to-day life.

I believe it is a misfortune that many people today are entranced by the notion of perfection. The problem is not so much that people believe that they can actually attain such a state; it is more that such a state mirrors the contemporary desire to be passively saved. Increasingly, as choices become more complex, many are opting for “handy” solutions. The burgeoning use of technology is one answer; the promise of a new order, a Hegelian ideal, a brilliantly articulated path to certainty and peace, is another. Ken Wilber has made sense of the world again. He has restored the comforting notions of clear historical contexts and progressive planetary solutions to our problems. Yet what we see today are embarrassing caricatures of the New consciousness (Joy, 1985). There are just too many people who, because of their newfound certitude, have plunged headlong into disaster. They are the desperate followers who found they couldn’t be saved, and the failed leaders—as we have seen—who became just as disillusioned as their followers (see Cox, 1977). Wilber (1982a, 1983a) has admitted these problems. He termed these sorts of people “regressed,” and insisted that they sharply differ from the true seekers. Yet what are the marks of these “true” seekers?

I believe that the great mystics that Wilber (1979, 1981) cites—Buddha, Lao Tzu, Lord Krishna, and others—were refreshingly earthbound. Far from comprehending the cosmos, these luminaries knew some very salient strategies to help people. Buddhists

and Taoists, for example, taught that the self flows like a river, like the known “laws” of nature, and that acceptance of such processes promotes harmony (Watts, 1975). They made no claims, it seems to me, about absolute truths of the universe. The Buddha, for instance, was alleged to have said the following when asked by his pupils if the universe is eternal:

I do not know and it is of no concern to me because whatever the answer is it does not contribute to the one problem which is of concern: how to reduce human suffering. (quoted in Fromm, 1950, p. 105)

I maintain that if knowledge of Kundalini and chakras can help people elevate their esteem, relate better to a spouse, or think more clearly about planetary survival, then so much the better. Gendlin (1978) knew this when he invented his Zen-modified “focusing” technique. Focusing helps psychotherapy clients reduce their pain and enjoy renewed vigor. It pointedly does not help them achieve “immortality,” “Void,” and “perfect . . . transcendence into . . . ultimate Consciousness” (Wilber, 1981, p. 253). Moreover, if it did, my guess is that few clients would be interested.

We need more human heroes; not those claiming to be in touch with the outer fringes of the cosmos. We need people who risk their lives and psyches on earth—for family, lovers, friends, and the realistic improvements of society. Why should “gods” bother with these problems? I would rather know one person who concretely enhanced his or her own and another’s lot in life than a thousand deities who spoke about cosmic “vibrations” or the level of pure energy. If this is centauric thinking, then so be it. I don’t see the value of striving to get beyond it.

## THE MYSTIC AND A LACKLUSTER WORLD

The achievement of ultimate consciousness—if it were truly engaged, as I do not believe Wilber’s exemplars have done—brings another question to mind. How appealing would it be? How enchanting is staring directly at the sun/cosmos? Wouldn’t

the scope of one's perspective be diffuse? Wouldn't an explosion of white light, radiant and bright, turn dull after awhile? Is it not darkness and mystery, form and containment, that enrich as well as restrict human life? These are questions that Wilber and many transpersonalists do not take up.

I have a hard time imagining a society of deific people, but I'll try. Perhaps they would be like paintings of Hindu gods. They would be "in tune" with the "natural" rhythms of the world around them. They would often meditate and travel far out of their bodies. They would be ecstatically sensual and treat others with pure warmth, kindness, and respect. Everyone and everything would be totally acceptable and permitted. There would be no threat of vengeance or discord because nothing would be repressed. No matter what activity they engaged in, it would be "good" because all activities (in their state) would be godlike or transcendent. In short, all life would be blissful, free of tension and fear.

There is, however, something irksome about the above scenario; something inhuman. No doubt, harmony and bliss are beautiful. Wholeness is nice. But the above vision is so extreme that it makes me wonder why anyone would want to partake in it. First, I wonder why anyone would be motivated in such a world. All activities are transcendent. All people are warm and kind. All the world is harmonious. I sense so much monotony in this world that being god wouldn't hold much appeal after awhile. Why would lovers maintain their sensuality and fire, artists forge dazzling masterpieces, thinkers create incisive theories, and, in the final analysis, anyone seek to fashion anything? It's *all* already there.

I believe that Wilber missed the mark with his convictions about total transcendence and freedom. Not only, as pointed out earlier, do I view such a state as humanly impossible and irrelevant; it also seems dull. No boundary, no "death" is just as deadening as too much restriction. Wilber (1981) fails to detect this emphasis in the existential-phenomenological view:

These existentialists have, indeed, seen the diagnosis of mankind—sickness unto death, fear and trembling—but they have not yet pushed through to the ultimate prognosis. . . . To move from self-consciousness to superconsciousness is to make death obsolete. (p. 337)

But “death” and boundary are not always negative for existential-phenomenologists. They do not always connote crippled, shrunken lives. To the contrary, at a certain point, boundaries may be enlivening. They can intensify the life they surround. This is a point that some humanistic psychologists (e.g., Maslow, 1971; Rogers, 1961; Schachtel, 1959) miss at times as well. A modicum of deficits and tensions are necessary for full human expression (May, 1977). “Pregnant” pauses and free play carry one only so far: productivity also entails structure. It entails applicability and the spirited confrontation with consequences or endings (Fromm, 1956, 1964). “The possibility of freedom,” according to Fromm (1964),

lies precisely in recognizing which are the real possibilities between which we can choose, and which are the “unreal possibilities”. . . . The unreal possibilities are, of course, no possibilities at all; they are pipe dreams. (p. 142)

May (1981) put it this way:

Life is more alive, more zestful, when we are aware of death; and death has significance only because there is life. God needs the devil. Freedom comes alive only when we see it in opposition to destiny, and destiny is significant only when it is in opposition to freedom. The opposites fructify each other; each gives dynamism, power to the other. (p. 66)

Becker (1973) reaffirmed these points:

Whatever is achieved must be achieved from within the subjective energies of creatures, without deadening, with full exercise of passion, of vision, of pain, of fear, and of sorrow. (p. 284)

The above writers speak here of “healthy” boundaries, of boundaries that, far from deadening or incapacitating, awaken and inform life. They speak of fruitful contrasts. How can one know deeply what freedom means unless one has some sense of being repressed or destined? How can one feel deep joy unless one has experience with sorrow?

To be sure, healthier people do not seek unnecessary contrasts. They do not seek restriction just to enhance freedom, or sorrow just to heighten pleasure. These contrasts occur naturally enough

in life, and they can be as miserable as they might be gratifying. However, healthy people are distinguished by their pursuit of only the necessary boundaries for their projects. This is when limitation is not something feared but invited. It is the place where passions, wants, and desires are optimally refined and channeled. It is that vital balance that only humans can know.

For example, George Washington, Martin Luther King, Gandhi, and (the case could be made) Jesus each worked within certain realistic and self-discovered limitations. In so doing, they foresaw not absolute truth, but the likelihood that future generations could improve upon as well as benefit from their leadership. Washington did this by refusing to accept an unlimited term as president at the height of his power; King and Gandhi by promoting nonviolent civil rights movements in the midst of chaos and persecution; and Jesus by conveying a humane code of communal ethics in the face of mass antagonism. The active confrontation with and discovery of boundaries—fears, anxieties, regrets, as well as joyous sentiments—have also marked the work of great artists. Such confrontations have formed the basis of works like Picasso's "Guernica," in which fractured and disarranged bodies reveal the tragedy of war and contemporary society (May, 1959); or a Van Gogh painting, in which complementary colors—"their blending and . . . oppositions"—symbolize the "love of two lovers" (Van Gogh quoted in Graetz, 1963, p. 69). Finally, a growing body of research suggests that "hardy" or vigorous people (from businesspersons to scientists and artists) blend challenge, spontaneity, and inventiveness with discipline, organization, purpose, and commitment (Antonovsky, 1979; Arieti, 1976; Barron, 1963; Fromm, 1956, 1964; Kobasa, 1979; Kobasa, Maddi, & Puccetti, 1982; Kobasa & Puccetti, 1983).

If the above points fail to persuade, all one needs to do is look around. Look at the people who seem to thrive. Look at people who can still love although they know great tragedy. Look at those who rouse limbs and bones despite profound physical handicaps. See the ones who savor each waking moment although they face imminent death. Witness those who build financial empires although they grew up the children of paupers. View the ones who diligently strive for peace although they've known the ravages of war. Discover those who think clearly and creatively despite having been brought up to feel dumb. At their core, these

triumphs—these glorious moments of defiance—are the models for all our victories, be they large or small.

It would seem then that true liberation is wedded to boundary, some kind of boundary. Although boundaries can be stretched, there appears to be an optimal point. If they extend too far or if they are, as Wilber exhorts, universal, they lose meaning. “Infinitizing” the world, as Kierkegaard (1954) declared, is as much an escape as “finitizing” it—both negate life.

We can’t be perfect in this world. This is a blessing. Without boundaries life would probably be maddening; and if not maddening then surely impoverished and unchallenging. Why do Wilber and kindred thinkers take their views so far? Aren’t people (and I emphasize their human side) like Buddha and Jesus liberating enough without having to endow them with super powers? Aren’t the capacities of the human mind and heart huge enough without having to slap perfection and omniscience on them? I challenge Wilber and other transpersonal thinkers to show us how immortality, perfection, and total transcendence will help people now. I think that even their remedies must end up centauric. For how else could they help people who lose jobs, spouses, or cherished ways of living? Outmoded narrow boundaries (religions) require updated broader ones. Tired paradoxes demand awakened ones. Only deities can surpass—and to their misfortunes miss—this cycle.

## POSTSCRIPT

Transpersonal critics may object that I am not familiar enough with the disciplines and practices necessary to achieve ultimate consciousness. They may say, therefore, that I am in no position to critique the “firsthand” reports of such an experience—especially since it is considered to be transrational and transverbal (Wilber, 1983a).

However, the irony of such an objection is that I doubt any of the objectors themselves would possess the usual “firsthand” experience necessary to verify the phenomenon of ultimate consciousness. Even a lifetime of practice wouldn’t ensure its attainment! The problem is that the claim about ultimate consciousness is an extreme one and does not lend itself clearly to



the method of direct verification (see Bharati, 1976, p. 84, on the disregard for falsifiability as a criterion for most mystical claims; Toulmin, 1982, p. 268, on the limitations posed by ethical and political elements of cosmological views; and Kuhn, 1970, pp. 36-37, on the absence of a puzzle-solving capacity—and therefore scientific basis—in metaphysical positions).

I contend, therefore, that in this case any reasonably informed critic should be able to discern the preponderance of evidence available. If this were not the case, then the extraordinary claims of “psychotics,” cultists, and fanatics would often be exempt from criticism by those outside of their experiential domains. For example, if a man claimed that jumping off a 1000-foot cliff is an ecstatic, survivable experience, and that all one need do to verify his claim is to take his 20-year course in transrational, trans-verbal seaside ritual, then jump, would we be obliged as scientists to take up the challenge? Would there not be less drastic means of verifying his claims (i.e., the physiological and psychological status of those who claimed to have jumped; the current state of knowledge regarding physiological and psychological capabilities)? While it is apparent, at present, that no one can prove or disprove ultimate consciousness (Bharati, 1976), much can—and indeed should—be said about its practical implications. Trans-personalists invited this scrutiny when they began formalizing the concept.

## NOTE

1. Wilber (1979, 1980) used this term to denote the existential/humanistic mode of consciousness. He described it as centaur because, for him, it lies “halfway” between personal and transpersonal bands. However, I argue that the centaur level not only covers mind and body, but probably what Wilber (1981) referred to as the (transpersonal) soul or subtle realm, immediately preceding “ultimate” consciousness. The centaur is a mode of consciousness based on personal meaning. Beyond such boundary, I doubt *human* being is relevant or possible.

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