

Participation, metaphysics, and enlightenment

Reflections on Ken Wilber's recent work

This article critically examines Ken Wilber's (2006) recent work from a participatory perspective of human spirituality. After a brief introduction to the participatory approach, I limit my discussion to the following four key issues: *a.* the participatory critique of Wilber's work, *b.* the cultural versus universal nature of Wilber's Kosmic habits, *c.* the question of (post-)metaphysics in spiritual discourse, and *d.* the nature of enlightenment. The article concludes with some concrete directions in which to move the dialogue forward.*

An introduction to participatory spirituality

Developed over time (e.g., Ferrer 1998a, 1998b, 2000a, 2000b, 2001), published as a book (Ferrer 2002) and expanded in an anthology (Ferrer and Sherman 2008a, 2008b; Ferrer 2008a), the *participatory approach* holds that human spirituality essentially emerges from human cocreative participation in an undetermined mystery or generative power of life, the cosmos, or reality.¹ More specifically, I

argue that spiritual participatory events can engage the entire range of human epistemic faculties (e.g., rational, imaginal, somatic, vital, aesthetic) with both the creative unfolding of the mystery and the possible agency of subtle entities or energies in the enactment – or 'bringing forth' – of ontologically rich religious worlds. In other words, the participatory approach presents an enactive² understanding of the sacred that conceives spiritual phenomena, experiences, and insights as *cocreated events*. By locating

itual discourse, a challenge to neo-Kantianism and associated metaphysical agnosticism, the affirmation of a plurality of spiritual ultimates, and the recommendation of a pragmatist emancipatory epistemology for transpersonal and religious studies. These values may or may not be endorsed by other participatory thinkers. As Jacob H. Sherman and I wrote in the introduction to *The Participatory Turn* (2008b), a participatory sensibility to spirituality and scholarship can and does manifest in a rich multiplicity of ways. Other helpful presentations of the participatory turn in transpersonal and religious studies include Tarnas (2001), Kripal (2003), Jaenke (2004), and Gleig and Boeving (2009).

- 2 My use of the term *enactive* is inspired by Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch's (1991) pioneering articulation of a non-representational paradigm of cognition. The participatory formulation adapts and extends the enactive paradigm – originally limited to the perceptual cognition of the natural world – to account for the emergence of ontologically rich religious realms cocreated by human multi-dimensional cognition and the generative force of life or the spirit. For other discussions of spiritual knowing as enactive, see Kelly (2008), Irwin (2008), and Wilber (1995), and for an important synthesis of bio-cognitive, phenomenological, and transpersonal participatory accounts of enaction, see Malkemus (2012).

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1 It is important to clarify that nowhere in this article do I claim – or seek – to represent the ideas of the increasing number of authors working under a participatory banner (e.g., see Cabot 2014, Ferrer and Sherman 2008a, Lahood 2007a). Although for style reasons I often mention *the* participatory approach, this expression refers exclusively to my own participatory perspective. As with any other, this perspective is shaped not only by inevitable limitations, but also by particular features and values – such as the adoption of an enactive cognitive approach, the rejection of a representational paradigm of cognition, the rejection of naive objectivism and pregiven referents in spir-



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the emergence of spiritual knowing at the interface of human multidimensional cognition, cultural context, subtle worlds, and the deep generativity of life or the cosmos, this account avoids both the secular post/modernist reduction of religion to cultural-linguistic artifact and, as discussed below, the religionist dogmatic privileging of a single tradition as superior or paradigmatic.

Spiritual cocreation has three interrelated dimensions – intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal. These dimensions respectively establish participatory spirituality as embodied (spirit within), relational (spirit in-between), and enactive (spirit beyond), discussed below. *Intrapersonal cocreation* consists of the collaborative participation of all human attributes – body, vital energy, heart, mind, and consciousness – in the enactment of spiritual phenomena. This dimension is grounded in the *principle of equiprimacy*, according to which no human attribute is intrinsically superior or more evolved than any other. As Marina Romero and Ramon Albareda (2001) pointed out, the cognicentric (i.e., mind-centred) character of Western culture hinders

the maturation of non-mental attributes, making it normally necessary to engage in intentional practices to bring these attributes up to the same developmental level the mind achieves through mainstream education (see Ferrer 2003, Ferrer *et al.* 2005). In principle, however, all human attributes can participate as equal partners in the creative unfolding of the spiritual path, are equally capable of sharing freely in the life of the mystery here on Earth, and can also be equally alienated from it. The main challenges to intrapersonal cocreation are cognicentrism, lopsided development, mental pride, and disembodied attitudes to spiritual growth. Possible antidotes to those challenges are integral practices, the cultivation of mental humility, the integral *bodhisattva* vow (see below), and embodied approaches to spiritual growth. Intrapersonal cocreation affirms the importance of being rooted in *spirit within* (i.e., the immanent dimension of the mystery) and renders participatory spirituality essentially *embodied* (Ferrer 2006, 2008b; Heron 2006; Lanzetta 2008).

Interpersonal cocreation emerges from cooperative relationships among human beings growing as peers in the spirit of solidarity, mutual respect, and constructive confrontation (Ferrer 2003; Heron 1998, 2006). It is grounded in the *principle of equipotentiality*, according to which ‘we are all teachers and students’ insofar as we are superior and inferior to others in different regards (Bauwens 2007, Ferrer *et al.* 2004). This principle does not entail that there is no value in working with spiritual teachers or mentors; it simply means that human beings cannot be ranked in their totality or according to a single developmental criterion, such as brainpower, emotional intelligence, or contemplative realization. Although peer-to-peer human relationships are vital for spiritual growth, interpersonal cocreation can include contact with perceived non-human intelligences, such as subtle entities, natural powers, or archetypal forces that might be embedded in the psyche, nature, or the cosmos (e.g., Heron 1998, 2006; Jung 2009; Rachel 2013). The main challenges to interpersonal cocreation are spiritual pride, psycho-spiritual inflation, circumstantial or self-imposed isolation, and adherence to rigidly hierarchical spiritualities. Antidotes to those challenges include collaborative spiritual practice and inquiry, intellectual and spiritual humility, deep dialogue, and relational and pluralistic approaches to spiritual growth. Interpersonal cocreation affirms the importance of communion

with *spirit in-between* (i.e., the situational dimension of the mystery) and makes participatory spirituality intrinsically *relational* (see, e.g., Heron 1998, 2006; Heron and Lahood 2008; Lahood 2010a, 2010b).

Transpersonal cocreation refers to dynamic interaction between embodied human beings and the mystery in the bringing forth of spiritual insights, practices, states, and worlds (Ferrer 2002, 2008a). This dimension is grounded in the *principle of equiplurality*,³ according to which there can potentially be multiple spiritual enactments that are nonetheless equally holistic and emancipatory. This principle frees participatory spirituality from allegiance to any single spiritual system and paves the way for a genuine, ontologically and pragmatically grounded, spiritual pluralism. The main challenges to transpersonal cocreation are spiritual disempowerment, indoctrination, spiritual narcissism, and adherence to naive objectivist or universalist spiritualities. Antidotes include the development of one's inner spiritual authority and the affirmation of the right to inquire (Heron 1998, 2006), heretical courage, and enactive and creative spiritualities (Ferrer and Sherman 2008a, 2008b). Transpersonal cocreation affirms the importance of being open to *spirit beyond* (i.e., the subtle dimensions of the mystery) and makes participatory spirituality fundamentally inquiry-driven (Heron 1998, 2006) and *enactive* (Ferrer 2000a, 2002, 2008a; Ferrer and Sherman 2008b).

The participatory approach embraces a *pluralistic vision of spirituality* that accepts the formative role of contextual and linguistic factors in religious phenomena, while simultaneously recognizing the importance of non-linguistic variables (e.g., somatic, imaginal, energetic, subtle, archetypal) in shaping religious experiences and meanings, and affirming the ontological value and creative impact of spiritual worlds. Participatory pluralism allows the conception of a multiplicity of not only spiritual paths, but also spiritual liberations and even spiritual ultimates. On

3 The language of *equiprimacy*, *equipotentiality*, and *equiplurality* can raise the spectre of Wilber's (1995) critique of the so-called 'green meme' in spiritual discourse, with its problematic emphasis on antihierarchical egalitarianism. For an anticipated response to Wilber's (2002b) 'green meme' charge of the participatory approach, see Ferrer (2002: 223–6), and for a critique of Wilber's misleading use of the 'green meme' by one of Clare Graves's students, see Todorovic (2002).

the one hand, besides affirming the historical existence of multiple spiritual goals or 'salvations' (Ferrer 2002, Heim 1995), the increased embodied openness to immanent spiritual life and the spirit-in-between fostered by the participatory approach may naturally engender a number of novel holistic spiritual realizations that cannot be reduced to traditional states of enlightenment or liberation.⁴

On the other hand, participatory pluralism proposes that different spiritual ultimates can be enacted through intentional or spontaneous participation in an undetermined mystery, spiritual power, or generative force of life or reality. The participatory perspective does not contend that there are two, three, or any limited quantity of pre-given spiritual ultimates, but rather that the radical openness, interrelatedness, and creativity of the mystery or the cosmos allows for the participatory cocreation of an indefinite number of ultimate self-disclosures of reality and corresponding religious worlds. Participatory approaches, that is, seek to enact with body, mind, heart, and consciousness a creative spirituality that lets a thousand spiritual flowers bloom.

Other important features of the participatory approach are discussed throughout my critical engagement of Ken Wilber's (2006) work in the remainder of this article.⁵

The participatory critique of Wilber's work

The following summary of the participatory critique of Wilber's (2006) work is developed in response to

4 In this regard, see Duckworth's (2014a) creative engagement of the participatory approach to reinterpret Buddhist emptiness (*sunyata*) and Buddha nature (*tathagatagarbha*), as well as his related argument that participatory pluralism prevents emptiness (*sunyata*) from being the last word on the nature of ultimate reality (Duckworth, 2014b). Other discussions of participatory religious pluralism include Hollick (2006), Ogilvy (2013), and Dale (2014).

5 For more comprehensive presentations of the participatory approach and its ongoing impact on transpersonal and religious studies, see Ferrer (2011, forthcoming) and Ferrer and Sherman (2008a, 2008b). In an upcoming book, I also explore the implications of the participatory approach for such areas as the relationship between transpersonal psychology and science, integral transformative practice, embodied spirituality, integral and contemplative education, and the study of mysticism and the future of religion, among others.

the dialogue on Wilber's post-metaphysical approach between John Rowan and Michael Daniels, mediated by David Fontana and chaired by Malcolm Walley (Rowan *et al.* 2009).⁶ In this dialogue, Rowan defended Wilber's model against critics who have detected an Eastern bias in its allegedly universal spiritual map. To this end, Rowan offered a list of Western sources considered in Wilber's work; in addition, he endorsed Wilber's claim that Evelyn Underhill's stages of the Christian mystical path conformed with Wilber's scheme.

This reply is unconvincing. With regard to Rowan's first defence, it should be obvious that the mere inclusion of Western sources does not warrant their *fair use*, so to speak. The issue is not that Wilber ignored Western (or Indigenous) traditions, but that he consistently regarded their goals as lower spiritual expressions in a single developmental sequence culminating in a monistically based nondual realization (see also Wilber 1995, 1996). As I elaborated elsewhere (Ferrer 2002), there is nothing new about this move. A legion of religious figures – from Ramanuja to Kukai, Vivekananda to Zaehner to the Dalai Lama – situated their favoured (and remarkably different) spiritual choices at the zenith of a hierarchy of spiritual insights whose lower steps are linked to rival traditions or schools (see Ferrer 2002, 2010; Halbfass 1988, 1991).⁷ In any event, since the nondual realization of the ultimate identity between the self and the divine (or the cosmos) is the explicit goal of certain Eastern schools (e.g., Advaita Vedanta), it is

6 Unless indicated otherwise, all mention of Rowan, Daniels, and Fontana in this article refers to Rowan *et al.* (2009). Likewise, unless indicated otherwise, all mention of Wilber refers to Wilber (2006).

7 See Stoeber (1994) for a contemporary argument of the superiority of theistic dual states over monistic nondual ones. Similarly, Martin Buber (1947/2006) regarded the I/Thou relationship with God as spiritually higher than the monistic experience of non-duality, and Robert Zaehner (1957/1980) argued that the monistic ideal is transcended in theistic mysticism, considering Sankara's monistic liberation (moksa) a primitive stage in the process of deification. More recently, Wilber's (1995) ranking of non-dual mysticism over theism and other contemplative paths has been critiqued and rebutted by Daniel Helminiak (1998), George Adams (2002), and, perhaps most effectively, by Leon Schlamm (2001), who used Rawlinson's (1997, 2000) typology of mystical orientations to show the arbitrariness and doctrinal nature of such rankings.

understandable that scholars find an Eastern bias in Wilber's scheme.⁸

As for Rowan's second statement, although both Underhill (1955) and Wilber (1995, 2006) offered universal maps of spiritual development – a highly discredited notion in contemporary scholarship – their final stages are far from equivalent. Wilber erroneously equated Underhill's *divine mysticism* with his own *states of nondual union*. Underhill's unitive life, however, is characterized not by the nondual realization of one's deepest self as the divine, but by a process of deification (*theosis*) resulting from the ongoing spiritual marriage between God and the soul. In Christian mysticism, even for Pseudo-Dionysius, deification or 'being as much as possible like and in union with God' (McGinn and McGinn 2003: 186) is a gift bestowed by God based on the soul's participation in (vs. identity with) divine nature that should not be confused with monistic nondual claims (McGinn and McGinn 2003). In fact, Underhill explicitly rejected monistic interpretations holding that 'extreme mystics preach the annihilation of the self and regard themselves as co-equal with the Deity' (1955: 419) and insisted that 'the great mystics are anxious above all things to establish and force on us the truth that by deification they intend no arrogant claim to identification with God' (p. 420).⁹ Even if

8 Both Wilber's account of nondual realization – built upon monistic belief in the ultimate identity between one's true Self and the divine – and his stage model drew heavily from the writings of Franklin Jones (aka Adi Da), a Western adept of Hinduism (see B. Daniels 2005). Elsewhere, I argued for the importance of distinguishing between different forms of nonduality usually conflated by Wilber; for example, the Hindu Atman-Brahman nonduality and the Buddhist nonduality of emptiness (*sunyata*) are conceptually, experientially, and ontologically distinct (Ferrer 2002, cf. Fenton 1995). Similarly, considering the Soto Zen founder Dogen's nonduality, Harmless (2008) wrote that although 'he pointed to the radically nondual, it cannot be presumed he is speaking of a oneness within ultimate reality that is anything like what Christians or Muslims speak of, much less what Hindus mean when they speak of a deeper monism' (p. 253).

9 This type of move – unfortunately frequent in Wilber's work – partly explains why Wilber is mostly ignored in the field of religious studies. Although Wilber cannot be unaware that Underhill's *unitive life* has not much to do with his own *nondual realization*, he nonetheless equates them to defend the universal

a marginal number of Christian mystics might have reported states of nondual union with God – a view that Underhill did not support – those are arguably different from Wilber’s nonduality.¹⁰ Furthermore, not only nonduality but also mystical union fails to typify the dominant trends of the Christian mystical tradition, which are more adequately described as cultivating the ‘direct presence of God’, as Bernard McGinn (1991: xvii) stated in the introduction to his authoritative multi-volume history of Western Christian mysticism. Even if one cites the work of Jim Marion (2000) or other modern Christian authors influenced by Wilber’s model, doing so does not change two thousand years of documented history. In any event, since a variety of nondual states have been reported across traditions, I suggest that instead of an ‘Eastern bias’, it may be more accurate to talk about a ‘monistic nondual bias’ in Wilber’s approach (see also Ferrer 2002).

validity of his model. Even if Underhill’s map were to fit Wilber’s, her overall characterization of Christian mysticism in terms of *mystical union* is today recognized as a historical distortion (Harmless 2008, McGinn 1991). Historically, the Christian mystical path had many goals (e.g., spiritual marriage, the birth of the Word in the soul, the vision of God, deification, *unio mystica*, the direct feeling of the presence of God), but Wilber’s nonduality was not one of them. For instance, St Bonaventure, one of the greatest cartographers of the Christian path, depicted the final spiritual stage as an ecstatic union with the salvific suffering of Christ: ‘For Bonaventure, union meant sharing in the radical self-emptying, self-abnegating union with Christ crucified’ (Harmless 2008: 252). For discussions of the varieties of mystical union between the soul and God in the Semitic traditions, see Idel and McGinn (1996), and McGinn (2005).

- 10 For a nuanced account of the differences between Eastern and Christian nondualities, see Barnhart (2001). Whereas in the East nonduality (whether of self and God, or self and world) is taken to be the ontologically given nature of things to be realized by the mystic, when and if insinuated in the West, nonduality becomes a new historical ontological reality that did not exist before. In Christianity, mystical union with God was generally conceived in this same spirit. Commenting on Jan van Ruuesbroec’s mysticism, for example, Louis Dupré wrote: ‘By its dynamic quality, the mystical experience surpasses the mere awareness of an already present, ontological union. The process of loving devotion *realizes* what existed only as potential in the initial stage, thus creating a *new ontological reality*’ (1996: 20).



The Universal Man, Liber Divinorum Operum of Hildegard of Bingen, 1165. Copy of the 13th century.

Rowan proceeded with a three-part defence of Wilber’s work against my participatory critique (Ferrer 2002). First, he claimed to be responding to my challenge of the perennialist idea that mystics are ‘all saying the same thing’ (Rowan *et al.* 2009: 10), and without providing supporting evidence, stated that ‘it turns out the more precisely the [mystical] experiences are described, the more similar they seem to be’ (p. 10). Without further explanation, he added that Wilber’s version of the perennial philosophy is more sophisticated than the one I critiqued. However, among the varieties of perennialism discussed in my work – basic, esotericist, perspectival, typological, and structuralist, only the basic type holds that mystics are ‘all saying the same thing’ (Ferrer 2000a, 2002). I know of nobody today, including Wilber, who holds this view, so I am puzzled as to why Rowan brings it up in this context. As for Rowan’s additional claim, contemporary scholarship reveals exactly the opposite picture: the more precisely mystical states are described, the more disparate they appear to be, such that features that may have initially appeared similar turn out,

on closer inspection, to represent significant divergences. As Paul Mommaers and Jan van Bragt (1995) pointed out, ‘the mystics themselves would be the last ones to concede a single, common essence in mystical awareness’ (p. 45). The supporting literature is too voluminous to cite here, but the reader can consult Jess Hollenback’s (1996) meticulous work, which shows the striking differences between the mystical states and understandings of Western, Eastern, and Indigenous figures. I am mindful that Wilber’s model can explain these and other differences by appealing to his four mysticism types (psychic, subtle, causal, nondual), their enaction from the perspective of different structures of consciousness (archaic, magic, mythic, rational, pluralistic, integral, and super-integral), and the interpretive impact of each tradition’s language and doctrines. I return to this below, but let us first look at Rowan’s second point.

Second, Rowan misconstrued my critique of experientialism – targeted at a subtly dualistic and individualist account of spirituality arguably associated with spiritual narcissism and integrative arrestment (Ferrer 2000b, 2002) – as suggesting the altogether different point that mystics are conformists. In any event, Rowan championed the view that the great mystics are spiritual revolutionaries, mentioning (as usual in these cases) Meister Eckhart as paradigmatic.¹¹ Unfortunately, Eckhart is so well known *precisely* because of his rather exceptional break with tradition and famous Inquisition trial (McGinn 2001).¹² In other words, heretic mystics are actually

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

12 Although Eckhart developed a new terminology with his language of ‘the ground’ (*grunt*), the revolutionary nature of his mysticism tends to be exaggerated in

the exception to the rule, and most mystics adhered to received doctrines and scriptures (see, e.g., Katz 1983a, 1983b, 2000). As Harmless (2008) pointed out, ‘[t]he widespread intertwining of the doctrinal and the mystical is no accident... Mystics often set forth their (or others’) experiences as the *experience of doctrine*’ (p. 233). The romantic view of the mystic as revolutionary heretic is simply not supported by the historical evidence.¹³

In addition, I am perplexed by Rowan’s claim that the participatory approach renders mysticism dependent on cultural conditions, since my work explicitly critiqued this strong constructivist view and presented participatory spirituality as emerging from the interaction among human multidimensional cognition, historical-cultural background, and the mystery or generative power of life or the cosmos (Ferrer 2002). Furthermore, whereas past mysticism may be largely conservative, participatory approaches (contra Rowan’s depiction) invite us to undertake not only the revision of traditional religious forms, but also the cocreation of novel spiritual understandings, practices, and even expanded states of freedom (Ferrer 2010, 2011; Ferrer and Sherman 2008a).

Third, Rowan claimed that my critique does not apply to Wilber’s current views and that, as I indicated in *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory* (2002), the majority of transpersonal writers ‘still do adhere to a more sophisticated view of the perennial philosophy’ (Rowan *et al.* 2009: 10). I am not sure what to make of Rowan’s last remark, but what I wrote at that time is no longer applicable in a transpersonal community that has mostly broken free from Wilber’s stranglehold (see, e.g., Dale 2014; Ferrer 2011; Lahood 2007b, 2008; Tarnas 2001). It goes without saying that even if a majority would still support perennialism, this has nothing to do with its validity. Turning to Rowan’s more substantive point, it is true that

popular circles. Eckhart’s metaphysics of emanation and return has a long pedigree in the Christian tradition (e.g., Origen, Pseudo-Dionysius, Bonaventure), his articulation of an indistinct union with God was inspired by the Beguine mystics (especially Marguerite Porete), and his teaching on the unceasing birth of God in the soul goes back to Origen, as Eckhart acknowledged in one of his sermons (Harmless 2008; McGinn 1994, 2001).

13 This is not to say there were not heretical mystics who challenged traditional authority (Cupitt 1998, Kripal 2006), but simply that, in light of the available historical evidence, those were rather anomalous.

in my early work, due to the vagaries of publishing that Rowan generously acknowledges,¹⁴ I could not address Wilber-4 (2000a); however, I argue that the core of the critique holds for not only Wilber-4 but also Wilber-5 (2006).

Despite Wilber's significant revisions (e.g., letting go of 'involutionary givens' in transpersonal stages), his current model holds that *a.* spiritual development and evolution follow a sequence of (now evolutionarily laid down) states and stages (psychic/subtle/causal/nondual); *b.* this sequence is universal, paradigmatic, and mandatory for all human beings regardless of culture, tradition, or spiritual orientation; *c.* nondual realization is the single ultimate summit of spiritual growth; and *d.* spiritual traditions are geared to the cultivation of particular states and stages. To be sure, the Wilber-Combs lattice complicates this account further by allowing that practitioners from any tradition and at any developmental stage can, in theory, access all transpersonal states (though the states would be interpreted from those corresponding perspectives; Wilber 2006). Wilber's current formulation, however, retains a core problem and adds a new one. On the one hand, some traditions still rank lower than others since they aim at supposedly less advanced spiritual states and stages (e.g., theistic traditions rank lower than nondual ones, shamanic ones lower than theistic).¹⁵ On the other hand, the new grace granted to rival traditions is a Faustian bargain: theistic and shamanic practitioners are told that they too can reach the most advanced spiritual stage, but only if they sacrifice the integrity of their own tradition's self-understanding by accepting Wilber's spiritual itiner-

14 I wrote *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory* between 1994 and 1998 and defended it as my doctoral dissertation in 1999 (Ferrer 1999a). Despite its 2002 publication date, the book actually came out in October of 2001, shortly after Tarnas's (2001) preview in *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*. Earlier introductions to my participatory approach and critical perspectives on Wilber's work appeared in Ferrer (1998a, 1998b, 2000a, 2000b, 2001).

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

ary and nondual endpoint.¹⁶ Although different traditions obviously focus on the enacting of particular mystical states and goals (*d.* above), I strongly dispute the plausibility and legitimacy of Wilber's hierarchical rankings (*a.-c.* above).

Because the participatory approach has been pigeonholed as relativist and self-contradictory (Wilber 2002), I should reiterate here that although my work does not privilege any tradition or type of spirituality over others on *objectivist or ontological grounds* (i.e., saying that theism, monism, or nondualism corresponds to the nature of ultimate reality or is intrinsically superior), it does offer criteria for making qualitative distinctions among spiritual systems on *pragmatic and transformational grounds*. Specifically, I have suggested three basic guidelines: the *egocentrism test*, which assesses the extent to which spiritual traditions, teachings, and practices free practitioners from gross and subtle forms of narcissism and self-centeredness; the *dissociation test*, which evaluates the extent to which spiritual traditions, teachings, and practices foster the integrated blossoming of all dimensions of the person; and the *eco-social-political test*, which assesses the extent to which spiritual systems foster ecological balance, social and economic justice, religious and political freedom, class and gender equality, and other fundamental human rights (see Ferrer 2002, 2008a, 2011). To put it bluntly, I do not think it very important whether my friend's spiritual practice is Dzogchen meditation, entheogenic shamanism, or communion with nature – or whether she achieves nondual states, visions of God or the Goddess, or insight into the interrelatedness of all phenomena. What I really care about is whether she is becoming a more complete and liberated human being – that is, more selfless, more loving and compassionate, more capable of contributing to the spiritual transformation of the world, and so forth.

In any event, since it is likely that most religious traditions would not rank too highly in these tests (see Ferrer 2006, 2008b), it should be obvious that the participatory approach also leads to a strong ranking of spiritual orientations. The crucial difference is that the participatory rankings are not ideologically based on *a priori* ontological doctrines or putative

16 Since Wilber's nonduality is admittedly different than traditional versions, even nondual practitioners may need to strike this bargain in order to qualify as proper suitors of his final realization.

correspondence to a single nondual Spiritual Reality (see Hartelius and Ferrer 2013, Hartelius 2015), but instead ground critical discernment in the practical values of integrated selflessness and eco-social-political justice. I stand by these values, not because I think they are universal (they are not), but because I firmly believe their cultivation can effectively reduce personal, relational, social, and planetary suffering. To be sure, this distinction can be problematized since the specificities of the various spiritual transformational goals often derive from descriptive or normative ontological views about the nature of reality or the divine. As I elaborate below, however, the participatory ranking is not itself precipitated by the privileging of a single spiritual goal, but rather explodes into a plurality of potentially holistic spiritual realizations that can take place within and outside traditions. Furthermore, most traditions are today reconstructing themselves in precisely these embodied and holistic directions (see Ferrer 2003, 2010, 2012).

To summarize, even after Wilber's *ad hoc* modifications, his model still privileges nondual, monistic, and formless spiritualities over theistic and visionary ones,¹⁷ even as it seeks to confine the multiplicity of spiritual expressions to a single, unilinear sequence of spiritual development (cf. Dale 2014, Schlamm 2001). Insofar as Wilber's model retains this sequence and associated doctrinal rankings of spiritual states, stages, and traditions, the essence of the participatory critique is both applicable and effective. While I do consider the critique justifiable, I do not think of it as a definitive refutation of Wilber's model (though its claimed universality is refutable by evidence). My sense is that both the participatory and Wilberian visions can accommodate spiritual diversity in different ways. In the same way that alternative and even logically incompatible theories can fit all possible evidence – as the Duhem-Quine principle of underdetermination of theory by evidence, shows (Duhem 1953, Quine 1953/1980) – it is likely that these alternative, integral meta-theories can fit all possible spiritual data. In contrast to Wilber's theory, however, I submit that participatory integralism meets

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

this challenge *a.* without distorting traditions' self-understandings,¹⁸ *b.* by engendering more harmonious inter-religious relations (see Ferrer 2002, 2010, 2012), and *c.* by emancipating individual spiritual inquiry and growth from the constraints of an evolutionarily laid-down, pregiven sequence of transpersonal stages (Ferrer 2002, Heron 1998). In addition, I contend that the participatory approach is more aligned with the seemingly inexhaustible creativity of the mystery and more parsimonious in its accounting for the same spiritual evidence. Notably, it is unclear whether the ever increasing conceptual proliferation of Wilber's integral theory is truly necessary, or whether it may suggest the exhaustion of the model's explanatory effectiveness and the possible degeneration of his research programme. As Edward Dale (2014) indicated regarding Wilber's (2000a, 2006) work, 'Whenever attempts are made to fit nonlinear patterns into linear frameworks, the resulting picture becomes overcomplicated and fragmented' (p. 135).

Kosmic habits: cultural or universal?

In dialogue with Michael Daniels (in Rowan *et al.* 2009), in this section I clarify my view of participatory cocreation and reflect on the related question of the cultural versus universal nature of Wilber's

18 Given its normative challenge to traditions, it can be reasonably said that the participatory approach does not fully honour some traditions' self-understanding. True enough. On the one hand, however, it can be argued that the world traditions themselves – from Christianity to Yoga, Tantra to Buddhism to Judaism – are nowadays reconstructing themselves precisely in more holistic and embodied directions (e.g., Fox 1988, Lerner 1994, Ray 2008, Singleton 2010, Urban 2003), and that the participatory turn can be seen as giving voice to and strengthening a pre-existing trend within most traditions (Ferrer and Sherman 2008b). On the other hand, and perhaps more crucially, the participatory approach does not require traditions to sacrifice their doctrinal integrity and embrace others' spiritual ultimates because it holds that *all traditions can potentially become more embodied, holistic, and eco-socio-politically responsible in their own terms*. As I elaborate below, if Shamkya Yoga – arguably one of the most explicitly dissociative spiritual traditions of all – can be conceptually and practically reconstructed in embodied and integrative ways (see Whicher 1999), others can do the same. Whether this outcome may ultimately be possible or not, I firmly believe in the value of approaching this dialogue open to such possibilities.



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Kosmic habits. As a preliminary aside, I was relieved to finally see in print what has been in the mind of so many in transpersonal and integral circles for years: Wilber-5 is, in part, 'a participatory revision of Wilber-4'.¹⁹ As Daniels noted, the cocreated nature of the spiritual path, the language of participation, and the use of the myth of the given in spiritual critical discourse are central features of the participatory approach introduced in my early work (Ferrer 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2002). This participatory reform is startling, especially given Wilber's (2002) dismissive account of *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory* as expressing 'a green-meme approach to spirituality, a kind of participatory samsara equated with nirvana' (p. 12).²⁰ As Daniels pointed out, Wilber often dis-

plays the disturbing scholarly habit of incorporating into his theorizing critical points made by others about his work – at times, points he previously dis-

the 'green meme' charge, see Ferrer (2002: 223–6). Wilber (2002) has not responded to these rejoinders, nor has he re-engaged his response (Wilber 1998) to my earlier critique of his spiritual epistemology (Ferrer 1998b), which is also addressed in Ferrer (2002: 66–9). In subsequent works, however, Wilber stopped using Popperian falsifiability as demarcation criterion between genuine and dogmatic spiritual knowledge – a central target of my critique – so I can only assume that the critique was effective even if he never acknowledged its validity. Arguably, the participatory critique was also a major factor in Wilber's (2000b, 2000a) departure from the field of transpersonal psychology and related announcement of its demise (see Ferrer and Puente 2013). See also Abramson (2014a) for a response to Hartelius and Ferrer's (2013) participatory critique of Wilber's work, as well as the ensuing exchange between Stuart Whomsley (2014), John Abramson (2014b), and Glenn Hartelius (2015a, 2015b). In my view, Hartelius's essay (2015a) summarizes and conclusively settles many of the central issues discussed around Wilber's work in the last two decades.

19 As described by one member of Wilber's Integral Institute, requesting anonymity (personal communication, 16.5.2008).

20 I decided not to respond to Wilber's (2002) critique because each of his substantial points had already been anticipated and addressed in *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory*; for a response to the charge of performative self-contradiction, see Ferrer (2002: 179–81; see also Ferrer 1998a) and for a response to

missed as misinformed or conveying less evolved levels of spiritual discernment – and presenting them as autonomous developments of his thinking. In this case, Wilber assimilated aspects of the participatory approach into his integral vision; from a participatory perspective, however, many problems remained.²¹

Daniels wrote that, whereas in my view the different ‘cocreated [spiritual] realities are cultural constructions’ (Rowan *et al.* 2009: 21), for Wilber ‘these cocreated structures ... become parts of the Kosmos ... ontological realities that everybody has to negotiate’ (p. 21). Stated this way, however, Daniels’s account might mislead readers to associate the participatory approach with cultural constructivism, which I explicitly critiqued as operating under the spell of what Karl Popper (1994) called the ‘myth of the framework’ (Ferrer 2002: 141). In the present context, this myth suggests that mystics and religious practitioners are prisoners of their cultures and conceptual frameworks, and that spiritual knowledge must always be shaped by or screened through such frameworks. In contrast, participatory approaches conceive mystical phenomena as cocreated events emerging not only from culture, but also from the interaction of human multidimensional cognition, subtle worlds and entities, and an undetermined mystery or creative power of life, the cosmos, or reality (Ferrer 2002, 2008a; Ferrer and Sherman 2008a). In other words, participatory spirituality embraces the role of language and culture in religious phenomena while simultaneously recognizing the importance, and at times the centrality, of nonlinguistic (somatic, energetic, imaginal, archetypal, etc.) and transcultural factors

21 In addition to arguably influencing Wilber’s work, participatory thinking has begun to affect the writing of his colleagues and critics alike. In a series of important essays, Bruce Alderman (2011, 2012a, 2012b) offered the most successful attempt yet to reconcile Wilberian and participatory perspectives on enaction and spiritual pluralism. Dustin DiPerna (2012) coined the term *participatory integration* to name the paradigm shift necessary to develop a Wilberian-integral approach to religious studies. Other integral scholars employing participatory ideas in their theorizing include Steve McIntosh (2007), who used *Revisioning’s* enactive approach and epistemological critique to elaborate a more pluralistic ‘integral reality framework’ that seeks to counter some of the problems of Wilber’s model, and Frank Ferendo (2007), who presented the participatory perspective on integral practice (Ferrer 2003) as complementary to Wilber’s approach.

(subtle worlds; the creative power of life or the spirit) in shaping religious experiences. As we put it in the introduction to *The Participatory Turn*:

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

As Ann Gleig and Nicholas Boeving (2009) wrote in their essay review of the book: ‘Ontological veracity ... is not inherently at odds with a contextualist sensibility. To acknowledge that humans do not only discover but also shape and cocreate spiritual landscapes does not annul the metaphysical reality of such mystical worlds’ (p. 66).²²

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

I don’t deny that groups of people can cocreate ... morphogenetic fields—or habits of working, or patterns of working ... What I am denying is that they become Kosmic habits—that they become realities that are given in the Kosmos, and are fixed, and everyone has to go through them. (Rowan *et al.* 2009: 35)

22 Although a philosophical divide is often traced between ‘representationalist realists’ and ‘anti-representationalist constructivists’ who tend to reject realism (e.g., Rorty 2004), this generally valid polarization becomes fallacious if taken to be normative. As Steven Engler (2004) showed in an instructive essay, constructivism – although challenging the correspondence between linguistic signs and independent facts – is not necessarily anti-realist or relativistic. For a recent, sophisticated realist-constructivist synthesis in international relations theory, see Barkin (2010). More attuned to participatory standpoints, Robert Miner (2004) offered an account of knowledge as *true construction* that takes human creative pursuits to be participating in divine knowledge and creation.

I concur. Daniels immediately added, however, that I view cocreated spiritual realities as ‘cultural habits ... not Kosmic habits’ (Rowan *et al.* 2009: 36). To which I respond, yes, they are cultural but not *merely* cultural; they are also morphogenetic fields of energy and consciousness, which, although not universal or mandatory, can become more available as new shores of the Kosmos are explored. The key point is that *there is no need to conflate Kosmic and universal if the Kosmos is considered a plural cornucopia creatively advancing in multiple ontological directions*. Wilber sought to confine such an ontological multiplicity to his unilinear evolutionary sequence, but I believe it is both more accurate and more generous to envision cosmic and spiritual evolution as branching out in many different but potentially intermingled directions (or as an omniscattered rhizome propagating through offshoots and thickenings of its nodes; Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Dale’s (2014) nonlinear transpersonal paradigm also supports the existence of multiple developmental and evolutionary pathways that branch ‘cladogenetically’ through ‘specializing diversification’ (p. 219). In other words, rather than a single spiritual itinerary, these pathways follow collateral developmental lines. For Dale, Wilber’s (2000a, 2006) works are ‘the epitome of the [linear] statistical averaging approach’ (Dale 2014: 135).²³ In the context of this pluralistic account, the ontological nature of a multiplicity of Kosmic habits can be affirmed free from Wilberian dogmatic constraints.

There may also be deeper philosophical issues behind Daniels’s reluctance to grant an ontological status to Wilber’s Kosmic habits. Following Jung, Daniels (2001) proposed that transpersonal psychology should remain metaphysically agnostic toward any ontological reality beyond the physical and psychological (cf. Friedman 2002, 2013) and should focus on the phenomenological study of human experience. As I discussed elsewhere in greater detail (Ferrer 2014, forthcoming), however, this apparently cautious stance is rooted in an implicit allegiance to neo-Kantian frameworks that either bracket or deny the existence of supernatural and metaphysical realities. At its heart rests the Kantian belief that innate or deeply seated epistemic constraints in human cognition render impossible or illicit any knowledge claim

23 For an essay review discussing the many merits and several potential tensions in Dale’s (2014) important work, see Ferrer (2015).

about such metaphysical realities. In other words, metaphysical realities *may* exist, but the only thing human beings can access is a situated phenomenal awareness of them. The legitimacy of metaphysical agnosticism is thus contingent on the validity of a neo-Kantian dualistic metaphysics, which, although not necessarily wrong (based on its metaphysical status, that is), nonetheless undermines the professed neutrality of metaphysical agnosticism (cf. King 1999, Lancaster 2002). Indeed, as Jeremy Northcote (2004) argued, the methodological suspension of the validity of supernormal claims (e.g., about metaphysical entities or levels of reality), far from warranting objectivism or scholarly neutrality in the study of religion, may actually constitute a bias against ‘the possibility that people’s thinking and behaviour are indeed based on various supernormal forces ... a bracketing approach will falsely attribute mundane sociological explanations to behaviour that is in actuality shaped by supernatural forces’ (p. 89).

The point here is that unless one subscribes ideologically to a naturalistic metaphysics,²⁴ it may be prudent – and heuristically fertile – not to reject *a priori* the possibility of effective causation from the various metaphysical sources described in religious utterances. In addition, Western epistemologies (such as the neo-Kantianism prevalent in modern academia) may not be the last arbiters in the assessment of religious knowledge claims, and in particular of those emerging from long-term contemplative practice.²⁵

24 In his acclaimed work, *The Empirical Stance* (2002), the philosopher of science Bas van Fraassen offered the most cogent and, in my opinion, definitive exposition of the ideological nature of associating scientific empiricism with naturalistic and materialistic metaphysical theories. See Ferrer (2014) for a proposal for a participatory research programme that bridges the naturalistic/supernaturalistic split by embracing a more liberal or open naturalism – one that is receptive to both the ontological integrity of spiritual referents and the plausibility of subtle worlds or dimensions of reality.

25 For critical discussions of neo-Kantianism in transpersonal and religious studies, see Ferrer (2000a, 2002, 2014) and Ferrer and Sherman (2008b), and for an often overlooked but important analysis of the ‘radically subjectivist neo-Kantianism’ (Nagy 1991: 365) that shaped Jung’s metaphysical agnosticism, see Nagy (1991). See also Kelly (1993) for a proposed dissolution of the Kantianism affecting Jungian’s view of the archetypes.

Why do I insist on the ontological (vs. merely cultural) nature of Kosmic habits? As I see it, this account is the most plausible explanation for the well-documented transcultural access to apparently given spiritual motives and realities (e.g., Grof 1985, 1988, 1998; Shanon 2002; see Ferrer, forthcoming). The other alternative is to appeal to Jung's notions of the collective unconscious and universal archetypes, but as Shanon (2002) explained, Jungian explanations fall short. On the one hand, many psychedelic visions are very different from those connected with the Jungian archetypes (e.g., the Hero, the Trickster, the Great Mother); on the other hand, many visions are culture-specific and do not have the universal status of the archetypes, which Jung posited as 'associated with the common heritage that is shared by all human beings and which may well have evolved throughout the history of the species' (Shanon 2002: 391). After a lucid discussion of biological, depth psychological, cognitive, and supernatural interpretations of the related phenomenon of cross-cultural commonalities in ayahuasca visions, Shanon rejected supernatural accounts and leaned toward cognitive considerations. His final conclusion, however, was highly attuned to the participatory view of spiritual cocreation:

The cross-personal commonalities exhibited in Ayahuasca visions, the wondrous scenarios revealed by them, and the insights gained through them are perhaps neither just psychological, nor just reflective of other realms, nor are they 'merely' a creation of the human mind. Rather, they might be psychological *and* creative *and* real. (Shanon 2002: 401)

In any event, as Daniels pointed out, Wilber's attempt to make the transcultural accessibility to spiritual states and referents mandatory for the entire human species is misleading. Once enacted, spiritual realities become more easily accessible, but this does not mean that they are mandatory, predetermined, organized in a transcultural hierarchical fashion, universally sequential in their unfolding, or limited in number, or that new pathways cannot be enacted through cocreative participation.

In my view, then, cocreated spiritual realities *a.* can become ontologically given in the cosmos, *b.* are not fixed but are dynamic and open to human participatory endeavours, *c.* are not mandatory, and

d. are always options among other new pathways that can be potentially enacted. Thus, when Fontana cautiously left open 'for general debate as to whether these Kosmic habits are cultural, or whether they are indeed Kosmic' (Rowan *et al.* 2009: 37), participatory scholars might have responded that they are *both* cultural *and* Kosmic, but in the open and pluralistic fashion outlined above.

Post-metaphysical versus participatory spirituality

In *Integral Spirituality*, Wilber introduced an allegedly post-metaphysical approach that conceived spiritual worlds not as pre-existing ontological levels but as cocreated structures of human consciousness.²⁶ As discussed above, once evolutionarily laid down, Wilber believes that these structures become Kosmic habits or '*actually existing structures* in the Kosmos' (2000a: 247), although by this he meant that they exist within the inner realms of the individual. In his own words:

The claim of Integral Post-Metaphysics is that the invaluable and profound truths of the pre-modern traditions can be salvaged by realizing that what they are saying and showing applies basically to the Upper-Left quadrant [i.e., the interior of the individual]. (Wilber 2000a: 46)

I have often been asked what I think about Wilber's post-metaphysical spirituality. My answer: it is not only unoriginal, but also arguably reductionist. I fail to see novelty in it because many contemplative traditions – such as Yogacara (Mind-Only) Buddhism or most Tibetan Buddhist schools – explicitly accounted for spiritual realms in terms of subtle dimensions of consciousness, not as external metaphysical levels of reality. Wilber seems to be reacting against a special brand of Neoplatonic metaphysics (the Great Chain of Being), but his post-metaphysical formulation does not add anything to the way some other traditions have understood spiritual realities for centuries. I am somehow surprised each time Wilber borrows age-old notions and presents them as not only the newest spiritual vision, but one that supersedes all previous visions.²⁷

26 For a questioning of the post-metaphysical nature of Wilber's present approach, see Hartelius and Ferrer (2011) and Hartelius (2015a, 2015b).

27 I am equally puzzled by Rowan's claim that Wilber

Before explaining why Wilber's post-metaphysics may be reductionist, let me distinguish between two related but independent meanings of the term *metaphysics*. On the one hand, the notion of metaphysics in Western philosophy is generally based on the distinction between appearance and reality, with a metaphysical statement being one claiming to portray that reality presumably lying behind the realm of appearances (van Inwagen 1998, Schilbrack 2014). In addition to this use, on the other hand, many religious traditions also use the term *metaphysical worlds* to refer to levels or dimensions of reality existing beyond the sensible world or within the subtle ontological depths of human consciousness. The first usage is the main target of Jacques Derrida's (1976) attack on the metaphysics of presence. On a strong reading, this critique leads to the *a priori* denial of the ontological status of any 'supernatural' or metaphysical reality; the weaker reading simply requires a declaration of metaphysical agnosticism.²⁸

'invented the idea of these quadrants [AQAL model]' (Rowan *et al.* 2009: 41). Put together E. F. Schumacher's (1977) four fields of knowledge – interior/exterior of myself, interior/exterior of other beings and the world – or any pantheist's inner/outer dimensions (see Clarke 2004), and Erich Jantsch's (1980) micro/macro evolutions, then add a pinch of Arthur Koestler's (1976) holonic logic, and *voilà*, you have the basic AQAL framework. Wilber (1995) gave due acknowledgment to most of these influences in his elaboration of the AQAL model, except perhaps to Schumacher, whose own four-quadrant model is closest to Wilber's. Note also how heavily Wilber drew his critique of the modern flatland, neo-perennialism, and three-eyes epistemology from Schumacher's (1977) 'loss of the vertical dimension' (pp. 10–14), evolutionary 'Levels of Being' (pp. 15–26), and theory of *adaequatio* (pp. 39–60), respectively. Conceptually speaking, therefore, much of what is valuable in the model is not new; unfortunately, what is new is arguably problematic (e.g., Wilber's developmental map and hierarchical spiritual gradations). Nonetheless, although I take issue with Rowan's claim that Wilber invented something new in the AQAL model, Wilber has played an important role in spreading these ideas and some integral scholars are exploring the applicability of the AQAL model to important issues (e.g., Esbjörn-Hargens 2010). As I believe Wilber himself would admit, his particular genius manifests not in invention, but in the integration of others' ideas.

28 For two anthologies exploring the implications of post-metaphysical thought for religious studies, see Wrathall (2003) and Bloechl (2003). Earlier

Eeva Kallio, <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/donnaceleste/albums>>



Neues Museum, Berlin.

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

In this light, a major problem with Wilber's formulation becomes apparent: It created a *false dichotomy between pre-given ontological levels and his post-metaphysical account of spiritual worlds within the interior realms of the individual*. This dichotomy is fallacious because, among other possibilities, it overlooks the possible existence of subtle worlds or dimensions of reality coexisting with the physical realm that potentially house indwelling non-physical entities. As anyone who has engaged systematically in entheogenic inquiry knows, for example, subtle worlds and ostensibly autonomous spiritual entities can be encountered not only within one's inner visionary landscapes (e.g., Strassman 2001), but also in front of one's open eyes in the world 'out there' (Shanon 2002) – and these external visions can sometimes

discussions appeared in Ruf (1989). See Ferrer (2014) for a recommended overcoming of the natural/supernatural dichotomy, and Ferrer (forthcoming) for a proposal to talk about so-called metaphysical or transcendent realities in terms of *subtle worlds*.

be intersubjectively corroborated (see Ferrer 2014, forthcoming).²⁹

This discussion raises the thorny issue of the ontological nature of subtle or non-physical entities. Are they constructed, cocreated, or fully independent? I do not have a definitive answer to this question, but I offer three remarks. First, I see no conflict between maintaining that entities such as angels or *dakinis* may have been historically cocreated and that they can also have autonomy and agency independent from human experience. In my view, some of these beings are not reducible to culturally constructed psychological visions, but may rather be endowed with an extra-psychological ontological status emerging from collectively maintained enactive interactions between human multidimensional cognition, cultural-religious memes, and the creative power of life, reality, or the cosmos. Second, if one accepts the possibility of an afterlife scenario in which personal identity is somehow maintained, it becomes possible to contemplate the feasibility of human encounters with non-cocreated entities such as deceased saints, *bodhisattvas*, ascended masters, and the like.³⁰ (I leave open the possibility that so-called angels or *dakinis* may be evolved incarnations of these deceased personhoods in other dimensions of the cosmos.) Finally, as many traditions maintain, it might be conceivable to entertain the possibility of parallel realms or dimensions of reality inhabited by fully autonomous entities endowed with self-awareness and volition. In the case of angels, *dakinis*, and the like, however, I confess that their cultural speci-

ficity (forms, qualities, etc.) makes me wonder about their cocreated nature.³¹

In any event, if the plausibility of a multidimensional cosmos is accepted – as many shamanic, esoteric, and contemplative traditions affirm – *Wilber's integral post-metaphysics is reductionist in its relegation of all spiritual realities to the inner depths of the individual* (see also Hartelius and Ferrer 2013, Hartelius 2015). If he is also suggesting that *all* spiritual realities

29 See Shanon (2002: 69–85) for descriptions of a variety of these 'open-eye visualizations.' In my experience, the psychoactive brew ayahuasca (*yagé*) and the cactus San Pedro (*wachuma*) are especially conducive to such external visions. For an examination of the epistemological challenge of intersubjective external visions for modern scientific naturalism, see Ferrer (2014, forthcoming).

30 See Barnard (2011) for a powerful participatory case regarding the feasibility of a diversity of cocreated post-mortem scenarios. In a similar spirit, David Loy (2010) wrote: 'the Christian Heaven, the Pure Land of Buddhism, are we suddenly whisked away to them, or do we gain them by becoming the kind of person who would live in such a place? ... If the world is made of stories, who knows what our best stories might accomplish? If we ourselves are Buddha, who but us can create Pure Land?' (pp. 102–3)

31 Perennialists may assume that practitioners from different traditions encounter the same entities (putatively existing in a shared spiritual universe), and that the entities' various outlooks are contingent on the practitioners' particular belief systems, conceptual schemes, or interpretations. Similarly, scholars with neo-Kantian leanings may appeal to different phenomenal appearances of the same noumenal realities (e.g., Hick 1989), structuralist thinkers may refer to plural surface manifestations of the same deep structure or structural level (e.g., Anthony 1982; Wilber 1995, 1996), and Jungians may write about culturally specific manifestations of the same universal archetypes (after Jung 1969, e.g., Grof 1988). After dispensing with the dualism of framework and reality underlying the above explanations, the participatory approach – through its enactive account of spiritual knowledge – overcomes all these problematic dualisms and reductionisms. Although I recognize that some of the above accounts can initially have a certain intuitive force (after all, people can have different perspectives and interpretations of the same phenomenon in the natural and social worlds), a deeper examination reveals the limitations of these dualistic proposals. It is plausible to consider that a sensorially vague or diffuse being of light could be perceived as an angel by a Christian practitioner. However, it is much less convincing to establish meaningful equivalences among the highly specific spiritual visions which these dualistic proposals agglutinate within a particular structural, archetypal, or noumenal reality. Consider, for example, the very specific image of a Tibetan Buddhist *dakini*. To be sure, a *dakini* can manifest in a variety of ways – from an ugly beggar woman to a beautiful golden consort – but it would most likely be a serious mistake to equate, whether structurally or archetypally, the wisdom *dakini* Vajrayogini (a three-eyed, semi-wrathful, red-skinned naked female with cemetery ornaments and a hooked knife; Simmer-Brown 2002) with the Virgin Mary or the Hindu Goddess Lakshmi. In contrast to these dualistic solutions and their forced equivalences, I propose that it is both more cogent and less reductionist to consider such religious figures as different enacted, cocreated, or perhaps independent entities or phenomena.

and entities are human cocreations, his proposal could have also been charged with anthropocentrism.

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

The question of enlightenment

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

Let me begin by considering Wilber's (2006) definition: 'Enlightenment is the realization of oneness with all states and structures that are in existence at any given time' (p. 95). To clarify what he meant, Wilber proposed a 'sliding scale of Enlightenment' (p. 235) according to its *Emptiness* and *Form* aspects. Since the structures of consciousness unfold evolutionarily in the world of Form, one can realize the same Emptiness at any point of history, but later practitioners can embrace Form in fuller ways: 'A person's realization today is not Freer than Buddha's (Emptiness is Emptiness), but it is Fuller than Buddha's (and will be even fuller down the road)' (p. 248).

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

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

His Holiness: Again, it depends upon how you interpret the words, 'ultimate liberation'. The *moksa* which is described in the Buddhist religion is achieved only through the practice of emptiness. And this kind of nirvana or liberation, as I have defined it above, cannot be achieved even by Svatantrika Madhyamikas, by Cittamatras, Sautrantikas or Vaibhasikas. The follower of these schools, *though Buddhists*, do not understand the actual doctrine of emptiness. Because they cannot realize emptiness, or reality, they cannot accomplish the kind of liberation I defined previously. (Tenzin Gyatso 1988: 23-4)

Like the Dalai Lama, Wilber may retort that many traditions are not aimed at (what he considers to be) ultimate liberation.³² Such a response, however, begs

32 Note here that the Dalai Lama's account of liberation is different from Wilber's: 'Liberation in which "a mind that understands the sphere of reality annihilates all defilements in the sphere of reality" is a state that *only* [italics added] Buddhists can accomplish. This kind of *moksa* or *nirvana* is *only* [italics added] explained in the Buddhist scriptures, and is achieved *only* [italics added] through Buddhist practice' (Tenzin Gyatso 1988: 23). While celebrating the existence of different religions to accommodate the diversity of human karmic dispositions, the Dalai Lama contended that final liberation can only be achieved

the question by assuming the validity of the very framework being challenged: Wilber's ranking of spiritual states/stages and account of final liberation.

Second, serious questions can be raised about Wilber's claim that the Buddha achieved complete freedom. In contrast to later articulations of emptiness (*sunyata*), the Buddha's *nirvana* is described in the Buddhist canon as an utterly disembodied state of blissful consciousness in which all personality factors – including sensations, desires, feelings, and thoughts – have been totally extinguished (Harvey 1995). This should not come as a surprise: most traditions spawned in India regarded embodied life as illusory or a source of suffering, thus seeking liberation in its transcendence. The dominant view in the Indian tradition is to consider spiritual freedom (*moksa*, *mukti*) as the release from the cycle of transmigratory experience (*samsara*), the body as bound and even created by karma and ignorance, and bodiless liberation (at death) as superior to living embodied liberation (Fort 1998). Immersed in this cultural-religious matrix, the Buddha also believed that the body and sexuality (and aspects of the heart, such as certain passions) were hindrances to spiritual flourishing (Faure 1998), and early Buddhism pictured the body as a repulsive source of suffering, *nirvana* as extinction of bodily senses and desires, and 'final *nirvana*' (*parinirvana*) as attainable only after death (Collins 1998). Although some exceptions may be found, this trend generally led the various Buddhist schools and vehicles to the repression, regulation, or transmutation of body and sexuality at the service of the *higher* goal of the liberation of consciousness (Ferrer 2006, 2008b).

So, was the historical Buddha entirely *Free*, as Wilber believes? My answer: only if you understand spiritual freedom in the disembodied, and arguably dissociative, way pursued by early Buddhism.³³

through the emptiness practices of his own school of Tibetan Buddhism, implicitly situating all other spiritual choices as lower – a view that he believes all other Buddhists and religious people will eventually accept (D'Costa 2000, see also Ferrer 2010).

33 I mean no disrespect or condescension. When looking at this religious past, it is important to avoid falling into what Barfield called a 'chronological snobbery' that excoriates past spiritualities as deficient when considered from the perspective of modern standards (as cited in Lewis 1966: 125). The point here is that many, although by no means all, past dis-



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Gilt-bronze Maitreya in Meditation (National Treasure No. 83. National Museum of Korea.

Despite his downplaying the spiritual import of sexuality and the vital world, Sri Aurobindo (2001) was correct when he pointed out that the liberation of consciousness should not be confused with an integral transformation that entails the spiritual alignment of all human dimensions (pp. 942 ff). With this in mind, I have proposed an integral *bodhisattva* vow in which the conscious mind renounces full liberation until the body, the heart, and the primary world can be free as well from the alienating tendencies that prevent them from sharing freely in the unfolding life of the mystery here on Earth (Ferrer 2006, 2007, 2011a). Since the conscious mind is the seat of most individuals' sense of identity, an exclusive liberation of consciousness can be extremely deceptive insofar as one can believe that one is fully free when, in fact, essential dimensions of the self are underdeveloped, alienated,

embodied spiritual trends may have been appropriate and even inevitable in their particular historical and cultural contexts.

or in bondage – as the numerous sexual, emotional, and relational difficulties of traditionally enlightened teachers attest (Feuerstein 2006, Forsthoefel and Humes 2005, Kripal 1999, Storr 1996).

Third, despite Wilber's (1995) plea for the integration of ascending and descending spiritual trends, his account of spiritual freedom in terms of Buddhist emptiness revealed an ascending and monopolar bias. Since the ascending bias has been already discussed (Daniels 2005, 2009), I focus here on the monopolar charge. As John Heron (1998, 2006) explained, in addition to spiritualities that blatantly devalue body and world, monopolar spirituality is a more subtle type of disembodied orientation that sees spiritual life as emerging from the interaction of human beings' immediate present experience with transcendent fields or states of consciousness (cf. Ferrer *et al.* 2004).³⁴ The shortcoming of this monopolar understanding is that it ignores the existence of a second spiritual pole – immanent spiritual life or energy – that is intimately connected to the vital world and arguably stores the most generative power of the mystery (see Ferrer 2003, 2006, 2008b; Ferrer and Sherman 2008b). Wilber's account is monopolar insofar as it conceives of enlightenment in terms of a realization in consciousness that overlooks the crucial role of immanent life for genuinely integral spiritual growth and creative spiritual breakthroughs.

Wilber's (1995, 1996) proposed logic of 'transcend and include' as *the* formula of spiritual development gives the game away. When the mind emerges, it is said to transcend and include the body, vital energy, and emotions; when the witness consciousness emerges, it is said to transcend and include the mind; when higher structures of consciousness emerge, they are said to transcend and include the witness, and so forth.³⁵ Wilber (1995) regarded the body and

sexuality as sacred in the sense of having spiritual 'ground value' (i.e., they are expressions of absolute Spirit, emptiness, or God) and in that they can be sacralized in the nondual embrace; however, this account is very different from recognizing the centrality of intrinsically spiritual, immanent sources for integral transpersonal development. When both consciousness and energy (and matter) are understood as equally fundamental spiritual players, *integral spiritual development unfolds in a dialectical interaction with both transcendent and immanent spiritual sources that the linear logic of 'transcend and include' fails to capture* (see Dale 2014; Ferrer 2003; Heron 1998, 2006). A fully embodied spirituality, I suggest, emerges from the creative interplay of both immanent and transcendent spiritual energies in individuals who embrace the fullness of human experience while remaining firmly grounded in body and earth. Openness to immanent spiritual life naturally engenders a richer plurality of creative spiritual realizations – often connected with transformative personal life choices – that cannot be reduced to the homogenous 'one taste' of Wilber's (1999) nondual realization.

I strongly suspect that this one-sidedness is behind Wilber's elevation of meditation as the royal path to spiritual growth. He wrote:

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

As Daniels (2009) indicated, however, meditation is, at least historically, an ascending spiritual practice.³⁶ Furthermore, remember that the particular

case about the nonlinear (i.e., atypical, indeterministic) nature of transpersonal development and the consequent failure of Wilber's (2000a, 2006) essentially linear approach to account for it.

36 It is noteworthy that meditation and other contemplative practices are being re-envisioned today from the perspective of more holistic understandings; see for example, Reginald Ray's (2008) embodied reconstruction of Buddhist meditation, Donald Rothberg's (2006, 2008) relational and socially engaged expansion of Buddhist practice, Ian Whicher's (1999)

34 In this context, spiritual practice is aimed either at accessing such overriding realities (ascent paths, e.g., classic Neoplatonic mysticism) or at bringing such spiritual energies down to earth to transfigure human nature or the world (descent paths, e.g., central elements of Sri Aurobindo's (1993, 2001) integral yoga; cf. Heron 1998, 2006). Here, monopolar descent is different from the traditional descending paths that search for spiritual fulfillment in nature or the world (Daniels 2009, Wilber 1995).

35 As Sean Kelly (1998) and Michael Washburn (1998) pointed out, however, Wilber's (1996b) holarchical logic cannot account for important aspects of human development. See also Dale (2014) for a persuasive

meditative techniques favoured by Wilber originated in religious systems seeking to liberate human beings from the suffering or illusory nature of both body and world through identification with the Self, the achievement of *nirvana*, and so forth. It may be countered that all contemplative traditions privilege one or another type of ascending meditation practice, to which I would respond that this is likely to be so because most past religious traditions were strongly patriarchal and leaned toward disembodiment and dissociation (for documentation of this claim, see Ferrer 2008b). Consistent with his spiritual rankings, Wilber's enthroning of meditation as the spiritual practice *par excellence* privileges contemplative traditions over alternative visionary, wisdom, devotional, and socially engaged ones. In his concluding comment, Fontana got to the heart of the matter when, in light of the four yogas of Hinduism – *karma* (yoga of action), *bhakti* (yoga of devotion), *jnana* (yoga of wisdom), and *raja* (yoga of meditation) – he suggested meditation may be *the* path only for *raja* yogis (Rowan *et al.* 2009: 58–9).

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

integrative account of Patanjali's yoga, and Celeste Schroeder's (1995) and Jane Vennard's (1998) engagements of the body and sexuality in Christian prayer.

somatic intelligence (cf. Ray 2008), the strict regulation of sexual behaviour and prohibition of the creative exploration of sensual desire (Faure 1998, Loy 2008), the individualist focus and lack of relational and collective practices (Rothberg 2008), the aversion toward the expression of strong emotions such as anger (Masters 2000), and the overall lack of discrimination between attachment and passions.³⁷

A last point about Wilber's view of meditation: as the above reflects, I wholeheartedly agree with David Fontana that meditation may not be *the* most effective or appropriate spiritual practice for everybody (for some it can be even counter-indicated; see Treleaven 2010). I want to add here that to elevate one's own spiritual choice as the universally superior one is a symptom of what I have called *spiritual narcissism*, which is unfortunately pandemic in the human approach to religious diversity (see Ferrer 2010, forthcoming). From a participatory perspective, however, it is no longer a contested issue whether practitioners endorse a theistic, nondual, or naturalistic account of the mystery, or whether their chosen path of spiritual cultivation is meditation, social engagement, conscious parenting, entheogenic shamanism, sacred sexuality, or communion with nature. (Of course, it may be desirable to complement each pathway with practices that cultivate other human potentials – hence the importance of non-mentally guided integral practice; see Ferrer 2003). The new spiritual bottom line, in contrast, is the degree to which each spiritual path fosters both an overcoming of self-centeredness and a fully embodied integration that make us not only more sensitive to the needs of others, nature, and the world, but also more effective cultural and planetary transformative agents in whatever contexts and measure life or the mystery calls us to be.

An important practical outcome of adopting this participatory approach is that, like members of a healthy family, practitioners can stop attempting to impose their doctrinal beliefs on others and instead possibly become a supportive force for their spiritual individuation. This mutual empowerment of spiritual creativity may lead to the emergence of

37 Perhaps aware of these limitations, Wilber currently recommends an Integral Life Practice (ILP) in which practitioners select practices from different modules corresponding to trainable human capacities, such as body, mind, spirit, sex, and relationships (see Wilber 2006, Wilber *et al.* 2008). For critical appraisals of Wilber's ILP, see Ferrer (2003, forthcoming).

not only a human community formed by fully differentiated spiritual individuals, but also a rich variety of coherent spiritual perspectives that can *potentially* be equally aligned to the mystery (equiplurality principle; see above). I stress ‘potentially’ to suggest that every spiritual tradition – even those traditionally promulgating arguably dissociative (or unilaterally transcendentalist, or disembodied, or world-denying) doctrines and practices – can be creatively (and legitimately, I would argue) re-envisioned from the perspective of more holistic understandings. Whicher’s (1998) integrative, embodied reinterpretation of Patanjali’s dualistic system of classical yoga – whose aim was self-identification with a pure consciousness (*purusa*) in isolation (*kaivalyam*) from all possible physical or mental contents (*prakrti*) – offers an excellent example of such hermeneutic and spiritual possibilities. Therefore, I maintain that the participatory approach allows affirming both the uniqueness and potential integrity of each tradition in its own terms.

This account of spiritual individuation is, I believe, consistent with Daniels’s intuition that spiritual realization will be different for different people. If human beings are considered *unique* embodiments of the mystery, would it not be natural that as they spiritually individuate, their spiritual realizations might be distinct even if they could be aligned with each other and potentially overlap in different regards?³⁸ After affirming a participatory account of spirituality that welcomes a multiplicity of paths, Malcolm Hollick (2006) wrote:

It is tempting to suggest that “balanced” spiritual growth would see each of us develop more or less equally along each path But I don’t think that’s how it works. We are all unique, and carve out our unique combinations of paths toward our unique revelation of Spirit. (Hollick 2006: 354)

38 My emphasis on spiritual individuation should not be confused with what Robert Bellah (Bellah *et al.* 1985) famously called *Sheilaism* – named after Sheila, a respondent who claimed to have her own private religion. By contrast, my sense is that the perspectives of spiritually individuated persons may naturally align with one another and shape spiritual networks and communities even across doctrinal differences – a communion or genuine unity-in-diversity of multiple spiritual perceptions (cf. Dale 2014).

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

Conclusion

In closing, three directions may be particularly productive in moving this dialogue forward. First, it may be important for Wilber to unpack more explicitly the ontological implications of his integral post-metaphysics. In particular, I wonder whether he truly meant to relegate spiritual realities to the individual’s interiors, or whether this is an unintended upshot of his seeking to avoid the pitfalls of classical metaphysical systems. In addition, it is not clear whether he believes that all spiritual realities and entities are human cocreations or whether he is leaving room for the possibility that some may (co-)exist autonomously.

Second, I issue a plea to the transpersonal community to scrutinize the neo-Kantian assumptions lying beneath agnosticism toward the extra-physical and extra-psychological ontological status of spiritual

realities (for extended discussions, see Ferrer 2014, forthcoming). I believe it is fundamental to be aware that such a stance, far from warranting neutrality or impartiality, is the fruit of a modern, Western, and dualistic epistemological ethos that automatically renders suspect mystical claims about the nature of knowledge and reality. In their noble attempts to promote the scientific legitimacy of the field, some transpersonal psychologists – from Michael Washburn (1995) to Harris Friedman (2002, 2013) to Michael Daniels (2001, 2005) – may have prematurely committed to a neo-Kantian dualistic epistemology that is in fact ideologically tied to a naturalistic, and often materialistic, metaphysics. Whether such a naturalistic worldview will ultimately be cogent is unknown (I strongly suspect it will not), but transpersonal scholars should be able recognize and make explicit the metaphysical presuppositions implicit in such methodological agnosticism; in this way, they can avoid assuming or defending its purportedly scientific, metaphysically neutral status and thereby falling prey to one of science’s most prevalent ideologies (van Fraassen 2002).

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



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