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## **Holism, Integration and the Transpersonal**

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"Holism" is one of the catchwords of the humanistic, transpersonal, complementary health, and "new age" movements. In the popular mythology of these movements, holism is generally considered a self-evident "good thing", representing the notion that various divisions or splits may be resolved, healed, or transcended in some kind of higher-order integration. Indeed such integration is often equated with health and maturity, whether this be in personal, social or political realms.

Ken Wilber's recent writings (e.g., 1995a, 1996) provide a useful analysis of the general mechanisms involved in holistic (or "holarchical") processes. According to Wilber (1996, p. 29), "all evolutionary and developmental patterns proceed by holarchization, by a process of increasing orders of wholeness and inclusion". New wholes become possible when a principle emerges that is capable of uniting formerly separate and conflicting elements.

It is not my intention in this article to deny the validity of the *general* concept of holism or holarchy. Indeed I very much support Wilber's analysis. What I wish to question, however, is the extent to which *specific* commonly-held notions of holism are useful and valid.

## Holism 1

Perhaps the most popular version of holism is the belief in the integration of body, mind and spirit. Ideologically, this is often taken to mean the basic indivisibility of the person's physical, mental and spiritual being. Therapeutically, it refers to the importance of treating the "whole" person as well as to the healing that results from the personal integration of the three aspects.

This powerful and appealing metaphor has been enthusiastically promoted by many who proclaim the new paradigms in health and psychology. In my opinion, however, it is limited and often deeply flawed. One of the main reasons for this is that, within the various new paradigms, it is largely synonymous with a "positive thinking" approach that is itself polarized and unintegrated. Art Levine (1985) caricatures this as the "Pollyanna paradigm" and Michael Marien (1983) has written a more considered critique of what he calls the "sandbox syndrome" - essentially a puerile, utopian approach in which everything is or can become perfect and wonderful. This kind of holism therefore generally promotes the possibility of what is seen as a *perfect* integration of the *healthy* body, *positive* mind and *divine* spirit. This is revealed, for example, by the way that the new paradigms usually focus upon and idealize youthfulness, physical beauty, imagination, creativity, love, empathy, happiness, self-actualization, enlightenment, peak experiences, ecstasy, and peace.

I shall call this kind of holism "*Holism 1*". Its problem is that it is simply not holistic enough. Rather than being truly integrative, Holism I reinforces

basic splits of, for example, good vs. evil, life vs. death, youth vs. old age, health vs. illness, beauty vs. ugliness, imagination vs logic, love vs. hate, and ecstasy vs. dread. In this way it inevitably denies, represses or demonizes what Jung would call its "shadow". It is an approach which, as Rollo May (1982) has pointed out, is incapable of fully acknowledging or dealing with the so-called "negative" aspects of human experience such as illness, anxiety, hostility, stagnation and death. For this reason it cannot, I believe, offer a truly integrative or holistic vision.

## **Holism 2**

A more holistic approach must therefore attempt to integrate and heal the splits that are implicit within Holism 1. As in psychotherapy, this will involve the recognition, owning, and in some sense *acceptance* of the shadow. This implies the possibility of a higher-order integration of "positive" and "negative" in which the shadow is seen not as our enemy, but as fundamental to our own nature.

Such an approach (which I will call "*Holism 2*") is nothing new. It is to be found in existentialist thinking as well as in much psychotherapeutic (especially psychodynamic) theory and practice. Unfortunately, Holism 2 is much less evident in the new paradigms. In their often zealous attempts to establish their unique identities and to differentiate themselves from the "old paradigms", these approaches have generally identified with what they see as the positive side of the split while simultaneously projecting much of the negative side onto their opponents. This inevitably produces a fragmented and incomplete vision.

Holism 2 recognizes the need to integrate the seemingly negative, darker aspects of human nature. If we apply this principle to the body-mind-spirit metaphor, then this means acknowledging and coming to terms with the shadow as it manifests in each of these areas. In relation to the body, this implies an acceptance of pain, illness, aging and death. At the level of mind, we need to own and come to terms with anxiety, depression, jealousy, anger and other seemingly negative emotions, as well as the rational, analytical, and conceptual thinking that is often devalued and neglected within the new paradigms. Spiritually, we need to find a way to acknowledge and reconcile ourselves with meaninglessness, tragedy, human weakness and fallibility, loss of faith, existential guilt, and the dark night of the soul.

If we turn our attention specifically to transpersonal psychology, then Holism 2 has a number of important implications and recommendations. Most importantly, perhaps, is the need to be on the lookout for polarized, idealistic tendencies in our approach to the transpersonal. In practice, these may often be recognised by their secondary characteristics such as cult-like certainty, charismatic enthusiasm, hubris and spiritual one-upmanship. In contrast, a little self-doubt and humility is not only refreshing, but, I believe, essential in anyone approaching the transpersonal. Second, we should give much greater consideration in our experience, thinking, and research to the transpersonal shadow (cf. Vaughan, 1985). We should, for example, attempt to balance our interest in self-actualization, peak experiences, ecstasy, and the "positive" effects of meditation with studies that focus upon spiritual failure, trough experiences, the "dark night" and the dangers inherent in psycho-spiritual

practice. Finally we should attempt, both personally and as a discipline, to develop ways of integrating our experience of the transpersonal *in all its manifestations*.

### **Holism 3**

Is Holism 2 the final answer? To the extent that it implies that integration may be carried out as a purely individual endeavour, then no. This is, of course, a further major problem with the body-mind-spirit metaphor. Where do other people, social and cultural systems, the physical world and ecosphere figure in this model? How does it understand the relationship between the individual and these other realities?

One of the important debates within transpersonal psychology in the last decade has concerned the relationship between "other-worldly" and "this-worldly" approaches to the transpersonal. Warwick Fox (e.g., 1990, 1993) argues that the "other-worldly" approach that has dominated transpersonal psychology is essentially egocentric and anthropocentric in its aim to promote the person's "vertical" ascent to higher forms of spiritual consciousness. Fox himself advocates a "this-worldly" or "horizontal" view of transpersonal development - a "transpersonal ecology" (or, "deep ecology") which is biocentric or ecocentric, and which emphasizes the importance of expanding our concern and sense of self outwards to achieve a wider and deeper identification with the natural world.

Although Fox is surely right to alert us to the importance of the horizontal dimension and to the limitations of a purely vertical approach, he unfortunately reinforces polarized thinking in this area. Fox provides neither

the means nor clear motivation to integrate the horizontal and vertical approaches to the transpersonal, but presents the horizontal mainly as an *alternative* to the vertical. For these reasons, transpersonal ecology fails to provide a truly holistic vision.

This debate has recently been greatly advanced by Wilber's (1995a, 1995b, 1996) elegant analyses. Wilber recognizes the need to develop our understanding of, and ultimately to integrate, both the "ascending" (vertical, other-worldly) and "descending" (horizontal, this-worldly) paths. Unlike Fox, Wilber also acknowledges the importance of the collective, social-cultural world. He thus proposes that we need to find ways to respect and integrate all "four quadrants" that are defined by the combinations of the "interior-exterior" and "individual-collective" dimensions of evolution. In this way, Wilber's model clearly moves beyond both an individually-orientated Holism 2, and Fox's polarized deep ecology (which Wilber dismisses as a "flatland" approach).

Wilber's arguments imply what I shall call "*Holism 3*" - the integration of the individual body-mind-spirit (positive and negative) in the social, cultural and natural worlds. However, as Wilber (1995b, p. 118) himself points out "as of yet, there has historically been no 'holism' that actually embraces all four quadrants in all their levels ... this is one of the central aims of general transpersonal studies". Wilber's own recent work undoubtedly marks a major advance towards the development of Holism 3, but it is important to realize that the kind of formal analysis that Wilber offers can only provide a general schematic programme. There is a vast difference between being able to understand that Holism 3 requires an integration of ascending and

descending currents, or the interior-exterior and individual-collective dimensions, and actually being able to achieve this integration. This is the difference that Wilber (e.g., 1995a, 1996) himself acknowledges, between the map and the territory. Holism 3, like the other holisms, ultimately has to be achieved through our *living experience*, not through our models.

On the other hand, models can help to point the way forward. Certainly the concept of Holism 3 has some important implications for transpersonal psychology. One of these, of course, is that an exclusively *psychological* approach to the transpersonal can never be sufficient. Transpersonal psychology should therefore never be considered as a totally separate, discrete discipline, but should be supplemented and ultimately integrated with, for example, transpersonal sociology, transpersonal anthropology, and transpersonal ecology (cf. Walsh & Vaughan, 1993). A related practical message is the need to balance our interest in possible universal "psychological" features of transpersonal experiences and processes with a careful examination of the social-cultural influences on them, and on the meanings that people attach to them. Put simply, social-cultural differences may be just as interesting and revealing as universal commonalities.

Holism 3 also helps us to clarify the meaning of the transpersonal and to identify certain problems that may arise in our spiritual practice. A common paradox in this area is that transpersonal experiences may be presented as something that the person may actively seek, or may look forward to enjoying. If we are to be genuinely transpersonal then surely we need to develop beyond the personal desire for our own enlightenment or self-realization? In

this sense, I believe that Fox is correct in his observation that there is something essentially egocentric in elements of the transpersonal movement's thinking and practice. A real danger, if we are not vigilant, is therefore that transpersonal psychology may develop models and practices that serve only to sustain and reinforce what Chogyam Trungpa (1973) calls "spiritual materialism" - a form of self-deception in which spirituality becomes a subtle means to fulfill egocentric (or anthropocentric) desires.

One important advantage of Holism 3 is that it offers a perspective that takes us beyond self-centred spiritual materialism without, however, repressing or denying the significance of personal-individual being. Holism 3 therefore leaves open the possibility of synergistic (integrated) relationships between personal and transpersonal, horizontal and vertical, ascending and descending, interior and exterior, individual and collective, this-world and that-world. Such relationships imply that we may enjoy and gain fulfillment from the transpersonal path, and may experience profound states of consciousness, even though we are not on the path for fun, or personal fulfillment, or to notch up experiences, and even though much of the time it may be bewildering, difficult, demanding, tedious, unrewarded, and even hellish.

From the perspective of Holism 3, the true meaning of "transpersonal" is not "beyond the personal" or even "beyond the ego", although it certainly implies "beyond person-centredness" and "beyond egocentrism". More crucially, it signifies "beyond the distinction between personal and transpersonal", and "beyond the distinction between egoic and trans-egoic". In



practice this makes possible a perspective in which there is no fundamental difference between the spiritual and mundane paths. The transpersonal journey may therefore be undertaken through our everyday life experience rather than being seen as separate and dissociated from ordinary living.

### **Conclusion**

"Holism" is a seductive but tricky concept that means different things to different people. In distinguishing between three main holistic approaches, I hope to have clarified some of the problems associated with certain perspectives. In advocating an approach that I have termed "Holism 3", I have tried to resolve some of these problems in a way that accurately reflects the direction of current thinking about the transpersonal and also offers some useful pointers to possible future developments within transpersonal psychology.

There is much in this article that may seem critical of the new paradigms in general and of the transpersonal movement in particular. However it is not my intention to strangle the baby at birth and I remain personally committed to, and basically optimistic about, the future of transpersonal psychology. Although the Transpersonal Psychology Section of the BPS is very new, William James' (e.g., 1901/1960) pioneering work makes transpersonal psychology almost as old as psychology itself. Furthermore, the great advances in transpersonal thinking that have occurred in the past twenty-five years mean, I believe, that transpersonal psychology is no longer an infant, but is fast developing a maturity that makes it tough enough to withstand constructive criticism and debate. Indeed I believe that this is very much what

the discipline needs at this time in order to further define and refine its approach and to deepen our understanding of the transpersonal. I await future developments with eager anticipation.

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