Between Philosophy and Prophesy

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Introduction: On eyeing weaknesses in Wilber’s work

In the summer of 2010, at the Integral Theory Conference (ITC) in the hills outside San Francisco, I sat on a panel dedicated to discussing criticisms of Ken Wilber’s writings. That day I said his work was marked by three laudable liabilities. These are aspects of the work that I think are problematic, in that they render it controversial and unappealing, and yet they are also valuable, lending a certain intriguing power and validity to the work. The first laudable liability involves some particular theoretical issues having to do with Wilber’s use of stage theories from developmental psychology. That topic involves some complex concerns about the growth to goodness assumptions, concerns that I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Stein, forthcoming). The second and third laudable liabilities are discussed in this essay. These involve positioning Wilber’s work in a historical-critical manner and reflecting on his project as a whole, as opposed to focusing in on certain detailed parts of his various models.

The worries I offer below are about the engineered popularity of Wilber’s ideas and about their overtly religious and spiritual content and motive—their soteriological knowledge constitutive interest. However, the broad goal of this essay is to make sense of Wilber’s work in terms of the historical era in which it thrives. I believe this is the best way to frame a discussion of any problematic issues with an author and their corpus. An author should be understood, at least in part, against the backdrop of their times. When that author is a contemporary, this can have us looking at the present era as if through the eyes of a future historian of ideas. Positioning Wilber’s work in the contemporary contexts of our current historical moment means characterizing the emergence of this work as a part of this “time of global transformations” (Habermas, 2006). That I take up this kind of broad historical-critical approach is also a result of what transpired during that two-hour panel in California. I found myself having to explicitly bring up the need for a rigorous and historically sensitive hermeneutics of respect, as opposed to a parochial and pedantic hermeneutics of suspicion. We must read Wilber as we would read a signpost at the edge of history.
Theorizing at the edge of history

If we are going to take a step in the transition from civilization to planetization, we will need a map. Each of us carries within, an image of space and time, and this cognitive map tells us who we are, where we come from, and where we are going.... [This map is] an imaging of personal values and cultural forms.... A culture provides an individual with a mapping of time and space, but as the culture goes through a period of change and stressful transformation, the [map] becomes distorted. In periods of intense cultural distortion, the [map] becomes so changed as to be almost obliterated. Then the individual becomes lost, profoundly lost in the ontological sense of not knowing who or what he is, where he comes from, and where he is going. For some this can be a moment of terror, for others, a time of release. In a moment of silence in which the old forms fall away, there comes a new receptivity, a new centering inward, and in an instant there flashes onto the screen of consciousness a new re-visioning of the [map]. There in the receptive silences of meditation the new possibilities of time and space announce themselves, possibilities that lie beyond the descriptions of the old institutions of the old culture. This is the prophetic moment, the announcement of a new myth, and the beginning of a new culture.

—Thompson (1977 p.14)

Popular philosophical movements are symptomatic of their times. In retrospect historical moments are often best understood in terms of the ideas that thrived during them. Athenian Democracy and the Sophists and Socrates, Medieval Europe and the Church, The American and French Revolutions and the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution and Darwinism and Romanticism—no trick of critical historiography could disentangle these groupings of ideas and events, these civilizational eras. What ideas will be associated with the past 60 years, the era since the start of the so-called American Century? What have been the popular philosophies in the post-industrial social systems that emerged after World War II? This question is complicated by the dynamics of the era, which witnessed explosive advances in informational technologies that enabled an unprecedented diffusion of ideas before a growing global public. It is too soon to tell, but the culture of late capitalism—post-modern culture—may very well be defined in terms of its having lacked dominant comprehensive doctrines (Habermas, 1990; Jameson, 1992). This has affected all aspects of life, from the media-saturated textures of our action-orienting self-understandings to the economic policies that structure national geographies.

Today we are witnessing the end of the culture of late capitalism. And as post-industrial societies reconfigure into the shape of tomorrow’s planetary civilization there are competing
visions as to what the accompanying World Philosophies will be. There are, of course, the classic religious traditions with worldcentric intentions; East and West, the great traditions have been universalistic, seeking to unite all humanity under a truth deemed true for all humanity. The traditions experienced invigoration and fragmentation during the post-modern decades and have, on the whole, been overwhelmed by their own histories of blood, land, and ideological conquest. Nevertheless, the notion of a trans-traditional World Spirituality that might transcend but include the great religions strikes me as a viable candidate World Philosophy with some traction in the public sphere and civil society.

Other “global noetic-polities” (Thompson, 2004) will likely emerge as a part of the complex planetary organizations that will be built (and are already being built) to handle increasingly frequent large-scale humanitarian and ecological crises. It is an open question as to whether these new post-national configurations will embody new political worldviews and socio-cultural practices or if they will simply be bottling old ideological-wine in new casks. It seems clearly preferable that institutions of global reach be guided by worldcentric ideas and values. But as organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund demonstrate, the rhetoric of economic globalism is already upon us and threatens to deliver us to a world of robust international interconnectedness and competition but devoid of any universal values except the bottom line (Beck, 2002).

Globalization should not be confused with Planetization; the later is a term coined by Teilhard de Chardin, the former is a term coined by financiers. The Marx-inspired image of an awakened humanity capable of retooling the channels built by global capitalism in the name of human dignity and justice is a powerful one. But it begs the question as to how human dignity and global justice should be conceived in the face of an indelible pluralism of cultural values and norms, let alone how such universalistic conceptions might be made available as a common point of reference in an emerging planetary public sphere.
This is how I frame the following considerations about Wilber’s Integral Theory. I see Wilber’s corpus as an example of a new species of planetary public philosophy. It is the kind of World Philosophy around which some of tomorrow’s planetary culture might congeal. I’m not suggesting that Integral Theory will become a hegemon. Rather, I think it is better to see Wilber’s writings as a certain type of emergent cultural phenomenon, one with clear historical antecedences, but which also has new characteristics, distinctly 21st Century characteristics that are beyond the post-modern mind (Smith, 1989). Moreover, it is a public philosophy with global reach, widely translated and with copious audio and video offerings on the world-wide-web.

Below I first consider the *engineered popularity* of Wilber’s ideas. The worry here is that the medium is the message. In the context of new communications technologies and a radically commoditized media, the public sphere is oversaturated with ostensibly urgent quasi-academic messages and many people have grown skeptical of information flows driven by market mechanisms. But before retreating into an Integral Scholasticism (which might not be that bad of an idea), do remember that Kant was forthright about the role of the cosmopolitan-comprehensivist philosopher, who would be a much-needed servant of truth amidst the contestation of a democratic public sphere. Habermas, Emerson, Dewey, and a host of others have echoed this sentiment, as I have pointed out elsewhere (Stein, 2010). In the context of a planetary digital media explosion the issue of how to best *push* the message is complex. And of course that issue hinges on what the message is.

With the exception of Wilber and Emerson, none of the aforementioned public intellectuals were religious adepts offering explicitly stereological and eschatological messages. This is the second issue I bring up below. Wilber’s writings cannot be well understood apart from their *soteriological knowledge constitutive interest*. Integral Theory is more than a set of meta-theoretical orienting generalizations that can function to insure the comprehensiveness of knowledge production processes and action orientations. In a very important sense Wilber’s writings are mainly concerned with human liberation, awakening, and enlightenment, in the fully
religious sense of these terms. Reasoned discourse about these topics has been a ubiquitous part of human culture since ancient times and forms the core of the great religious traditions begun during the Axial Age. The transformative practices, rituals, and forms of life initiated by these traditions have a place at the core of Wilber's work. Yet, in a cultural context where religious traditions are perceived in complex and contested ways, and religious believers are some of the most dynamic and dangerous ideologues and activists, the unabashed use of religious languages and practices by a highly educated sub-culture in the post-industrial West is cause for pause. So again, at the edge of history, we must critically consider the World Philosophies to come.

**Tomorrow's public intellectuals**

It helps to distinguish here between two types of public and publicity. In today's media society, the public sphere serves those who have gained celebrity as a stage on which to present themselves. Visibility is the real purpose of public appearances. The price that stars pay for this kind of presence in the mass media is the conflation of their private and public lives. The intention behind participation in political, literary, or scholarly debates or any contribution to public discourse, by contrast, is quite different. Here reaching agreement on a particular topic or clarifying reasonable decent takes priority over the self-presentation of the author. This public is not a space of viewers and listeners but an arena in which speakers and interlocutors exchange questions and answers. Rather than everyone else's gaze being focused on the celebrity, an exchange of opinions and reasons takes place.

—Habermas (2008, p12)

With the birth of the bourgeois public sphere in the 17th Century came the emergence of the public intellectual—e.g., the academic, philosopher, or scientists—who gives voice to issues of broad interest using a public forum or form of media. The inclusiveness and reach of open public discourse has been continually increasing for the past several centuries (Habermas, 1979; 1984). There has been and continues to be *stratification*, both in terms of access and participation. But even despite today’s so-called ‘digital divide,’ which marks a real difference of educational opportunity between economic classes, when put in historical context, our era is one that is hyper-communicative and media-saturated. This ever-expanding availability of
“public space” and possible audiences has transformed the role of the public intellectual, who now must address a polycentric planetary culture.

A global book and newspaper consuming public followed in the wake of the World Wars, as massive international publishing houses partnered with the first modern large-scale research universities (Cremin, 1988). Radios and televisions found their way into every home and the first global public moments were shared, experienced with rapt attention by a privilege few in the newly post-industrial West. Along the way, as the Beatles’ became bigger than Jesus, celebrities went cosmopolitan, and thought leaders began to address a global public as communications technologies set pace. Los Angeles and New York began to transmit culture as the first global megalopolises. Hollywood films, mass-produced images, and the accoutrements of the post-war “cultural industry” became increasingly geared toward international dissemination. America emerged in the post-war decades as the dominant exporter of cultural and intellectual trends, addressing the world as from a city upon the hill. And the emergence of a truly global audience transfigured the shape of publicity and came to restructure the demands placed on the personalities populating the global stage, some of whom have been philosophers.

Kant echoed the Stoics in arguing that philosophers ought to engage a cosmopolitan audience. Today this involves utilizing the affordances of global post-industrial entertainment-oriented communications technologies to address a planetary public. Dewey, Sartre, Russell, Habermas, and dozens of other public intellectuals began a trend toward explicitly addressing a planetary public in “real time” through whatever media was available. The industrial era climaxed with the engineering of computers and biotechnology, and these first meta-industrial economies have flourished as transnational enterprises. The digital media and Internet have radically transfigured the communicative affordances of the public sphere, affecting a kind of semantic centrifugal force, with public meaning spreading outward into expanding networks of increasingly complex informational environments. These 21st Century trends can work against the interests of a critical public philosophy. Habermas (2009, p. 53):
The Internet has led to an expansion and fragmentation of communication networks. Thus, although the Internet has a subversive affect on public spheres under authoritative regimes, at the same time the horizontal and informal networking of communications diminishes the achievements of [industrial-democratic] public spheres. For the latter pools the attention of a dispersed public within a political community for selected messages, so that citizens can address the same critically filtered issues and contributions at the same time. The price of a welcome increase in egalitarianism due to the Internet is a decentering of the modes of access to [information]. In this medium the contributions of intellectuals can no longer constitute a focal point.

The effect Habermas is pointing out here goes beyond recognizing the detriments of the informational shallows (Carr, 2010), the mediated and post-modern (Zengotita, 2003), and the now frequent observation that we are a distracted society overwhelmed by a commoditized media (NYT, 2010). Habermas offers a deeper message about the structural transformations of the public sphere. The structures of our communication technologies and media providers themselves are shifting from concentric hierarchical national networks to polycentric heterarchical international lattices (Benkler, 2006).

The use of the term *decentering* in the quote above is a nod to Piaget (1971), who used it to refer to a process in epistemological development wherein the a child puts their own perspective in perspective as they are cognitively pushed out from the center of the universe. Decentering is a process that leads to decreasing narcissism and increasing objectivity and multi-persectivalism. Habermas sees how the lattices of communication technologies that now encircle the planet have already started shifting patterns of cultural hegemony and influence, leading in the direction of increased cultural complexity and multiplicity.

The planetary culture that is emerging through the digital media is without governance (and arguably ungovernable), it is without a regent nexus, and thus without a dominant historical narrative or vision of its own future. Social-media entertainment devices already figure prominently in childhood identity formation processes and computers are replacing televisions and radios in many homes. Recent accelerations in the development and dissemination of communication and information technologies have set the lifeworld adrift, as traditions of cultural transmission are altered irreversibly. When photographs were first widely introduced they
radically affected collective memory and education. Now hundreds of millions of people traffic in photos (and videos) that are digital and can be instantly sent almost anywhere in the world. Obama does not give fireside chats for us to listen to by radio; he streams weakly addresses via YouTube in multiple languages, self-consciously broadcasting to a global public. An emerging planetary culture is just beginning to take up life within the informational infrastructures of global capitalism; this is the new frontier of education, democracy, and liberational agency. The public intellectual must now build a constituency through web-based communication networks. Affecting public opinion and will formation requires working with decentralized media outlets and leveraging the new digital-grassroots of the blogosphere. Organizing large-scale social change entails working to forge non-local noetic-polities by communicatively linking-up geographically diverse centers of local activity (Harris, Moffit, & Squires, 2010).

In this light, Wilber’s choreographed digital popularization appears as an undue cause for derision from critics and an illegitimate reason for receiving premature dismissals from academics. The complex affordances of the media available to Wilber enabled the transformation of a writer-lecturer (in the tradition of Emerson and Watts) into a copiously conversant and articulate public philosopher, strategic with the new media, linked into book publishing, web-seminars, digital-learning technologies, streaming video and audio content, and magazine appearances. This leaves Wilber looking from afar like a self-styled cyber-celebrity or New Age self-help profiteer, playing digital Guru for power and money. But these kinds of criticisms beg the question as to what a 21st Century planetary public philosophy can and should look like. Can we really anticipate what form intellectual currents will take as they begin circulating in the multimedia-rich planetary public sphere? Moreover, in today’s day and age, what is a public intellectual to do?

Wilber’s initiatives with Integral Institute and its subsidiaries should be considered together with other contemporary projects guided by similar values, and with comparable scope and vision: Aurobindo’s Auroville, Murphy’s Esalen; Thompson’s Lindisfarne; Mitchell’s Institute
of Noetic Sciences; Cohen’s EnlighteNext. This is an incomplete list of organizations founded under philosophical auspices for the express purpose of catalyzing our transformation to a planetary culture. Members of these groups act as intellectuals and educationists outside the academy and serve the public interest by engaging in discussions of topics vital to our collective sense of identity. The groups display varying amounts of web-based media dissemination, but all explicitly address a planetary public, and actively work to facilitate open public philosophical debates and inquiries into current events that range beyond both the monoculture of the national mainstream media and the fragmented cacophony of views on the Internet.

The kinds of “cultural ecosystems” that will facilitate the emergence of worldcentric cultural agents will not resemble commoditized media-entertainment or open-platform info-egalitarianism (Thompson, 2009). And the public philosophies of the 21st Century will not come from the academy, although they may transcend but include it. They will be predicated on the innovative use of planetary communication infrastructures, and thus they will be vulnerable to the limitations of these media. The telos of communicative rationality is comprehensive, universal, and cosmopolitan (Habermas, 1979; 1998)—implicit in the structure of every speech act is an appeal for universal consensuses. This sets cultural evolution groping toward planetization. During the course of the evolutionary drift there will likely be dozens of forms of new media aiming to instantiate the cosmopolitan community. Public intellectuals will need to work through emerging channels despite their transience and the large probability that the medium will distort the message.

A great deal of wisdom about the evolution of cultures is contained in Marshall McLuhan’s short and often repeated phrase, "the sloughed-off environment becomes a work of art in the new and invisible environment" (McLuhan, 1964; Thompson, 1998; Zengotita, 2005). It points to a view of cultural evolution wherein a prior era is transcended when its taken-for-granted assumptions can be made explicit and displayed as an object. This is a process of shifting figure and ground and rendering visible what was once merely implicit. It is also a
process of “chunking,” of summarizing the prior achievements of a culture so they can be viewed at a sweeping glance—a “miniaturization” of the prior cultural era (Thompson, 2005). Examples abound of this kind of evolutionary cultural redux. The great parks in our major Industrial era cities summarize the Agrarian era subduing of nature. Today’s global and multicultural pop-music industries make visible the Industrial Era taming of indigenous social practices. The results of Wilber’s theoretical imagination also provide an interesting case in point. His writings are relentlessly synthetic and synoptic, making them somewhat akin to miniaturizations of broad cultural domains. They also explicate some of the implicit structures of knowledge production processes currently in use across a wide range of academic and non-academic contexts. These kinds of brief histories of everything are needed during times of cultural transformation because they re-articulate the self-understanding the culture:

A historical curriculum is a miniaturization of one civilization and a transition to the next. The Irish monks of the Western European Dark Ages miniaturized the Greco-Roman civilization into a curriculum of the classics and thus established the foundation for what would become the high civilization of medieval Western Europe. Now it is necessary for us to miniaturize the industrial civilization we are leaving behind in preparation for the planetary civilization we are about to enter (Thompson, 2009 p. 11).

So while the medium is the message, some messages—like those that “chunk” whole prior eras—are able to transcend their medium. Wilber at his best offers a World Philosophy ahead of its time, using today’s media to intimate tomorrow’s planetary culture. In the culture to come we will witness increasing cultural interanimation: FaceBook using Zen Priests allocating capital toward web-based Dharma focused enterprises; “meta-industrial villages” integrating education, local agriculture, and advanced green technology; globalized entertainment industries marketing trans-national trends (Thompson, 2005). Global capitalism will continue to increase the interconnectedness of mega-populated urban centers and the geopolitical landscape will fracture as it continues to stratify. This will be a world of terror and wonder (Kamin, 2010). It will also be a world seen in terms of many different worldviews.
You can see them as competing worldviews and characterize it as a clash of civilizations (Huntington, 1998). But they can also be seen as worldviews in need of some kind of reconciliation. Wilber’s meta-philosophical principle of non-exclusion, for example, would privilege discourse about finding harmony and isomorphism between cultures, and distilling their valuable complementarities. This is not to downgrade conflict and power (although some see it this way: Edwards, 2009), rather Wilber is articulating a more radically decentered view.

Comparable remarks are warranted concerning the so-called New Atheists (Dennett, 2006; Dawkins, 2008), a group of mainstream academics who have deployed rhetorically heavy-handed criticisms of religious culture, which they have broadcast loudly into the public sphere. They also map the cultural terrain in terms of a conflict between scientific worldviews and religious worldviews.

In a planetary public sphere that is overwhelmingly religious, I think that this kind of polarizing and culture-war mongering is counter-productive. When I think about the demands placed on tomorrow’s public philosophy, coursing through the communicative infrastructures of a globalized humanity, it seems that only comprehensive cosmopolitan philosophies will be fit to thrive in that cultural ecology. Importantly, these World Philosophies will need to be more than merely tolerant when it comes to religious cultures. As Both Habermas (2008) and Wilber (1998) have clearly stated, interreligious dialogue and dialogues between science and religion must now both be played out in the global public sphere and as part of cooperative and reciprocal learning processes between cultures.

Questions about the media-forms that might embody tomorrow’s public philosophies have occupied us so far. But I now turn to consider a crucial aspect of its content. Making sense of religion in the 21st Century is a must for any viable World Philosophy.
For God’s sake: soteriological knowledge constitutive interests

The interest [constitutive] of the mind’s attempt to reason about spirit, is soteriological—an interest in salvation; an attempt to comprehend spirit in mental terms so as either to orient oneself toward the pull of transcendental intuition or to help “picture” the spiritual realm for those minds not yet so interested. (The picture is always eventually paradoxical, as both Kant and Nagarjuna explained, but this neither hampers the human interest in the divine nor restricts the usefulness of mandalic reasoning…).

—Wilber (1983 p. 116)

Public intellectuals in America have put forth a variety of views about religious cultural practices and beliefs. On the whole they have been more religious than not, and there is one historical stream in the American public sphere that has had a distinctively religious bent. The rhetorical tradition of the American Jeremiad has received some scholarly attention (Bercovitch, 1980) and is worth bringing up in connection with a discussion Wilber’s religious and spiritual writings. This is a tradition of public intellectuals that stretches back through Emerson to Edwards and first Great Awakening. It includes figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and Abraham Lincoln, but it also includes dozens of Puritan, Protestant, and Unitarian preachers of lesser stature. Despite its name, the American Jeremiad is a literary trope that transcends both the Judeo-Christian tradition and US national borders, as Emerson most clearly demonstrated. In essence it is a call for moral renewal, in writing or speech, which appeals to common religious or spiritual values and is simultaneously radically critical and spiritually ennobling. The central theme is of a broken covenant with God that might be renewed; the central topic is the interface of the personality and the social system. It is a religious diagnosis of the present social condition (as an aspect of the human condition) and a religious prescription that typically involves some reformation of the personality.

The question of how far this tradition of teaching and preaching extends into our times is an interesting one. There are undoubtedly still fiery religious leaders condemning social ills coast to coast, from television evangelists and mega-churches to small urban pulpits and suburban temples and congregations. The mainstream media pundits can be critical of society,
but they typically only dabble in religious topics and would not venture to suggest a religious reformation of the personality as the remedy. The most popular Oprah-style spiritual teachers who top the New York Times Best Sellers list are typically not offering complex criticism of the academic, social, and political landscape. So where has the American Jeremiad been for the past 60 years?

Aside from the civil rights crusaders, certain public intellectuals and literary figures from the human potential movement and the early Vedanta Society (the perennialists) come to mind. Huxley (1963), Maslow (1971; 1982), May (1969), Smith (1982), and Thompson (1970; 2005), for example, were religiously oriented social critics writing in the post-war era. Niebuhr (1960) and Tillich (1959) are worth adding to this list, as is, perhaps, Dewey (1960), who brought the pragmatist tradition into the post-industrial public sphere with broad humanist sentiments. More contemporary lineage bearers would include West’s (1982) prophetic pragmatism and Taylor’s (1992) ethics of authenticity. Positioning Wilber in this historical current is both accurate and hermeneutically helpful.

Wilber (2000) has reflected on his own project along these lines and he has also explicitly drawn attention to the type of post-secular constructs in which he traffics. The quote that began this section comes toward the end of a book highly relevant to our purposes here. In *A Sociable God*, a young Wilber (1983) articulates a broad and highly theoretical critical sociology of religion, in which he touches on the so-called ‘new religious movements’ in particular. In the penultimate chapter Wilber expands on Habermas’s (1972) *Knowledge and Human Interests*, adding to the set of “anthropological deep-seated knowledge constitutive interests” detailed therein. Habermas is looking to reconstruct the pragmatic *a-priori* structures of consciousness that were the evolutionary precursors and catalysts of our major reflective discourses. He proposes that scientific discourse is undergirded by an interest in gaining control over and explaining the workings of objectified natural processes. Hermeneutics is undergirded by an interest in mutual-understating and historical self-clarification. The therapeutic and critical
discourses (e.g., psychoanalysis and critical theory) are undergirded by an interest in liberating humanity from injustice and distorted interpersonal (and intrapersonal) relationships. This is Habermas’s first pass at offering a pragmatist inspired neo-Kantian splicing of epistemological structures; the big three by any other name. Wilber was impressed enough to want to add a knowledge constitutive inertest of his own to the list.

Wilber (1983) proposes that a *soteriological knowledge constitutive* interest should be added to Habermas’s taxonomy. This follows a clarification of the historical continuity of reflective religious discourses and the manner in which issues of social justice are transcended but included in considerations of religious salvation. The proposal is that religious discourse be understood as being undergirded by an anthropologically deep-seated interest in awakening to knowledge of God (Reality, Tao, Buddha Nature, etc.) and thus gaining freedom from the existential binds the of the human condition. This involves posting a kind of primordial human interest in salvation and enlightenment in the fully religious meaning of these words. Wilber proposes that writers, speakers, and inquiry-oriented communities can be guided by an authentic interest in the religious transformation of the moral personality that results from knowledge of God. I am proposing here that Wilber’s own writings be understood in these terms. I think his broad project is best understood in terms the soteriological knowledge constitutive interest that guides it. And as I have foreshadowed, I think this is a double-edged sword.

On the one hand, this makes Wilber a great deal more than the meta-theorist many make him out to be (Edwards, 2009). I have placed Wilber’s work in the context of current debates about the role of meta-theoretical constructs in interdisciplinary knowledge production and philosophy (Stein 2007; 2010). But I have always been careful to point beyond the simple interpretation of his writings as a case of meta-theorizing. Some of Wilber’s central concepts have explicit origins in spiritual practices and religious ideational frameworks, which I think should have us characterizing his work as in part an attempt to explicate what Habermas has
referred to as the “untapped semantic potentials of religious language.” That is, beyond the task of building an overarching meta-theory unifying vast expanses of knowledge, Wilber has also taken up the task of synthesizing and up-dating certain aspects of the great religious traditions. There are implications of this that bear on our interpretation and criticism of Wilber’s work. Writers that span a multiplicity of roles and discourses are hard to pin down because they offer arguments and texts that blend a variety of validity claims.

For example, Wilber (1995; 1999; 2000) argues in light of scientific research about the transformative affects of religious/spiritual practices (Murphy, 1992) and first-person phenomenological accounts of his own spiritual experiences that the full actualization of human potential and maturity entails the reorganization of the personality around a set of universal religious experiences and values. This is a complex and, to my mind, fruitful argumentative strategy, that blends the claims of science with the claims of religious experience and the soteriological imagination. Moreover, it marks his broad project as a certain type of trans-academic public intellectualism, one with historical precedence, as I have suggested. I believe that to really understand Wilber one should look back through the human potential movement to the 19th Century New Thought Synthesizers, to Emerson’s Transcendentalism, and first American Jeremiads that enlivened the moral sentiments of the post-colonel public sphere (Cremin, 1970). For over a century there have been prophets working out their messages in the context of the reasonable pluralism of religious and scientific worldviews that characterizes democratic culture.

But there are false prophets, of course. Today one big concern is that we have a *marketplace* for spiritual ideas. We have prophets making profits. Books sales, retreats, pay-for-play web content, TV specials; religious and spiritual teachings sell, especially in America. The difference between authentic religious engagements and inauthentic ones is not easily seen (Wilber, 1983). I have written elsewhere on the unique type of authority exercised by spiritual and religious teachers and the various, and often treacherous, dynamics of such teacherly
authority (Stein, in review JITP). Being a religious voice in the public sphere has always been an option in America, but the role of religious leaders, teachers, and writers has been transforming, at least since the late 1960’s. Today religious teachers constitute a multicultural, poly-vocal, and dynamic group, especially in the context of the new media.

Habermas (2002; 2008) has taken lately to discussions about religion and the public sphere. He frames it, as I have here, in terms of broad planetary socio-political processes that have transformed the position of the reflective religious believer (Habermas, 2002 p.152):

In modern societies, religious doctrine has to accommodate itself to an unavoidable competition with other forms of faith, and other claims to truth…. Thus modern faith becomes reflexive. Only through self-criticism can it stabilize the inclusive attitude that it assumes within a universe of discourse delimited by secular knowledge and shared with other religions. This decentered background consciousness of the relativity of one’s own standpoint… is characteristic of modern forms of religious faith….

Where are the proponents of this reflexive religious faith in the burgeoning planetary public sphere? Wherever they are, I think that it is reasonable to count Wilber among them. As I have explained elsewhere (Stein, in review JITP), the Industrial era sociologists who foresaw the decline of religion were mostly wrong. The trends they saw linking secularization, modernization, and democratization were gleaned from a partial sample and indicate but one path through industrialization and political modernization (Habermas, 2001). Ultimately, a plurality of religious voices and movements have come to inhabit the post-industrial world. Religion is not so much in decline as it is in transformation. Dissonances and harmonies will characterize the emerging reflective forms of World Spirituality. There will be retreats into pre-reflective stances and reactionary traditionalism, as well as market driven eclecticisms fueling the consumption of “happiness.” There are some responsible voices touching deeply religious topics in the public sphere. It may be that some of the greatest public figures enabling the coming lurch towards planetization will embody the kind of religiosity that is worthy of coursing through our global communications infrastructures.
Conclusion: 21st Century Wilber

Humanity will have to realize that neither religions, nation-states, nor machines can serve any longer as the appropriate vehicles for human cultural evolution. Each of the mentalities of the past has had its appropriate educational institution to bring forth the new mentality, from the temple to the Pythagorean Academy to the House of Wisdom in Al Kwarizmi’s Baghdad to the modern scientific and technical university. Now a new institution will have to be created to embody and foster our new planetary civilization. My generation did what it could within the political limitations imposed by the commercial materialism, academic nihilism, and religious fanaticism of our time; but the countercultural institutions such as Esalen or my own Lindisfarne Association [ZS: I would add Integral Institute to this list] were more like crocuses signaling a change of season in early March than they were the hardy trees that could withstand a blizzard in April or a new climate.
—Thompson (2005 p. 49)

I have reflected above on the popularity and publicness of Wilber’s philosophy, positioning his work relative to the 21st Century media-forms that have become the inevitable accoutrements of today’s public intellectual. The problem is that today too often the medium is the message. A digital-egalitarianism threatens to make all messages equal while trans-national media conglomerates have a reflective public suspicious. But these communications technologies with global reach and multi-media affordances also enable the emergence of near-full sensory immediacy and real-time participation—trans-textual (post-Gutenberg) forms of communication and transmission broadcast to a global public sphere. These types of mediums present complex hermeneutical challenges and it is an open question whether they also damage the scholarly integrity of the work. Yet there are good reasons for philosophers to take themselves as having an obligation to address a cosmopolitan audience. On the whole it is good I have classed this issue as a laudable liability. I think we should hold the tension involved between the desire to offer an educative public philosophy and the risks that through popularization it will be disfigured.

Likewise with the second issue I discussed above. Wilber’s relentless religiosity shines though all his work and this should figure prominently in our interpretations and criticisms of it. It is both an asset and a liability for a public intellectual to be a religious figure. I argue, following Haberams (2005), that there are valuable “untapped semantic potentials” in religious languages,
and I suggest that a large part of Wilber’s work has been dedicated to re-articulating perennial religious ideas and forms of life. But religion is a 21st Century flashpoint and figures prominently in most impending geopolitical crises. Moreover, the conflicts between religious and scientific worldviews have lead to a variety of cultural polarizations, such that it is taken as highly improbable that one could be simultaneously a voice of reason and a voice for God (as Wilber is). Again, a sophisticated hermeneutics demands that the complex mixture of validity claims tied up in Wilber’s work be respected. The concepts yielded through the purist of a soteriological knowledge constitutive interest are unique, and they are not best characterized as meta-theoretical or philosophical constructs.

Wilber is a popular public philosopher and a religious figure, for better and for worse. The dynamics of attraction and repulsion and the tendency to polarize audiences often characterize great works of art (Nisenson, 1993). The theoretical imagination is also prone to powerfully affecting audiences. At the beginning of the 21st Century it has become cliché in some circles to speak of the coming of a New Age, and rightly so. Many from my generation (the 30-somethings) tend to shrug the boomers off, with their new paradigms and East-West self-styled awakenings. But I have seen Wilber’s work cut through the cynicism and commodity driven media-forms that characterize post-modern publicness. This was also something I tried to bring home on that panel at the ITC in Pleasant Hill. Whatever missteps— theoretical or otherwise— Wilber has no-doubt taken as a religious public intellect should be both placed in context and contrasted with his successes. In the last analysis, our greatest strengths are often closely allied with our greatest weaknesses.
Bibliography:


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