

## Humanity's Relation to Gaia: Part of the Whole, or Member of the Community?

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One of the most important issues in contemporary environmental discourse concerns how to define humankind's relation to the non-human natural world. According to a number of environmental philosophers, modern Western humankind has often conceived of itself as dramatically other to, and far more valuable than, the non-human natural world. Modern humans define themselves as free *subjects* standing over against causally-determined *objects*, that is, the interlocking totality of phenomena in the non-human natural world. Sharply distinguishing between history (domain of freedom) and nature (domain of causal necessity), many moderns (capitalists and communists alike) have regarded non-human nature as nothing more than raw material for human purposes. According to John Locke and Karl Marx, value accrues to natural raw material only when humans mix with it their productive labour. Natural things, then, have no inherent or intrinsic value, but instead their value is determined primarily in terms of their use value, or of the price they fetch on the market. Viewing non-human nature in a wholly instrumental manner invites the kind of exploitation that has generated so many environmental problems, ranging from urban pollution to destruction of wildlife habitat.

Modernity has also spawned anti-anthropocentric trends, however. For example, neo-Darwinism depicts humans as evolving by natural processes, and ecosystem theory interprets humans (and other organisms) primarily in terms of systemic and thermodynamic

processes. According to these perspectives, far from standing apart from the natural domain, humans are wholly contained within it. Environmentalists have often turned to such scientific developments as a way of countering the anthropocentric trends in modernity. Arne Naess has been a serious student of modernity, in both its anthropocentric and anti-anthropocentric guises. Concerned about anthropogenic environmental problems, he has urged people to begin asking deeper questions about the humankind-nature relationship. Do humans stand above and apart from nature, as its lord and master? Are people (and other species) parts of nature, strands in the web of life? Or are people members of the biospheric community? Those deep ecologists who conceive of humans as one strand among many in the biospheric web, seek to displace the hierarchical notion that humans stand atop a ladder of evolutionary development, because such a hierarchical scheme has been used to justify modernity's exploitative treatment of non-human nature. Many deep ecologists propose a kind of naturalism, which denies any human exceptionalism and which asks that humans humbly recognize and appreciate their status as one interesting species among millions of others.

Some deep ecologists go even further, suggesting that we regard humans as organs of the ecosystems that contain them as parts. Allegedly, such ecosystems are more real and more valuable than individual persons. I understand the attraction of regarding Gaia as a kind of superorganism, of which humans are ingredients, parts, or organs. I also am well aware of drawbacks to this view. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, I began to read Martin Heidegger's philosophy as theoretical basis for deep ecology.<sup>1</sup> In the late 1980s, however, new disclosures about the extent to which Heidegger's thought was consistent with elements of National Socialism led me to reconsider not only the Heidegger-deep ecology link, but also efforts by some deep ecologists to regard humankind as merely organs of Gaia.<sup>2</sup> National Socialism was in some respects a "green" movement, which promulgated far-reaching environmental protection laws. National Socialism, alas, also defined human beings in terms of racist biological categories, and emphasized that in its bitter struggle for survival, the German *Volk* would have to sacrifice individual persons for the good of the social whole, of which persons were merely parts. Calls for individual rights and freedoms were dismissed as instances of bourgeois subjectivity and selfishness. As an authoritarian social-biological holism, National Socialism was in some regards a kind of ecofascism.<sup>3</sup> Concern about ecofascism has subsequently led me to critically examine attempts by environmental theorists to depict humans as parts

of the biosphere, or strands in Gaia. The present essay concerns one such attempt.

In this journal, the late Stan Rowe—a deep-ecologically oriented ecologist—published “Transcending this Poor Earth—à la Ken Wilber,”<sup>4</sup> in which he criticized the developmental, hierarchical, and allegedly anthropocentric aspects of Ken Wilber’s book *A Brief History of Everything*.<sup>5</sup> According to Rowe, we ought to conceive of Gaia as at least analogous to (if not literally as) a living cell, of which humans (and other organisms) are constituent parts or organs. Contesting this kind of approach, Wilber claims that it unwittingly helps to justify authoritarian socio-political regimes that would sacrifice individuals for the good of the eco-social whole. The issue of how to define humanity’s place in terrestrial nature leads me to raise the following questions: Can humankind be defined in a way that (a) adequately takes into account the remarkable differences between humans and other animals (differences that include the linguistic competence that makes science possible) and (b) avoids depicting everything other than humans as having value only as instruments to enhance human power and security? Can humankind be a member of the biosphere, even while also transcending it as a member of the noosphere? Is it possible to regard humans as standing high on the terrestrial holarchy, while also insisting that such standing, far from legitimating abusive and thoughtless treatment of non-human life, calls on humankind to respect the biosphere and its constituent members? Wilber’s work, in my view, allows us to give affirmative answers to all these questions. In the confines of an essay, I cannot elaborate Wilber’s complex position. Instead, I will focus on how he would evaluate critically Rowe’s proposal that humans be regarded as parts contained volumetrically in the terrestrial whole called Gaia. First, however, I need to discuss the complex part-whole relations involved in holons, a concept that both Rowe and Wilber find very useful.

According to Arthur Koestler, who coined the term “holon,” reality is composed of hierarchical levels, each of which has its own structural uniformities that cannot be reduced to structures of lower-level phenomena. Holarchy is the term used to describe a hierarchy constituted by holons. Koestler argues that any holon has three different dimensions: first, it is a whole in its own right; second, it is composed of parts whose behaviour is significantly subordinated to those of the holon in question; third, the holon is a part of and is in important ways controlled by a more embracing or inclusive whole, that is, a holon at the next hierarchical level.<sup>6</sup> Rowe notes that the holon

is a whole to its parts below, and it is a part to the whole above. Reality consists of relational holons, not separate “things.” The concept, a good one, dissolves the antagonism in science between reductionism and holism, for reduction is a way of understanding that moves downward in holarchies while holism is the upward view.<sup>7</sup>

Koestler developed a pyramidal model of cosmic hierarchy, with vast numbers of holons (sub-atomic particles) at the bottom level, while each succeeding higher level—atoms, molecules, organelles, cells, tissues, organs, organ system, and the organism—has fewer instances. Although affirming the usefulness of this nested hierarchy for describing the structure of organisms, Rowe contends that Koestler pushed the model beyond its proper limits, by accepting it “as the template for organic development and evolution, for animal locomotion and behaviour, for linguistics, and for human societies past and present.”<sup>8</sup> Rowe contends, wrongly in my view, that Wilber accepted “Koestler’s grab-bag of holons and holarchies,” in a way that led him to “link non-homologous holarchies” and allow the rules that fit only one kind of holarchy to “uncritically be accepted as legitimate for all holarchies.”<sup>9</sup>

In discussing James K. Feibleman’s “laws of the levels,” Rowe mentions other problems posed by generalizing organic (nested) hierarchy beyond their appropriate application.<sup>10</sup> For instance, with regard to Feibleman’s first law, “Each level organizes the one below it plus one emergent quality,” Rowe maintains that it applies to the nested hierarchy constituting organisms, but writes that “The idea gets hazy when applied to sociological groupings such as family, tribe, ethnic group, societies with division of labour, and nation . . .”<sup>11</sup> According to Rowe’s restatement of Feibleman’s fourth law, each organic level has some autonomy, but is also an integral part of and thus constrained by the higher level. “The integrative tendency of each holon must overrule its self-assertive tendency if the whole organism is to maintain its health.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, the parts of an organism—for example, its cells or organs—must serve the interests of the whole organism. Rowe then goes on to acknowledge explicitly the dangers posed by authoritarian social systems, which treat individual persons as mere parts of organs. Overriding the self-assertive tendency, he writes, “is dangerous when applied to sociological systems [which Wilber will call social holons] for it can be used, as Medawar foresaw, *to justify subjugation of the individual to the totalitarian state.*”<sup>13</sup> Later on, however, as we will see, Rowe invites such totalitarianism by defining human beings as subservient parts of the supra-organism, Earth, which is held to be more valuable than they are.

As Rowe notes, Wilber holds that “each emergent holon transcends but includes its predecessors, and evolution is a process of transcend and include.”<sup>14</sup> For Wilber, planetary evolution moves from *physiosphere* (material-physical domain) to *biosphere* (ecosystems and member organisms) to *noosphere* (level at which interiority emerges for individuals and their corresponding cultures). Just as the biosphere transcends and includes the physiosphere, so too the noosphere transcends and includes the biosphere. At this point, in *A Brief History of Everything*, Wilber makes one his most provocative and misunderstood passages, which Rowe cites: “the biosphere is literally internal to us, is part of our being.”<sup>15</sup> Such arguments,” writes Rowe, “assume the same kind of structural organization in physical, biological, and mental categories.”<sup>16</sup> Although Wilber in fact emphasizes the differences among the “structural organization” of physiosphere, biosphere, and noosphere, Rowe insists this allegedly false structural homology, “when teamed up with [Wilber’s] Platonic philosophy, provide the bootstraps by which Wilber’s system lifts all reality into aspects of consciousness on their way to pure Spirit.” Rowe continues:

. . . the conclusion that such common-sense phenomena as the physiosphere and biosphere—the Earth realities of air-water-landscapes in which humans live, move, and have their being—are interior, structural parts of the mind-noosphere can only ring true for dedicated idealists.”<sup>17</sup>

Rowe’s criticism would have some validity, if by “transcend and include” Wilber means that higher levels are physically larger and contain prior levels volumetrically, as in the case of Chinese boxes. Fortunately, however, Wilber does not adhere to such a containment scheme. In his views, landscapes and biota are not interior to and/or reducible to states of human consciousness! The Mississippi River is not literally the “stream of thought,” nor is Mount Everest a figment of the collective (and delusional) human imagination.

What stands in the way of understanding Wilber’s point is the complex logic pertaining to parts and wholes, a logic that must be understood in order to avoid the very kind of authoritarianism against which Rowe himself warns. What does Wilber mean by saying that the physiosphere is part of every member of the biosphere? Surely, a single mouse cannot volumetrically contain the Earth’s crust, oceans, and atmosphere! In *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*,<sup>18</sup> Wilber says that *all* physiosphere holons exist in intricate networks of relational exchange with all the other holons at the physiosphere level of structural organization. As a very simplified model for depicting the relation between physiosphere and biosphere holons, Wilber uses a checker analogy with physiosphere holons as black (level one) checkers and the biosphere holons as red

(level two) checkers. The red, second level biospheric checkers stand atop the black, first level physiosphere checkers, because the red checkers add a *new dimension* to a cosmos previously constituted solely by black, physiosphere checkers. Wilber states that the red holons embrace the black holons, but also go beyond them.

Since the red-and-black checker depends for its existence on its own component black checkers, and since the black checkers themselves depend ultimately for their particular type of existence on all the other black checkers in *their* universe, then any level 2 holon in essence embraces *all* of its level 1 world by simple virtue of its own compound individuality.<sup>19</sup>

It is precisely because physiosphere holons are *wholly* interrelated that Wilber can make the claim that the physiosphere is a part of any organism, even if the organism itself is composed of such an apparently tiny amount of the totality of physiosphere matter. Wilber's point is that the physiosphere is a basic building block of the organism, but the organism is not a basic building block of the physiosphere. One could say that the physiological/material aspect of the organism is a part of the physiosphere, but in effect this is merely a tautological assertion. What is specifically new to the organism, namely, the fact that it is alive, cannot be part of the physiosphere, without the physiosphere taking on a dimension that does not belong to it. The physiosphere is more *fundamental* than and arose *before* the biosphere. Take away the physiosphere, and all organisms disappear, too. The organic or living dimension of the organism is not a part of the physiosphere, however, not only because the physiosphere lacks the phenomenon of life, but also because the biosphere is not foundational to the physiosphere. Hence, take away all organisms, and the physiosphere would remain, indeed, would retain its original matter/energy.

The biosphere is a part of noospheric beings like ourselves in the sense that we are in one respect organic beings, constituted by living flesh and blood. Organic life is wholly interrelated, as evidenced by universally shared DNA and by hundreds of millions of years of intertwined evolutionary processes. Humans are not only organic beings, however. Humans are also *noospheric* beings. To represent this fact, another layer of checkers—green—must be added to the black and red ones. The noosphere transcends the biosphere, in the sense that consciousness (including animal consciousness) involves emergent properties that cannot be reduced to physiospheric or biospheric properties. Insofar as a human being is an organic being, it contains as a part of itself the whole of interrelated terrestrial life. Without the biosphere, the noosphere would not have emerged in the first place. Were the biosphere to vanish today, so would the noosphere, because biosphere

is the *foundation* for noosphere. If you destroy all organelles, you destroy everything above that level, including cells, organisms, biotic ecosystems, that is, the entire biosphere, but molecules and atoms, along with social holons such as stars and planets, remain unscathed. Far from being an “idealist” in Rowe’s derogatory sense, Wilber agrees with many other scientists that conscious experience (noosphere) *depends on* the physical and organic domains, even though noosphere cannot be wholly explained in terms of or reduced to those domains. There is no furtive “idealism” here, no attempt to reduce physical and organic phenomena to mental states.

Noospheric-level beings, including all mammals, are characterized by greater interiority and thus have greater depth than biospheric-level beings. Because of its enormously complex brain, a kangaroo has a far more intensively developed interiority or “world space” than does a bush in the outback. By failing to take into account the depth dimension or interiority of phenomena under consideration, environmentalists and many scientists alike often propose holarchies based on size alone. Bigger, then, is somehow higher on the hierarchy. Neglecting to consider the interior aspect of phenomena leads to what Wilber calls a “flatland” ontology, which amounts to a reductionist materialism claiming that phenomena possess only exteriors. If Wilber is right, interior depth increases through evolutionary processes, with noospheric beings containing the greatest depth and, for that reason, the greatest concentration of value. Foundational for noospheric beings are the physiosphere and biosphere, which have greater span. There are far more atoms in the universe than molecules, many more molecules than cells, and many more cells than organisms. As depth increases, span decreases.

Because the *size* of the biosphere is so much greater than the whole human species, much less a single human being, some readers may understandably resist the assertion that the biosphere is *part of* the noosphere. As *physical* beings, humans are mere “parts” of the biosphere, which is, after all, literally composed of atoms and molecules, including those found in human bodies. In *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, however, Wilber states:

The human compound individual is not a part of the biosphere. Rather, a *part of* the human compound individual [that is, the non-living physical aspect] is a *part of* the biosphere, and the biosphere itself is a *part of* the noosphere.”<sup>20</sup>

As organisms, humans are *not* parts of the biosphere, however, because *individual* holons (organisms) relate to same-level *social* holons (their biotic ecosystem or *Umwelt*) as *members* that are in constant interchange with the ecosystem and with the other organic beings that

help to constitute the ecosystem. Such exchange relations are absolutely crucial for survival and growth.

Compound individual holons, which are most consistent with the laws proposed by Feibleman and Koestler, have a relatively centred agency and autonomy. By comparison, social holons have a distributed or nexus-agency, that is, they are not truly individual.<sup>21</sup> A social holon lacks “a locus of self-prehension, a unity feeling *as* a oneness. In more general terms, it lacks a locus of individual self-being . . . the parts in this social system [the State] are conscious, but the ‘whole’ is not.”<sup>22</sup> An individual holon exists *inseparably* from its social environment, but “to the degree that we can reasonably recognize [its own particular form or pattern], we will refer to an *individual holon*.”<sup>23</sup> For example, an ecosystem arises with and provides the evolutionary-developmental context for organisms that live in that ecosystem. Social holons display a whole/part pattern, are rule-bound, can be thought to develop (as in stellar or ecosystem evolution), and “can function with various degrees of upward and downward causation,” depending on their depth.<sup>24</sup> Wilber admits that some social holons, such as ant colonies, behave as if they were superorganisms, but he resists describing

a social holon, such as the State, as being literally a superorganism, because all organisms have priority over their components, and yet with the rise of democratic structures, we like to think that the State is subservient to the people, and *to the degree that* [the latter] *is true*, then the social system is not a true organism (it is a social or environmental holon).<sup>25</sup>

Holons always involve agency-in-communion. Macroscopic structures become environments for microscopic ones, and every system is linked with its environment by circular processes. The micro, for example, the organism, is always in relational exchange with the macro, for example, the biome composing the social holon of which the organism is a member. Whereas the organs of an organism (a compound individual holon) are *parts* of it and thus under its general control, the organisms in an ecosystem are *members* of it and not parts of it, because they are not under such strict control, because the complexity of organisms confers on them a relatively high degree of autonomy, and because ecosystem-organism are correlative aspects of the biosphere. The ecosystem is not more “fundamental” than the organisms within it, because organisms and ecosystem mutually influence and constitute one another. Humans achieve such a degree of relative autonomy that, as noospheric beings, they can try to *dissociate* themselves from the biosphere, as in otherworldly religiosity or mind-body dualism.<sup>26</sup>

According to Wilber, greater interior depth is achieved in individual holons as they develop from atoms to organisms. Moreover, the size of



individual holons involved *tends* to grow larger (although there are some exceptions, e.g., some molecules are larger than some cells), but, in this process, span decreases. Hence, there are far fewer organisms than atoms, and organisms have much greater depth than atoms. As social holons, such as galactic clusters, galaxies, solar systems, and planets evolve ecosystems and *biotic* ecosystems, size tends to decrease, depth increases, and span tends to increase, but is variable. For instance, with regard to span we may postulate that Earth started out with one ecosystem, but gradually developed a certain number more over the eons. Here, ecosystem span would have increased, but there would remain only *one* planet Earth as the lower-level social holon in which a number of more developed social holons could evolve. Earth, prior to the emergence of life, had less depth and thus less significance than today's Earth. A holarchy based on increasing size alone proves tenable only by (a) ignoring depth and thus significance, and (b) by ignoring the distinction between individual and social holons.

Occasionally, Wilber seems to condition his view that individual holons, such as humans, cannot be considered "parts" of a more inclusive social whole. In fact, individual humans often behave as if they were little more than role-players in powerful social systemic processes. Without considering the first-person experience of such individuals, however, we cannot legitimately conclude that behavioural analysis provides an adequate characterization of what goes on in and for the lives of individual persons. Wilber's legitimate concern is that very destructive consequences have ensued from polities (such as Stalinist Marxism or National Socialism) that depict individual humans as nothing more than *organs* of the state. Tomorrow's eco-fascists (or eco-communists) would ignore the agency aspect of individual human holons, and would overemphasize instead the communal aspect. Survival of the social collective, so we would be told, requires that individuals sacrifice themselves and their personal interests to the good of the superorganism of which all life is merely an expression. If Wilber's view is right, the fearless leader of an emergent eco-fascist state would be at best misguided in claiming that he is merely the mouthpiece, or the servant of the biological whole whose interests are threatened by selfish human behaviour. Arguably, both biotic ecosystems and the totality of such ecosystems lack the centred interiority or "consciousness" required to generate a perspective at all, much less one that the fearless leader would claim to be channelling. Critical analysis would be required to reveal what specific individuals and groups would be served by organizing society according to the dictates of an eco-fascist leader.

The difficulties involved in sorting out a cosmic holarchy are legion. Wilber indicates that many noted thinkers, including Karl Popper and Irvin Laszlo, subscribe to a version of the following hierarchy, which confuses individual and social holons.<sup>27</sup> (Note: I have inserted “organisms” in the list for clarification.)

Biosphere  
Society/Nation  
Culture/Subculture  
Community  
Family  
Personal Nervous System  
[Organisms]  
Organs/Organ Systems  
Tissues  
Cells  
Organelles  
Molecules  
Atoms  
Subatomic Particles

Insofar as higher hierarchical levels depend on lower levels, which are their parts, this hierarchy is deeply problematic. For one thing, it mixes up individual and social holons, thereby raising some of concerns that Rowe voices. For another, if this holarchy describes (as it seems to do) the sequential stages in which its various levels formed, then biosphere should emerge more or less simultaneously with cells, not billions of years later, after the emergence of human nations! The biosphere does not *depend* on human societies and cultures for its existence; they are not *foundational* for it. One can imagine that the human species will become extinct, but this event would *not* destroy the biosphere. Destroying the biosphere, however, would surely annihilate humankind. As Wilber puts it, the biosphere is shallower (less complex than), but *more fundamental* than human societies. The distinction between individual (micro) and social (macro) holon should not lead one to conclude that the macro is on a higher level than the micro. Instead, individual and social “are two aspects of the same thing, not two fundamentally different things (or levels).”<sup>28</sup> Hence, an ecosystem “isn’t a *particular* level among other levels of individual holarchy, but

the *social* environment of *each* and *every* level of individuality in the biosphere.”<sup>29</sup> Corresponding to each individual organic holon, then, is an environmental or social holon in which the individual participates and on whose existence the individual holon depends.

According to Erich Jantsch, the first biotic ecosystem was composed of the individual holons of prokaryotic cells. Hence, biosphere cannot be the *final* hierarchical level, because biosphere (that is, the biotic ecosphere) already emerged hundreds of millions of years ago along with prokaryotic cells. Ever since, the biosphere (social holon) has been *co-evolving* with life forms, including individual organisms/species.<sup>30</sup> Today’s biosphere has conditioned and has been conditioned by the totality of organisms that are members of it. The interior complexity of the noospheric human individual is founded on the biosphere, and the organic aspect of humans has constant interchanges with the biosphere, but neither the individual’s interiority, nor the culture of which the individual is a member, can rightly be regarded as part of the biosphere.

Taking the foregoing into account, we conclude that value-considerations help to answer the question, “Is the biosphere or the noosphere primary?” Wilber maintains that there are three value domains: ground, extrinsic, and intrinsic value. In terms of ground value, neither the biosphere nor the noosphere is primary. Instead, each is of equal value as a manifestation of Spirit. Spirit refers both to the ultimate source of all phenomena and to that which acts as the ultimate lure (attractor) to cosmic development, which seems to involve the emergence of ever more inclusive wholes. In terms of extrinsic value, however, the biosphere is primary because it is more *fundamental*: if one were to destroy the biosphere, one would also destroy the noosphere (conscious domain including at least mammals). On the other hand, *all* humans can be destroyed at no cost to the biosphere. Thus, the biosphere is primary, and this means that the biosphere is part of us. Remove it and we don’t exist. The noosphere is not internal to (a part of) the biosphere, however, because if it were, the biosphere wouldn’t work without us. But the opposite is true: Humans (and other mammals) don’t work without the biosphere. Hence, the biosphere is “part of” us. Many environmentalists intuit all this, but they often confuse what is most *fundamental* and thus has greater span (Gaia/biosphere) for what is most *significant* or has greater depth (noosphere), that is, what has the most intrinsic value. According to Wilber’s holarchy, because noospheric beings, including humans, have such enormous depth, they have greater intrinsic value than non-noospheric life forms. Wilber’s views here largely overlap with those of Holmes Rolston III, one of the world’s leading environmental

philosophers.<sup>31</sup> Greater levels of interiority do not justify heedless exploitation of levels with less developed interiority.

According to Rowe, Wilber “depreciates the physical and natural” and “cannot conceive any other source of values” apart from humankind.<sup>32</sup>

In fact, as we saw earlier, Wilber asserts that *everything* has some basic ground value, quite apart from any interest humans may have in it.

Moreover, Wilber affirms that *all* phenomena—living and non-living—have a worldspace of their own, however constricted it may be. People should honour the perspectives afforded by such worldspaces.

Ultimately this would require a measure of respect for *all* phenomena, from rocks to humans, from galactic clusters to ecosystems. Movement toward this dramatically non-anthropocentric view, however, first requires development of world-centrism, that is, mutual understanding among *humans*. A genuinely planet-centred perspective, which may emerge in the distant future, would eventually combine ecocentrism with world-centrism.

Rowe affirms ecocentrism and at one point resists social authoritarianism, but his suspicion of anthropocentrism leads him to affirm a politically problematic (though common) logic of part-whole relations. Rowe states that a “logical ecological holarchy follows the simple principle of containment, viz., each level in the sequence is enveloped as a physical volumetric part by the next higher level.”<sup>33</sup> As in nested Chinese boxes, Rowe states, “each higher level is the environment of those below.”<sup>34</sup> After agreeing with Wilber’s nesting hierarchy for compound individual holons (molecules are parts of cells, cells are parts of organs, etc.), Rowe parts company with Wilber by stating that organisms:

*are parts of geographic ecosystems, which are parts of the ecosphere.* Each higher level is the environment or “field” of the ones below, and each lower level is a functional part of the levels above. Note that in this sequence human organisms appear as one among many species-parts of the sectoral ecosystem that Earth comprises. Humans are made from and sustained by the living Planet. Physically and mentally they are Earthlings. Truly they are marvellous creatures, but not the be-all and end-all of creation.<sup>35</sup>

Wilber would certainly agree that humans, considered as organisms, are one species among many in the biosphere, are marvellous, and are not the be-all and end-all of creation. Wilber maintains, however, that humans are not only organisms, but are also noospheric or conscious beings. Such consciousness, however, whether human or animal, has no *simple location* in the sensory-motor world. Hence, neither consciousness nor culture can be “contained” within a three-dimensional volumetric framework. True enough, the brain that

correlates with consciousness *does* have such a location, and in some respects the societies that correlate with cultures (norms, values, philosophies, and so on) do have locations. Because human interiors (both individual and cultural) are not spatially locatable, however, and because the noosphere (consciousness) both includes and transcends the biosphere, humans cannot be adequately described as “part of” the biosphere. Human (and other organic forms of) awareness is *founded* on the biosphere and physiosphere, but cannot be *reduced* to them.

Rowe believes that greater external complexity combined with greater size and greater systemic inclusiveness justify the assertion that Earth, the ecosphere, includes humans as component parts. He calls on Feibleman’s fourth “law of the levels,” according to which the mechanism of any organization lies at the level below, and its purpose at the level above. Apparently, phenomena have no value in themselves, but only insofar as they serve the purpose of what is higher, that is, what “contains” them. Some elements of this claim hold with regard to the cells and organs of an organism, but Rowe and others go astray by maintaining that organisms are nothing but parts of ecosystems, rather than members thereof. If the purpose and value of individual humans are to serve the good of Earth’s all-containing ecosystems, humans—like other organisms—are organs of Gaia.

[T]he function of any given sectoral ecosystem of Earth can be learned by inspecting the interactions of its parts, which are organisms (including people), landforms, soil, air, water. Ascending the holarchy, the *purpose* of each holon is revealed in the context of that which encloses it. Thus the role of the heart is to maintain the animal organism in health. The niche of the animal is to play its part in maintaining the ecosystem’s integrity. Here is a clue to the role, niche, or purpose of the intelligent human animal in the context of Earth’s ecosystems and of Earth itself. Humans, like all holons, ought to act in ways that maintain the health and integrity of the higher-level holons—the regional geographic ecosystems and the ecosphere—in which they are encapsulated.<sup>56</sup>

In another essay published in *The Trumpeter*, “From Shallow to Deep Ecological Philosophy,” Rowe reinforces his point: “*Earth before organisms. Ecosystems before people.*”<sup>37</sup> Rowe acknowledges that some will ask whether the “the holarchy that places Earth above people [is] just another path to totalitarianism, to ecofascism?” Concern about ecofascism, we are told, arises from individualists and humanists who assume that “only people possess high intelligence, are important, and loved by God.” Fascism, Rowe correctly points out, is a human institution, not a natural one. Even though it is “ecological reality” that “Humans as Earthlings *are* subservient to the Earth,” “Earth’s ecosystems express no dictatorial decrees as to human behaviour.”

Humans are free to pursue whatever reckless and self-destructive paths they want.

Earth generally shows humans the folly of their ways slowly, *her* responses presented as lessons to be learned. Whether Earth is recognized as humanity's body/mind/spirit source and support, and whether or not people act responsibly on that knowledge is their choice.<sup>38</sup>

By regarding humans as parts included within the ever-higher levels of bioregion and ecosphere, Rowe states that we “shift from navel-gazing homocentrism to Earth-venerating ecocentrism. Matched with Earth's beauty, this [Earth's creative capacity?] is a transcendence that Camus . . . would approve.”<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, a hierarchy based on volumetric containment could be made compatible with such a repressive social regime, leaders of which could readily couch in Earth-venerating terms the necessity that some humans sacrifice themselves (or be sacrificed, in case they are selfishly unwilling to do so on their own) for the “higher good.”

Rowe's provocative essay provides opportunities for environmentalists to rethink their views about part/whole relations among individuals and systems. Although I have criticized Rowe's position, I want to acknowledge his attempt to make sense of humanity's relation to the wider world, with the aim of encouraging humankind to treat physiosphere and biosphere/organisms with respect, not only because they have moral status but also because humankind depends on them for its very survival. Wilber, too, sympathizes with those like Rowe who are trying to construct wider and wider wholes, more integrative contexts to help people orient themselves—morally, emotionally, cognitively, spiritually—in the larger scheme of things. By thinking that what has more span is not only more fundamental than, but also has more significance than what has greater depth, however, and by conceiving of humans as parts of (and as less significant than) the ecosphere, Rowe tends to align himself with the regressive tendency of some deep ecologists. As I have argued elsewhere, deep ecology can be interpreted in a progressive way, one that is generally consistent with Wilber's point of view.<sup>40</sup> I encourage deep ecologists to regard Wilber as an ally in their attempt to characterize the humanity-nature relationship in a comprehensive manner.<sup>41</sup> Alas, because of Stan Rowe's untimely death, I will not be able to engage him in a dialogue about this possibility.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> See my essays, “Marx and Heidegger on the Technological Domination of Nature,” *Philosophy Today*, XXIII (Summer, 1979), 99–112, and “Toward a Heideggerian Ethos for Radical Environmentalism,” *Environmental Ethics*, V (Summer, 1983), 99–131; “Implications of Heidegger’s Thought for Deep Ecology,” *The Modern Schoolman*, LXIV (November, 1986), 19–43.

<sup>2</sup> See my essays, “The Thorn in Heidegger’s Side: The Question of National Socialism,” *The Philosophical Forum*, XX (Summer, 1989), 326–365; “The Future of Ecology,” in *After Earth Day*, edited by Max Oeschlaeger, (Denton: University of North Texas, 1992); “Rethinking the Heidegger—Deep Ecology Relationship,” *Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Fall, 1993), 195–224.

<sup>3</sup> See my essay, “Ecofascism: An Enduring Temptation,” *Environmental Philosophy*, fourth edition, ed. Michael Zimmerman, et al., (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004), 390–408.

<sup>4</sup> Stan Rowe, “Transcending this Poor Earth—à la Ken Wilber,” *The Trumpeter*, Vol. 17, no. 1 (2001), available on-line at: <http://trumpeter.athabascau.ca/content/v17.1/rowe.html>. Pagination refers to pages as they printed out on my computer. No page breaks are indicated on the internet version.

<sup>5</sup> Ken Wilber, *A Brief History of Everything* (Boston: Shambhala, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Koestler, *The Ghost in the Machine*, Danube edition (London: Hutchinson, 1976), originally published in 1967.

<sup>7</sup> Rowe 2001, 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> James K. Feibleman, “Theory of Integrative Levels,” *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, V., no. 17 (1959), 59–66.

<sup>11</sup> Rowe 2001, 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 6

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Wilber 2000a, 38, cited in Rowe 2001.

<sup>16</sup> Rowe 2001, 9.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Ken Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution* 2d, rev. ed. Volume Six, *The Collected Works of Ken Wilber*. (Boston: Shambhala, 2000b), p. 97.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 383)

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 71–72.



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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 87–88.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>30</sup> Erich Jantsch, *The Self-Organizing Universe* (Oxford and New York: Pergamon Press, 1980, especially chapters eight, nine, and ten.

<sup>31</sup> Holmes Rolston III, *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988). See also Charles Birch and John B. Cobb, Jr., *The Liberation of Life: From the Cell to the Community* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>32</sup> Rowe 2001, 11.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>37</sup> Stan Rowe, “From Shallow to Deep Ecological Philosophy,” *The Trumpeter*, Vol. 13, no. 1 (1996), available at: <http://trumpeter.athabascau.ca/content/v13.1/>

<sup>38</sup> Rowe 2001, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Michael E. Zimmerman, *Contesting Earth’s Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>41</sup> My thanks for Sean Hargens, Stan Salthe, and Ken Wilber for suggestions that improved earlier versions of this essay. Remaining shortcomings are, of course, my responsibility.