

Integral gnosis and the material other

In this article, I look at Ken Wilber's Integral Theory as mimesis. This invites me to look at Integral Theory in three ways. First, I look at Integral Theory as process of making materialistic alterity, thus maintaining and fortifying the spirituality of the self. Second, I look at it from the perspective of the dialectics of epistemologies of estrangement and intimacy, raising questions concerning the legitimacy of the juxtaposing interpretative and explanatory approaches to culture. Third, I look at it from a social perspective, as a powerful instance of modern mimesis that creates a typically modern history. I will show how Integral Theory is grounded in the modern intuition of agency being distinct from and superior to the outer material world. To the extent that cultural agency has to materialize in some form, so does Integral Theory. My aim is to recall the close relations of scientific discourse with spirituality, even with magic and even more importantly, I want to show how supposedly secular intuitions of identity and agency bear strong potential for spiritual and religious discourse.

IN THIS ARTICLE I focus on Ken Wilber's idea of *gnosis* as something that can elevate one to higher levels of spirituality. My reading of Wilber's Integral Theory is motivated by a tension I find between the explanatory potential of his ideas and his simultaneous demand for an interpretative approach in religious and spiritual issues. These, at least seemingly contradictory combinations, or vectors of knowledge are essential to gnosis.

Wilber's view of gnosis provides an exceptionally systematic epistemology that provides an opportunity to understand a core dilemma in New Age spirituality. New Age thinking poses a challenge for the study of religion, because while from the etic point

of view seems to entail a collective belief in sacralizing the subjective experience, from the emic point of view spiritual truth is found only from within. This combination leads to a discourse that rejects all sorts of external truths and beliefs, thus making the New Age movement an exceptionally challenging subject of study (Aupers 2012: 344). Wilber's rejection of mainstream sciences and his demand for gnosis reflects this same pattern. My interest concerning Wilber's gnosis, and New Age more generally, can be formulated into a question concerning how thoroughly subjectified spiritual experience can amount to social action. Here, the movement between interpretation and explanation becomes important.

I see Integral Theory as a spiritual method that is based on the subject's movement between an outer, estranged view and an inner, intimate view of reality. Both of these views are essential to Wilber's idea of spiritual growth that opposes any given (i.e. external) truths. Wilber's claims concerning personal, social and global evolution show how spiritual aspiration gives rise to a history of constant renewals and liberations from restrictions of outer material and social forms; to a history that finds its parallel in historical Protestantism, as shown by Webb Keane (2002). While this process seeks to transcend materiality, spiritualists still live in a material universe. Here Wilber's gnosis comes into play. Gnosis gives rise to an experience of looking through the immanent into a body of presumed spiritual knowledge, giving rise to renewal and liberation from the external constrictions.

Even spiritual quests must have a starting point. While Wilber rejects New Age, he embraces the socially well-established truth-claims of modern sciences. This, I think, reflects the close relation between

the discourses of spirituality and modern sciences. As I will later show, they both share typically modern intuitions of human agency and ideals of signification, that were, according to Keane (2002), first articulated in historical Protestantism. Hence, it is no coincidence that the spiritual history that Integral Theory produces finds its parallel in the history of (post-)colonialism.

Spirituality and the abstraction of material things

Essential to Wilber's (2009) Integral Theory is an ontological postulation called *holarchy*, a unitary deep structure that everything in the whole universe consists of. Holarchies are not just a physical but also mental, and above all, spiritual in nature. According to Wilber, all holarchies are progressing towards more integrity, during which process psychological and ultimately more spiritual properties emerge. The ultimate goal of the cosmos is nonduality, where spirituality integrates everything into one. According to Wilber, evidence of this is apparent in biological, technological and social history, as well as in individual psychological development. The universe is on its way to spiritual integrity. (Wilber 2009: 61–92)

By contrast with this spiritual evolution, Wilber claims that Western societies are currently in a state of epistemic paralysis called Flatland. Flatland is possessed with the knowledge of materialistic surfaces devoid of real essence, depth and the spiritual. According to Wilber, humans have always been driven by spirituality, but postmodern relativism and the epistemics of Flatland make further spiritual integrity impossible. He calls this the ecological crisis between ego (internality) and eco (externality). Postmodern relativism is symptomatic of an epistemic position that fails to see beyond contextually (i.e. externally) determined knowledge. It denies any possibility of human access to absolute knowledge, and by this denial it keeps the human spirit strictly on the surface of the Flatland, blind to the holarchical deep structure and spiritual evolution of the universe. (Wilber 2009: 63, 215–17, 341–8)

The epistemics of Flatland poses a threat to humanity both in the global and the individual sense. For example, the environmental crisis, cultural differences and the unsustainable use of natural resources all call for urgent measures while epistemic relativism renders humanity powerless to face these global crises. At the same time, the knowledge of Flatland

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Misty dawn, Maidenhead Thicket, 14.11.2005.

undermines subjective wellbeing by overshadowing the realm of subjective cultural, religious and spiritual values, leaving less and less room for spiritual wellbeing. Fortunately, there is an antidote to the condition of postmodernity; the Integral Theory that promises to lift the human spirit from the limbo of Flatland and to set it on its natural course towards greater spiritual integrity. (Wilber 2009: 39–55, 400–22)

In Wilber's philosophy, abstract generalizations seem to go hand in hand with spirituality. Obviously, spirituality does not automatically follow abstractions, because more often than not, theoretical abstractions are not spiritual. Nevertheless, Wilber's philosophy reminds me of Talal Asad's (1993) claim that abstractions of culture often unconsciously follow spiritual and religious influences (p. 27–9). Asad shows how the concept of *belief* was a product of the religious discourse of reformation in the sixteenth century. Belief was an answer to a crisis of meaning: when the authority of a common church was questioned and people worshipped God in many different ways, what was Christianity? Belief grasped the *essence* of different forms of religion and brought coherence to Christianity. But unlike the medieval notion of religion that was ruled by local churches and controlled by the Catholic Church, the notion of belief also meant a shift of power from these institutions to believing individuals. Later, in his paradigm of natural religion Lord Edward Herbert defined religiosity as being ultimately about *believing* in God. This universalist definition was clearly biased towards reformist influences (Asad 1993: 37–42). Wilber's idea seems to follow a similar logic of seeking essence to create coherence, or integrity. And as he emphasizes, spirituality must be understood from within subjective experience (Wilber 2009: 166–71). But before looking into this, let's look at how abstractions of culture can unconsciously become religious or spiritual.

When Portuguese merchants reached West Africa in 1470, they soon became aware of the peculiar way the local people seemed to believe in the magical powers of material things and objects. They saw this as idolatrous fetishism; as a belief in the supernatural powers of man-made objects (Parrinder 1961: 8), something that had been forbidden in the second commandment. Fetishism was an antithesis to religion; a non-religion. Later in the eighteenth century, a Dutch merchant Willem Bosman visited the same region. He claimed that fetishism was a priestly

conspiracy that prevented the development of native societies by confusing spiritual values with material values. Bosman saw that both the priest and the merchants were after profit, but whereas the priests were intentionally misleading the naive 'primitives' for their own benefit, the merchants were sincere in their intention. (Manning and Meneley 2008: 11)

As Bosman's reaction hints, the colonial other puzzled the intellectual sphere of Europe. In Europe, the need for a secular public sphere became ever more obvious. The globalization of capitalism called for a general theory of economics that wasn't subject to the peculiarities of local exchange (Manning and Meneley 2008; Pels 2012: 27). During his visit to West Africa Bosman was in the process of developing one, and to his disappointment, fetishism broke certain laws he thought were universal (Manning and Meneley 2008: 11). The problem of the fetish was later solved by Victorian anthropology as Peter Pels (2012) shows. According to Pels, fetishism was a problem in relation to the naturalistic 'modern fact' of Francis Bacon's early modern empiricism. This combination led to the blasphemous notion that human agency was materially determined. (*Ibid.* 27–8)

Early modern empiricism was opposed by the Protestant Church because it associated materiality either with the sins of Epicureanism or with idolatrous fetishism. The sciences were faced with theological accusations, but thanks to the scientific agnosticism of Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–95), the study of material physical reality managed to maintain its position. Huxley argued that materialistic description should be understood in relation to as yet unknown statistical facts. Because statistical fact wasn't subject to the errors of human senses, eventually it was regarded as more reliable than that which meets the eye. Although this solution left theology outside scientific discourse, Pels argues that it implicitly hailed Protestant morals. According to him, this solution was one step in the process he calls the 'new reformation'. (Pels 2012: 34–5)

The new sciences were based on statistical analysis and controlled laboratory experiments, which excluded domestic and spiritual sciences from the science proper. In this E. B. Tylor's anthropology played a significant role. Tylor wanted to show that the preliminary stage in the evolution of a scientific society was already found within primitive cultures. But because of the Protestant Church, it could not be derived from fetishism, and because spiritualists



This *bo-fetish* from Benin shows how bundles of knowledge are binded into fetishes. Notice the similarity between binding external things into a fetish and diagrammatical bundeling of spiritual knowledge in the AQUAL-matrix.

already used the concept of spirituality, a term Tylor had originally considered, he came up with the term animism, which relied heavily on Huxley's ideas. The concept of animism referred to the projection of the human mind onto outer reality, onto inanimate, non-human objects. Whereas primitives looked at things according to such projections, modern science had discerned that objects were separate from the subject. In line with Comptean positivism, Tylor saw that this separation was a first step in cultural evolution. Modern occult sciences and spiritualism in which matter functions as a medium were condemned as evolutionary remnants. (Pels 2012: 35–8)

Pels' reading is influenced by Daniel Miller's (1987) theory of objectification that emphasizes the inseparability of cultural agency from objectification (Pels 2012: 30). Miller sees objectification as the very potential to act in historically generated linguistic, material, institutional forms. Although the subject may lose the scale of these forms or by becoming subject to a more dominant action, the subject may fail to see these forms as his own creation, he nevertheless strives towards some form of actualization (Miller 1987: 179–180). Objects can appear to be alien, but following Miller's theory, this alienation is a consequence of one's own historical forms of acting. As Miller puts it: 'Within the concept of objectification lies a Frankensteinian image of a model, once

externalized, turning away from and then against its human creators...' (*ibid.* 180).

Isn't Flatland a Frankensteinian image such as this; the great ideas of Enlightenment turned into a mockery of their original image? What about the fetish? From Charles De Brosse and August Comte to Marx (Pels 2012, 37) and Freud (Keane, Manning and Meneley), all define fetishism as the result of some sort of a category error which confuses the false with the true. Fetishism is a religion fallen into superficiality, it is an illusion created by capitalism to alienate human beings from their natural social life, it is a perversity that mistakes outer things as objects of sexual desire. Note the historicity here. That which is fallen, deluded, perverted, can be reinstated, disillusioned, or straightened. To be accurate, Wilber's Flatland is a bit different from fetishism, because he sees that the spiritual integrity is yet to come. In this respect, Flatland is different from fetish, which presumes an original state from which things have fallen. In fact, Wilber rejects ideas of returning to 'harmonious' societies as category-erroneous utopias. (Miller 2009: 93–109, 410–19)

Tylor's animism seems to provide a better comparison to Wilber's arguments. While Tylor's argument did not imply the historical fall, it did nevertheless entail the idea that animism was an error of the past that the process of cultural evolution will eventually fix. However, as I will later show, these kinds of normative arguments are motivated by a belief that there is some transcendent realm of truth hiding behind the apparent reality that sets the course for proper human action. In this sense, Tylor's animism and Wilber's Flatland are not that far from fetishism.

However, Pels shows that Tylor's argument was possible only by supposing a categorical distinction between material *cultural action* and an abstract system of *cultural meanings*, a distinction that also presumed the categorical distinction between subject and objects thus solving the problem of fetishism. According to Pels, this amounted to the emergence of later social sciences. The 'new reformation' conjured entities such as 'society', 'state' and 'economics' and announced the necessity of social expertise as the heir to the Protestant clergy, by pointing out that human agency was some levels above cold materialism. Pels sees here the steps that anticipated the Saussurean split which attempted to solve the problem of fetish by abstracting it into the problematic relation between the system of cultural signification

and human agency (Pels 2012: 38–9). Materiality became a mere mirror to human agency which was from now on understood as a distinctively *immaterial* agency. This leads us to Wilber's notions of gnosis.

My view of Wilber follows an open-ended definition of religion and spirituality formulated by Birgit Meyer and Dick Houtmann (2012). According to them, religion and spirituality is constituted of things – an alignment of artefacts, spaces, places, words, gestures, sounds, smells, architecture, participants, and so forth – that give rise to the *presence of something other*. While the presence of the other is something extra to the particular material things, its presence is nevertheless empirical (*ibid.* 3–4). This alignment of things can give rise to the presence of benevolent or malevolent spirits, gods and energies and such, but it can also give rise to alienating, threatening and strange entities. The other can be a presence of something that is not necessarily recognised as religious, as Wilber's gnosis exemplifies.

Wilber's gnosis as optical knowledge

Wilber (2011) argues that there are three levels of knowledge; the lowest being pre-symbolic, the second lowest symbolic and the highest trans-symbolic knowledge. In pre-symbolic knowledge, the eye of the body responds to sensuous perceptions of the corporeal world without any conscious reflection. In symbolic knowledge, the eye of the mind responds to theoretical knowledge. It makes it possible to reflect on sensuous perceptions and add representational content to perceptions of the corporeal world in order to share one's thought with others. Social interaction and scientific discourse are confined to this level. The highest level of knowledge is trans-symbolic. It looks directly into spiritual reality without the need for any mediating symbolic representations. Wilber calls this gnosis. These three levels of knowledge are hierarchical, where the higher level encompasses but transcends all the lower ones, but from the point of view of the lower levels, one cannot grasp the higher ones without changing its epistemological nature to accord with the lower. Wilber admits that contemporary science can study things at the corporeal, symbolic and even trans-symbolic levels, but its methods are restricted to the symbolic level, *the level of Logos*, which is why it is insufficient for an understanding of spiritual knowledge. This is where gnosis is needed. (Wilber 2011: 48)

This three-stage epistemology serves as a basic structure for Wilber's ideas concerning spiritual evolution. The basic idea is that one's problems are caused by some sort of misinterpretation occurring in the subject's worldview, in other words, in one's subject-object relationships. Higher levels of knowledge can enable a subject to see these misunderstandings and to renew and integrate their worldview. But a true renewal happens only by attaining a spiritual point of view on one's problematic worldview. Spiritual knowledge liberates the subject from the perverse subject-object relationship, thus making possible a shift to higher, more spiritual and integrated worldview. Wilber sees that this sort of spiritual evolution is the solution to all personal, social, ecological and global problems. (Wilber 2009: 213–38)

Here we have a modern version of the age-old idea of a divine spark which is trapped within every being. When found, this spark is believed to liberate the being from the confinement of flesh. The idea originates in the Gnosticism of the early centuries of the Common Era. It has existed within esoteric undercurrents in Western culture at least since the Renaissance, and it saw a revival during the counter-culture of the 1960s and 70s when the esoteric undercurrent became part of the imagery of popular consciousness – what is often referred as the New Age movement. (Aupers 2012: 342–3)

How does one achieve gnosis? According to Wilber gnosis cannot be achieved via active pursuit, because it is *transempirical* and *transrational*. Gnosis is an instant insight found from within, without any outer mediating form, material, linguistic or conceptual. One can only learn sensitivity to spiritual knowledge through years of meditational practice. Still, although the lower levels do not grasp spiritual knowledge or gnosis fully, they can nevertheless have partial and necessarily reductionist images of spirit. (Wilber 2011: 35, 44–7, 54)

I analyse Wilber's gnosis from the point of view of Michael Taussig's (1993) *mimesis*. Taussig is inspired by Walter Benjamin's idea of culture as a universal human faculty of learning by mimicry. According to Taussig, acts of, for example, describing, representing, instantiating or exemplifying are magic acts of *mimesis* (*ibid.* 16). What interests me about *mimesis* is that it shows how interpretation and explanation, estrangement and intimacy, are not necessarily opposing factors. They can also be understood as existing at the extremes of the same continuum, on

which there is a fruitful middle ground. According to Taussig, one can learn from what is new and strange only to the extent that it is presented in a familiar enough way. Ideal mimesis represents the other as faithfully as possible without being too alienating, thus diminishing the gap between self-identity and other. (*Ibid.* 7–15)

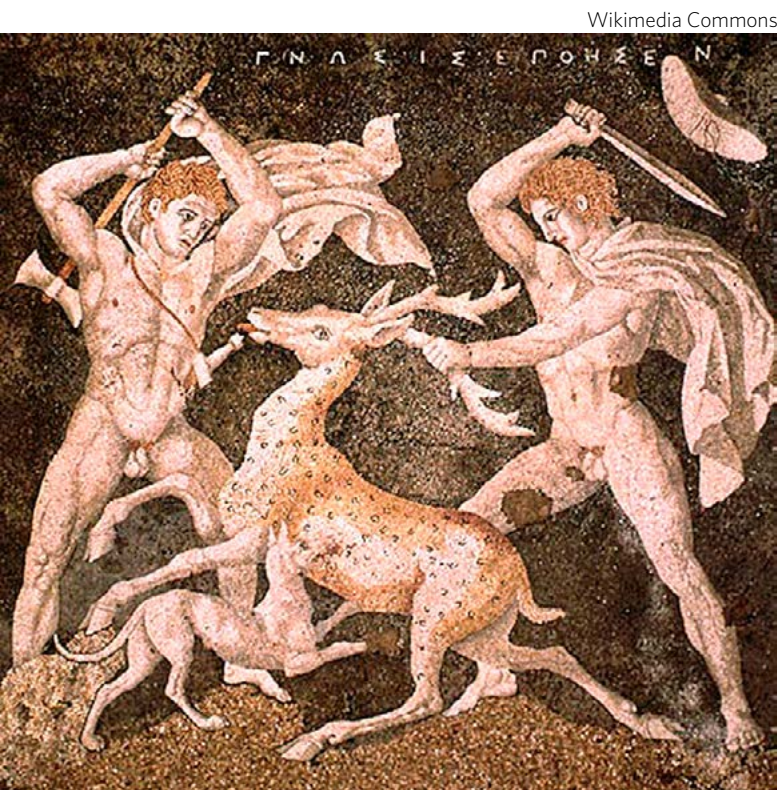
According to Taussig, Walter Benjamin saw that mimesis is grounded in the physiognomic nature of knowledge. Knowledge is always the end product of sensorimotor interactions with reality, the co-operation of the senses and the mind. For this reason, knowledge is always sensuous and situational, even in its most abstract conceptual form. Benjamin saw that modern photography and films have given visibility a privileged position over the other senses as the source of knowledge. The photorealistic and moving imagery of modernity creates a visual illusion of bodily presence. Therefore, the modern human is conditioned to be impressed upon and moved by pictures. Influenced by Marx, Benjamin sees that pictures replace the social and bodily presence taken by capitalist production. Taussig sees that Benjamin

reveals a bias of optical unconsciousness in modern knowledge. (Taussig 1993: 20–7)

For example, successful ethnographic descriptions, written and photographed, can create the impression of actually being with the phenomenon described; an effect of ethnographical transparency if you will. This is the mimetic magic of modernity that follows the logic of Benjamin's optical unconsciousness. We have convincing portrayals of others which are convincing only because they have given up on tactile faithfulness in order to make the shift from the original context to the context of representation possible, during which process visual description is privileged. Optical knowledge can also lead to crude generalizations. According to Taussig, James G. Frazer's typology of magic into copy and contact is a fine example of this. It presumed it was possible for an observer to distinguish whether the magical effect mediates via visual similarity between the ritual effigy and the target of ritual or via a former connection of the ritual effigy and the target. It presumed an outsider view of the observer, as though the anthropologist's visual perception was somehow above sensual mediation. Frazer's theory was a generalization of Tylor's view of magic as a primitive mistake that confused the ideal connection between things with the real connections, a confusion that modern science was already capable of distinguishing. Only as late as 1973 did S. J. Tambiah prove that both science and magic used the logic of analogy between things, and analogy is always an idealization of the real. (Taussig 1993: 20, 47–58)

Now we can see how the accusation of category errors are possible only if one takes one's optical ideals of the other as realistic and therefore believes one is able to see where the other is mistaken. What the accuser misses, is that both his own ideal of the other and the one of the actual other, are socially conditioned. This can be demonstrated by Gilbert Ryle's (2009) argument on René Descartes' substance dualism. Ryle claims that Descartes' argument is grounded in a category mistake. Being convinced of Galileo's mechanics, Descartes began to wonder about the relation between mechanics and the autonomy of the human soul. Because he failed to find one, Descartes was convinced that they are of a different substance, ontologically separate beings. (Ryle 2009: 4–8)

As Ryle (2009) notices, the influence of the intellectual sphere of Descartes should not be neglected. According to Ryle, at that time the 'Stoic-Augustinian



A deer hunt, detail from the mosaic floor signed Gnosis in the 'House of Abduction of Helen' at Pella, late 4th century bc, Pella Archaeological Museum. Signed 'Gnosis made it'.

theories of the will were embedded in the Calvinist doctrines of sin and grace; Platonic and Aristotelian theories of the intellect shaped the orthodox doctrines of the immortality of the soul. Descartes was reformulating already prevalent theological doctrines of the soul into the new syntax of Galileo' (*ibid.* 13). Regarding Ryle's argument with respect to Taussig's ideas, we can see how making an accusation of a category error which is justified from strictly analytical (i.e. optical) grounds, will nevertheless amount to making another kind of category error – one that passes over the social and sensuous logics of knowledge. How does this relate to gnosis?

Ryle (2009) further argues that changing internalized knowledge of *knowing how* into externalized expressions of *knowing that*, is to change the very nature of things (p. 16–17). One needs to make comparison between several instances of a particular performance in order to recognize what parts of knowing how is meaningful enough to be put into representational form. For other people to find this representation meaningful, it must also be put into a familiar enough form. Therefore reasoning out a performance will never add up to the knowledge required for actually performing skilfully. A massive amount of the tacit knowledge of which know-how is comprised never passes through the process of abstraction required for the act of representation. In this respect, Wilber is right when he claims that symbolically shared social and theoretical knowledge cannot grasp the full scope of knowledge.

Ryle (2009) also argues that self-representational utterances such as those of possession, belief, aspiration and knowledge should be understood as expressions of behavioural dispositions. They express 'inference-tickets, which license us to predict, retrodict, explain and modify these actions, reactions and states' (p. 108). Notice the indeterminacy of the ticket metaphor. With this Ryle wants to emphasize the nature of inference not as trundling along pre-determined 'rails' but being open to a multiplicity of possible routes (*ibid.* 106–7). Furthermore, whereas Ryle emphasizes the nature of representational acts as abstract and general, he thinks that self-representations as dispositional knowledge amounts to a vast array of knowledge concerning the way a person interacts with the outer social world.

In order to find the right dispositions from rather meagre self-representations, an act of interpretation is needed. Compared to the act of translation, for

example, interpretation seems to be more inwardly directed, though it is never completely an inner act. While interpretation concerns things that arise via one's interaction with the outer social world, from the subject's point of view, the reflective act may seem to be a completely inner process with no mediatory functions whatsoever. How is this possible?

Let us compare Ryle's metaphor of inference tickets with Benjamin's idea of physiognomic knowledge. What Ryle's metaphor suggests, is that there are, though not socially determined, still *socially preferred* ways of acting, something akin to Pierre Bourdieu's habitus. Like any knowledge, these socially preferred ways of acting are also internalized, and can be put into a representational form to some extent. But a lot of it remains as tacit bodily dispositions concerning intersubjective acts, gestures, signs, and many other subtle hints entwined with sensuous data. When there is enough correlation between our inner physiognomic knowledge and the outer social world, I think the act of interpretation can become a transparent, even a lucid process.

Consider this in relation to the indeterminacy of the meaning of a conversation. Imagine an ideal conversation with a trusted friend on some deeply personal subject. It can be described as a dialogue towards a point of saturation after which words no longer seem to increase mutual understanding. This saturation is often followed by a feeling that any sudden change would break this moment of mutual transparency. Given that the inner physiognomical features of language differ between individuals, that particular conversation has reached the degree of integrity that it can reach within that social constellation. Hence, further words, parties joining the conversation or changes in material surroundings risk breaking the integration. They can introduce something into the situation that either party of the conversation would find unfitting, even disturbing. The integrity of the conversation must be determined, not by meaning but by social and political relations (see Bakhtin 1981).

As my example shows, the familiar enough alignment between words, things and people can create images and landscapes to dissolve the boundaries between people and between people and things thus allowing a new field of social agency or, what I call 'common land' to emerge. Along these emergent common lands, new possibilities for co-operation, new ways of solving problems, new ideas and innovations arise, but also, new problems, challenges, and so

forth. But once this kind of landscape emerges, there is always the risk that an external influence breaks in, thus collapsing the landscape and its concomitant agency and revealing its dependency on social and material things. This risk rises from the tension between optical knowledge and the sensuousness it hides within.

Recalling Pels' claims about the 'new reformation' conjuring unconsciously 'Protestant' common lands like the 'state' and 'economics', to what extent people can project into these their intimate values and beliefs without breaking the fragile landscape? This brings us to the problem of the paradoxical combination of subjectified truths and social action in New Age movements. Given the position of gnosis as a continuous discourse in esoteric history from early gnosticism to contemporary New Age movements and recalling Taussig's idea of mimesis as a matter of portions of intimate familiarity and something other, I want to ask what kinds of alignment of things can amount to completely intimate yet socially meaningful experiences?

The sincerity of gnosis

According to W. J. T. Mitchell (2012), accusations of fetishism reflect an age-old battle against words and material images. In the context of all three major religions of the word – Christianity, Islam and Judaism – fetishism is often associated with the sin of idolatry. Idolatry has been condemned in the second commandment: 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven images.' As Mitchell emphasizes, the concern about the *act of (en)graving* is revealing. (*Ibid.* 112)

'Graving', or making images in material form connects the thing imagined to a particular place, more so than making images with words. It becomes signified with a handicraft of a particular person from a particular society in a particular culture in a particular historical context. In comparison, spelling out or making an image in writing is less bound to a particular context. Words are easy to exchange, easy to move from one context to another. It is hardly a coincidence that these three religions of the word are also the ones that are the most widespread religions in the world. Whereas words seem to allow a degree of mobility over materiality, thus giving rise to something emergent, engraving an image seems to confine the thing it represents into a particular human-made form. But to what extent is this true?

As described above, there is a tension between universal images, or 'common lands', and particular images, as seen from a universalist and rather scholarly point of view. For example, scholars tend to describe indigenous religions as distinctively materialistic, as the history of colonialism shows (see Dommelen 2006). This should come as no surprise, given the fact that the modern academy and sciences share historical roots with the religions of the word. The tendency to privilege cultural action rather as immaterial than material and to condemn the opposite as trickery or excess, seems to me to be some kind of hybrid of Puritan aesthetics and Occam's razor.

This takes us to Taussig's idea of mimetic space. According to him, indigenous mimesis is the co-operation between material surroundings, gesturing hands and speech. Spirits and gods are made present by bringing them into the concrete outer space. Taussig refers to this mimetic space metaphorically, as the womb. This indicates how modern anthropology perceives of the creative powers of the shamans and healers as feminine. In contrast, modern mimesis is the optical abstraction of its predecessor. Being optical, it is able to penetrate beyond the limits of physical space, visible surfaces of matter and it is inclined to solve the mysteries of feminine reproduction. This opticality of modern mimesis creates history that separates modern from 'primitive'. Modern society identifies itself with latest novelties and discoveries revealed by optical mimesis. From a new perspective, the past seems confused and imprisoning. But because the project of modernity still, although unconsciously, originates from a physiognomical interaction with reality, its identity is vulnerable to the mimesis of primitives. (Taussig 1993: 33–44)

Modernity is simultaneously amazed at and afraid of the 'maternal touch' of external creation. There is something familiar yet upsetting about it, something that Freud's concept of *unheimlich*, translated as the feeling of uncanniness, describes. It is reminiscent of a suppressed but longed-for sensuousness. But because modernity relies greatly upon optical knowledge, giving in to sensuousness risks losing control over things (Taussig 1993: 122). While Taussig puts his ideas in a rather provocative form, he catches something deeply modern, as Webb Keane's anthropological research in postcolonial Sumba in Indonesia suggests.

Keane shows how a mission of Dutch Calvinists (Orthodox Dutch Calvinists) during the twentieth

century led into a shift from indexically interpreted modes of cultural signification to symbolically interpreted ones (Keane 2002, also 1997 and 1998). He argues that the shift is a consequence of the *modernizing* effects of Protestantism. He follows Charles Taylor's definition of modernity, summed up as a belief in the historical and personal change rising from within and in the image of self separated from social and material commitments. However, to the extent that a subject somehow identifies with modernity, it must be recognized from social outer practice. Thus, a modern subject overlooks the apparent materiality and identifies itself only with the inner meanings and ideals. Here, the ideal of *sincere* speech becomes essential. (Keane 2002: 68–9)

According to Keane, the logic of modernity can be seen in a Protestant mission that paradoxically insists on a new beginning and a revival of originality. Among the seventeenth century English Puritans fleshly rhetorics were seen to be distorting the divine truth. Speech was to reflect the Puritanist lifestyle; one divested of excess. At that time there were ambitions in the Royal Society to formulate a purely objective natural language purified of errors. These two aims were combined in missionary activities on the frontiers, where scientific objectivism was used as a means of disenchanting traditional beliefs concerning the enchantment of external things. Scientific objectivism then has provided a means for missionaries to disenchant traditional beliefs. Conversion (and capitalism) has been possible only after natives have been convinced that outer things are not spiritual agents. Although the ideals of spiritual liberation are age-old ideas, before the Reformation of the sixteenth century the idea was rather the preserve of the religious elite and the wealthy. The vernacularization of the Mass and the Bible was believed to liberate everyone from idolatry and the power of the Catholic clergy, returning faith to religious individuals (Keane 2002: 66–8). In a historical sense, Protestant conversion has marked a new, modern era, while within the Protestant ethos, it marks a revival of the original order of things.

Keane observed such a process occurring in Sumba. Traditionally, the Sumbanese engage in a marital exchange that mediates a gift of blood (and spirit and life) from the bride's lineage to the husband's, creating a depth of connection that forms the basis of political and kinship alliances. The exchange can be very expensive, as the husband draws many supporters to gather 'male' valuables such as cattle,

horses and gold to wife's lineage and their supporters, who reciprocate with 'female' valuables of clothes, pigs and ivory. From a modern perspective, this exchange seems to bind human agency under the 'spell' of materiality, as if modern agency were not materially conditioned. According to Keane, the modern intuition speaks of the union of capitalism with Protestantism which sees materiality being subordinated to human agency. (Keane 2002: 70–1)

But modernity takes its toll. Elders who were brought up in the traditional way of life, regarded the Western marriage ideals as anarchistic. For them such a denial of good fortune (exchange) is not just a denial of another person, but a denial of God. Even the smallest exchange effects person's spirit (*dewa*) either positively or negatively, and that has consequences for future exchange. For them, exchange is the micro-politics that effects, via social circulation, one's own and everyone else's opportunities to interact in society. A denial of exchange would reduce human agency to that of an animal which is driven by mere instinct. Amongst the younger members of the population, who were more accustomed to a modern lifestyle, the ceremonial exchange became a representation of the bride's honour, not a measure of it. It was radically reduced in size, because a lifetime of depth did not serve its original purpose in a modernized society. While traditional things were still engaged in during the ceremony, they were regarded as signs of tradition, not as practical or valuable. Keane sees this as a shift in the representational economy. While the external aspects of the ceremony as ritual remain much the same, it had taken on completely new expressive and practical functions. The ceremonial gift was no longer regarded as causally effective, and the materiality of its objects had only an arbitrary relation to their meaning. (Keane 2002: 71–4)

The ideal of sincere speech is central in this shift. According to Keane, the ideal of sincere speech entails that inner ideas and outer things reflect each other, not just by coincidence, but *intentionally*. Hence, this ideal privileges inner thoughts over outer things, and as such it speaks of the sincerity of a person, not of things. Thus, the ideal has normative dimensions that relates its subjects to material and social things. Sincere speech is intended for other people to evaluate how one's words harmonize with outer things. If words and things harmonize well, that means that the words are sincere and they prove that the speakers thoughts are just as sincere as his words (Keane 2002:



Front view of a detail from a textile from Sumba depicting an ancestor figure (Marapu) using a supplementary of the warp, 1899.

74–6). As we can see, the ideal of sincere speech amounts to a normative ideal of alignment between words and other outer things that emphasize the presence of inner ideals and beliefs over materiality.

As Keane (2002) points out, the Sumbanese proselytes often saw the modernizing promises of the Protestant missionaries as naive willfulness (p. 77–8). Why? Because there were no proper frames for those promises. For example, because the Karhu Sumbanese understand language as being socially determined, converts found the ideal of sincere prayer difficult to actualize. They became obsessed with the possible outer origin of their prayers. To solve this, missionaries taught them to close their eyes while praying. Traditionally, the Sumbanese are disposed to distrust the subjective realm, and think that God and the spirits of ancestors cannot be reached from within, as the missionaries teach. In their traditional Marapu ancestor rituals, the ritual speaker does not speak words of his own, but canonical couplets spelled in *li'i* words of ancient ancestors. These words distribute agency only to outer things and words and not to human subjects. The Bible translator Louis Onvlee tried to find a *li'i* version of the phrase 'to pray' only to find out that it is an impossibility in *li'i* terms because there were no intentional structures in *li'i* words. For the Sumbanese, Protestant promises were excessively ideational and ineffective, lacking any concrete presence. (Keane 1998: 23–9)

Eventually, converts found frames for the modern idea of the 'state'. Traditionally, the Sumbanese name each other according to the different social contexts people are engaged in. By contrast, a Christian name is stable in two senses. It is registered in Heaven and in the registry of the modern state. This combination of state and church helped to make Christianity present in everyday practices. Because in Sumba baptism is not enough to confirm one's faith, adults go through public confirmation ceremonies that share a striking outer resemblance to official state presentations. The sermon is delivered in a pedagogical and formal register like public announcements, the alignment of the stage and the spectators follows the form of state presentations and the attendants of the ceremony are cashed over goods, and the confirmation is public like any state presentations. Traditionally, Sumbanese society is structured as a social hierarchy, by rank, clan, marital identity and so forth, and this is why the Sumbanese are very anxious about publicity. (Keane 2002: 78–80)

This publicity plays a central role in confirmation. The performative structure of confirmation amounts to a situation of negotiation where all parties are present: the one being confirmed, God via a cleric who performs as a civil servant of God, installed in his post by the church, and the congregation, who act as witnesses to the confirmation, enacted between God and the confirmed one. When it is done, the confirmed one becomes part of the congregation. The performance moves the conscience of every individual in the congregation. Having themselves once been in the same awkward position, they can relate to the confirmed one. Thus, the performance marks the moment when the confirmed one is authorized to speak sincerely and the congregation becomes obliged to intervene when necessary. (Keane 2002: 80–2)

This ritual is interesting in relation to Taussig's mimesis. As noticed by Keane (2002: 82), on one hand, the ritual can be seen to be putting the ideal of sincerity faithfully into conventions of Sumbanese interaction by combining bureaucratic rationality with sincerity. In order for a sincere speech to have any credibility in Sumba, it cannot be the sort of spontaneous outburst from the subjective realm customary to Protestantism. It needs to be put in the form of a public performative act so that it can be read as indexically efficacious. On the other hand, the confirmation can be seen also as being faithful to the doctrine of congregational discipline of Orthodox Dutch Calvinists. Keane claims that in a Weberian reading this is the logical consequence of liberal ideals and sincerity of speech. If the membership of the church is in no way obligatory, it becomes a subject to social negotiation, performed as public confessions in orthodox Calvinism. Ritual formality can be read as reflecting Protestant suspicions concerning strong emotions and the division between spiritual and material matters, stripping outer signs of their power to reflect internality. According to this interpretation, the seemingly contradictory combination of sincere speech and formality is not just a synthesis of 'traditional' and 'modern' Sumba.

Let us look into the tensions which arise between these interpretations. While both are respectable interpretations of the ritual, they reflect different approaches to a ritual, be they directed from within or from a more estranged perspective. But to what degree is this dichotomy legitimate? While the view from within perceives the religious meaning, it is also an optical interpretation in the sense that it rushes into

the religious meaning of the ritual and overlooks the meditative process of the material ritual context. It also neglects the role of the physiognomical familiarity of the performative structure of the ritual. While there is a danger of a reductionist reading associated with the estranged view, or rather the processual view, it is sensitive to the fine tunings of mediation, because it looks at it within the context. Also, because the optical view overlooks materiality, it risks taking the religious or spiritual agency for granted.

This risk associated with the optical arises from the idea of religion being ultimately something internal. As Asad stresses, the shift of emphasis from practice to belief does not imply a removal of outer materiality from religiosity, nor a disregard for the religious institutions. Rather, it has meant an increased emphasis on the *believing self* instead of the worshipping self in the self-interpretations of one's religious life. In practice, religious practice was still, necessarily, dependent on material social and institutional contexts (Asad 1993: 36). For religion and spirituality to be internal, they must be made internal. This is established following the idea of sincere speech. Here, Keane sees a suppressed link between the modernist view of language and things and the more theologically oriented view expressed by Protestant and other religious reformers: the value of freedom and abstraction lies, at least in part, in their offer of transcendence beyond the confinement of the social and material (Keane 2002: 83–4). The outer is there only for one's own sake, as an outer mirror of one's inner cosmos. Wilber's Integral Theory follows this logic faithfully.

Now, looking at Wilber's gnosis from this point of view, it can be defined as an inner experience that arises via a certain sincere enough alignment of social things, which is why it appears to be so immediate and unproblematic. However, because outer things are social, there's no sovereignty over these alignments. Hence, the alignment can alter in such a way that one finds the presence of things alienating. It becomes problematic, and subject to conscious estrangement. Its nature as materially mediated and socially conditioned is revealed. Yesterday's spirit turns into a Frankensteinian image that haunts the presence, where one seeks to locate oneself in a yet unproblematic epistemological position. Along this movement, the Frankensteinian image is transcendent and left to petrify into the sediments of history.

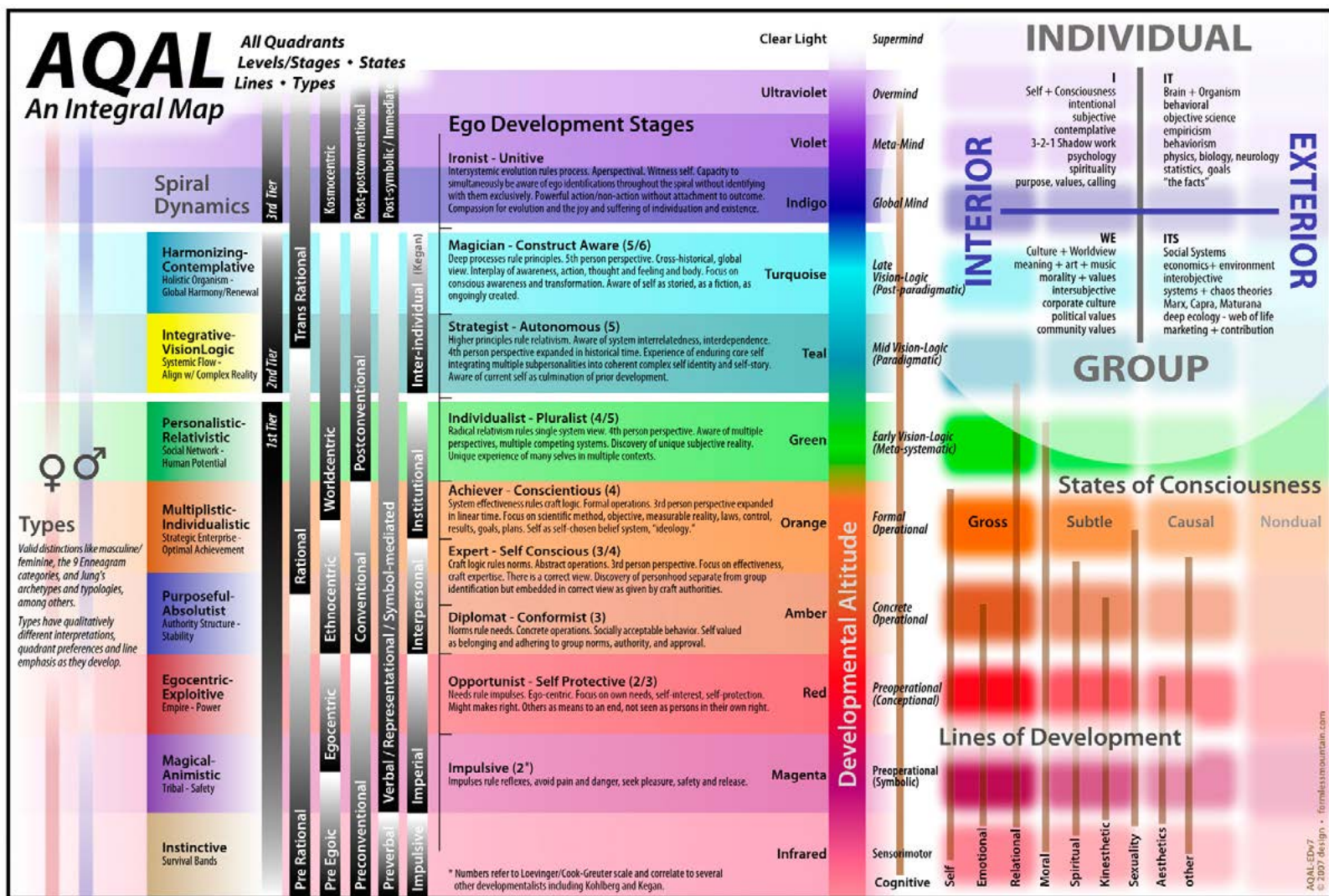
The AQAL model: the Great Mother of modernity

'Although it is impossible to change the world, it is always possible to change oneself instead.' This truism reveals central intuitions about modern magic. While it denies that the world can be changed outwardly, it encourages the same thing inwardly. Why is that? The reason is the same as that which motivated the emergence of the category of belief; a crisis of meaning. The postmodern world is defined by the emergence of knowledge that is rather fragmentary than coherent; what one can do but keep up with the pace and try to adapt and live along? We must reach out to each other. We must create 'common land' in order to solve ever emerging problems. This is the mimesis we do every day. Within this lies a seed of spirituality that Wilber so eagerly preaches.

The AQAL model, a diagram matrix of Wilber's view of the cosmos, shows the location of all things

in the cosmos. It situates all things *in relation* to each other. It has a place for external and internal things as well as for individual and complex things, but also for things in the past, present and future. It has all the things in cosmos put neatly into place. Despite its explanatory power, I don't think the explanatory function is key to Integral Theory. Rather, I think that Integral Theory facilitates the renewal of the spiritual connection between the inner and outer cosmos. It gives the necessary metapragmatic frames for spiritual quest and identity. But first, one needs to find oneself within the cosmos Wilber describes.

This is done by tapping into the already established realm of truths; scientific discourse. In a secular society, people are convinced by science. The burden of proof is associated with religious and spiritual institutes rather than with science. As James R. Lewis (2010) shows, scientific discourse has a charisma



The AQAL model: an Integral Map. integrallife.com.

that can legitimize religious and spiritual authority. Carrying the legacy of a positivistic era, science is commonly recognized as the source of truth and therefore appealing generally. For more educated people, science is also appealing because it is associated with rationality (Lewis 2010: 8–10). Wilber supports his claims not only by referring to spiritual traditions, but to numerous scholars with great philosophical and scientific prestige from wide range of fields, though most importantly from developmental psychology. Also, Wilber's work *A Brief History of Everything* (2001) no doubt benefits from the prestige of Stephen Hawking's Grand Unified Theory that he presented in his work *A Brief History of Time* (1988). Another proof of this is Wilber's affiliation with patterns and diagrams that he does not hesitate to use. The use of such diagrams indicates at whom Wilber is aiming his ideas. An ability to read diagrams is a privilege of educated people living in technologically advanced societies.

Once its potential for tapping into the truth is established, Integral Theory can work. For example, the AQAL model helps a person to locate and identify themselves and their problems. It helps to figure out the way to solve those problems via spiritual rebirth, which happens within one's subjective experience – termed 'the interpretive context' by Wilber. This is well presented in Wilber's Integral Semiotics which delineates a route of spiritual transformation (2014). I call the AQAL model, metaphorically, a portrait of the Great Mother of modernity, and the interpretive context of it as its mimetic womb *par excellence*. But as it, and Integral Theory in general, is a picture made of the most general features of the process on renewal, it lacks contextual sensitivity.

Its opticality is also the reason why engagement with Integral Theory can lead to a spiritual experience. Being a stable framework, it serves as a map for one's quest to find integrity in a reality that is complex, fragmentary and changing. Within a process of personal growth, the person *experiences* a change. But because the outer reality is still moving on and fragmenting, the change must have been internal. The AQAL model shows that it is a spiritual change.

The AQAL model and also such tools as the Kosmic Address and the Giga Glossary, work like magical fetishes. Like fetishes which are dressed up in things signifying vast amount of historical, local and contextual knowledge, these tools are also packed with information in simple ideational forms, purified

of contextual knowledge. This makes Integral Theory very convenient for contemporary capitalist technological societies. It can levitate above the material world, leaving the realm of materiality conveniently as the other, the Flatland, where non-spiritual actions can continue on their way. To put it another way, Integral Theory is based on the idea of a Saussurean sign following what Keane calls the representational economy of modernity that aligns with the idea of materiality as resource for capitalist economy and as such subordinate to human agency (Keane 2002: 71; 2003: 422).

The spirit of matter slips into Wilber's Integral Theory too. As Keane (2003) also stresses, the process of signification that the modern subject identifies symbolically, is in practice still based on indexical mediation (p. 411–17). We have already seen a similar tension in Wilber's gnosis that appears from within as immediate, transparent spiritual insight, but from the outside view as materially mediated and socially conditioned knowledge. Likewise, as my view of the AQAL model shows, Integral Theory and its tools utilizes the power of presence, which is the power of sensuous experience. While the sensuous power of fetish is consciously accepted, in Wilber's Integral Theory, this acceptance is more unconscious.

Conclusions

My findings support Steph Aupers' (2012) idea of an under theorized epistemological shift in the religious climate from (religious) belief to (spiritual) experience that he sees motivating an unexpected re-enchantment of a secular and capitalized modernity (340). It seems as if the experience of presence as yet uncategorized and unproblematized is a place where spiritual realities can emerge. That place is the litmus test of spirituality, and the result depends on how one interprets it, materially or spiritually. As my reading shows, the interpretation of such presence as spiritual depends on the way the external objects align. If they align properly, sincerely, they mediate spirituality, breaking down the boundary between inner and outer. But if they do not align properly, a realm of opaque and suspicious materialism appears.

This amounts to a set of political questions. This uncategorized presence is also the realm where religious, spiritual and scientific discourses all try to gain hegemony. Regarding this I want bring up the accusations of neglecting human values over capitalist

values which are directed at established sciences by so called 'fringe sciences' and perhaps in other ways around too. From the point of view of my analysis, it seems that the spiritualist view is inclined to take a rather optical view of things and while this view can be very sensitive to subjective *meanings of material things*, it lacks perspective on the social *meaning of the materiality of those things*. Of course, the established sciences are not flawless in this sense. From rather similar premises, Asad (1993) criticises symbolic anthropology as being in danger of putting too much weight on the self-representations of believing subjects (p. 30–48).

While my view of Integral Theory is rather critical, I want to stress its importance as revealing modern intuitions of agency and identity. The frontier where our agency breaks down is located where there are people we do not know or understand, cultures that are strange to us, things we respond to with suspicion. At these frontiers we see how our sincere beliefs shift into beliefs about other people's insincerity. This is the same colonial frontier where primitives fall into fetishism and idolatry and into the realm of materialist Flatland. This intuition tells that we seem to identify ourselves rather with spirituality than with materiality. This makes one wonder to what extent the concepts of identity and agency rely on the idea of the human being as something distinct from materiality, on an idea that is found in religious and spiritual traditions throughout milleniums. ■



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