

Ontology, Values, and Pluralism

Holons or Gestalts? A Response to Wilber and Zimmerman

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Explanation is reductive, not comprehensive; most of the time, when you explain something, you discover leftovers. An explanation is a bucket, not a well.

– Wendell Berry, *Life Is a Miracle*

Introduction

How one characterizes humankind’s relation to nature is the result of, among other things, the ontology one adopts. There are many ontologies; this paper focuses on one that has fostered an ongoing debate in the pages of the *Trumpeter*. Both Stan Rowe and Michael Zimmerman have commented on Ken Wilber’s concept of “holonic ecology.”¹ It is not surprising that Rowe, an eminent field ecologist, was particularly troubled by Wilber’s insistence that all reality is holons. Zimmerman attempted to rescue the concept from Rowe’s alleged misinterpretation.

Both Rowe and Wilber offer reflections on the relationship between parts and wholes, particularly as it applies to the human-nature relationship. But there is a critical difference between things that are considered parts and those that are considered the wholes. Wilber claims that humans, as holons, transcend and include all of nature, and

that nature is therefore a part of humankind. Rowe, on the other hand, claims that we are volumetrically contained within ecosystems and are therefore part of nature. Rowe's position, Zimmerman has cautioned, must be abandoned because it denies humanity's uniqueness and *may* (inadvertently) promote ecofascism. Wilber's theory of holons, according to Zimmerman, allows humans to be members of the biospheric community while still acknowledging our superior position on the evolutionary scale.²

The central point of divergence between Rowe and Wilber is whether humans are *in* nature or nature is *in* humans. Wilber's "complex logic pertaining to parts and wholes"³ leads him to conclude that all of nature is in the mental/spiritual dimensions of human beings. Rowe adopts a more phenomenologically based ontology, one which prioritizes concrete experience over abstract models. Arne Naess is aligned with Rowe in the sense that human beings are understood as "in, of, and for Nature from our very beginning."⁴ The gestalt ontology favoured by Naess provides a rich philosophical foundation for Rowe's view.

It is important to note that all of these commentators—Rowe, Wilber, Naess, and Zimmerman—appear to be in basic agreement on at least one fundamental ontological conviction: that all life is one. Yet, ontology is perhaps the most contentious issue with Wilber, who forces the topic unnecessarily with his intolerance of views that do not acknowledge that the world is, ultimately, transcended and embraced by pure Spirit. Naess has the wisdom to acknowledge that all ontology is problematic and he does not exempt gestalt ontology.⁵ There is no need for Wilber to be so insistent. The slogan "all life is one" provides a good common starting point. But it is considered an advantage that there is a diversity of ways to interpret this important insight.

Rowe, Naess, Wilber, Zimmerman—each is grappling with some of the very deepest concerns regarding life, the cosmos, and reality. They should be applauded for debating these issues and for making them relevant to environmental philosophy.

Wilber: All Reality Is Holons

The concept of holons is non-negotiable for Wilber, as evidenced in this passage from *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*:

Reality is not composed of things or processes; it is not composed of atoms or quarks; it is not composed of wholes nor does it have any parts. Rather, it is composed of whole/parts, or holons.

This is true of atoms, cells, symbols, ideas. They can be understood neither as things nor processes, neither as wholes nor parts, but only as simultaneous whole/parts, so that the standard ‘atomistic’ and ‘wholistic’ attempts are both way off the mark. There is nothing that isn’t a holon.⁶

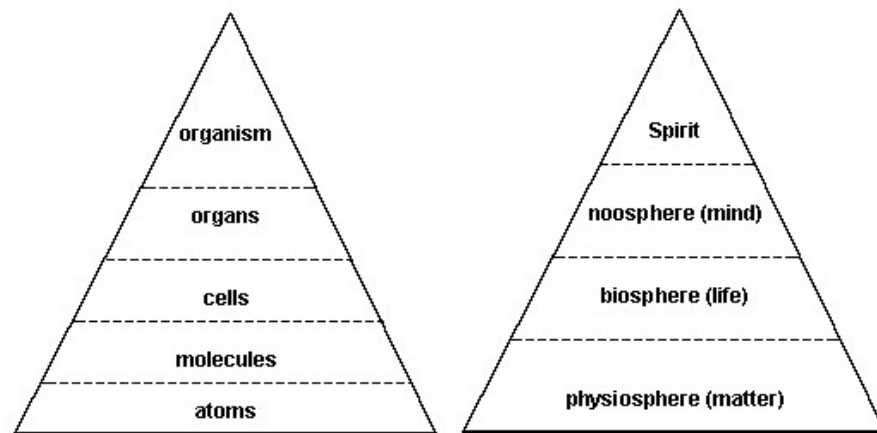
Inspired by general systems theory, Arthur Koestler chose the anatomical arrangement of the organism as the dominant pattern of structural uniformity between all levels of reality. Rowe contends, however, that while useful, the concept has a limited range of applicability; carried too far, the abstract concept loses meaning by reducing the uniqueness among the rich diversity of types of systems.

[Koestler’s] schematic representation took the form of a pyramid or inverted tree, the broad base comprising many sub-atomic particles, merged at the next higher level into fewer atoms, these into fewer molecules, these into organelles, cells, tissues, organs, organ systems, and at the top of the holarchy, the organism. Each level or holon is a whole to the parts below, and a part of the whole above. . . . This simple biological “tree diagram”—a useful abstraction of the organism’s anatomy composed of parts within parts within parts—was then imprudently extrapolated to include psychological and social/cultural phenomena.⁷

Wilber does find Koestler’s model of “transcend and include” quite convenient, seeing the entire universe as holons evolving toward increasingly complex holons ever since the so-called Big Bang. After matter (the physiosphere) came into existence, *depth* was added when matter had complexified enough to sustain life here on Earth; the biosphere had transcended but included its predecessor. Gradually as mind evolved from life yet another level of depth, the noosphere, transcended but included the biosphere (see Figure 1). Humans, in this view, are not merely organisms bound to the level of the biosphere, but

also have a depth of interior consciousness that transcends both the physiosphere and the biosphere. It is by this “logic” that Wilber concludes nature is part of humans. Furthermore, any view which reduces humans to part of a greater web of life is criticized as “an ontological disaster.”⁸

Figure 1: Examples of Wilber’s Holarchies



It is a mistake, in Wilber’s logic, to place humans *within* the biosphere because that would violate the law of “transcend and include.” Zimmerman explains it quite well.

. . . the physiosphere is a basic building block of the organism, but the organism is not a basic building block of the physiosphere. . . 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.⁹

Since Wilber assumes that evolution produces higher and higher stages of consciousness, the rationality possessed only by humans gives us the greatest depth, which therefore makes us the superior life form on Earth. Humans, then, are considered to be *more complex* than the biosphere(!). For that reason Wilber concludes that, on Earth, humans have the greatest concentration of (intrinsic) value.¹⁰

Because Wilber is committed to abstract concepts such as *physiosphere* and *basic building blocks*, the image of “transcend and include” is applied indiscriminately. “For the evolution of individual holons, greater embrace means that *more of* the universe is being *taken into* the holon (is actually *internal* to that holon).”¹¹ The basic concept of *include* has several senses that Wilber does not always make clear. At times Wilber does talk about volumetric embrace. In a spatial sense atoms may be said to be *in* a molecule, for example, or an organism is said to *include* cells. However, “include” for Wilber also means metaphysical, or Spiritual, embrace. *Depth* means the interior dimensions of matter, and since consciousness evolved *after* matter, it must, by Wilber’s logic, transcend and include matter. Therefore, nature, or the biosphere, is *internal* to noospheric beings like humans.

When particulars are ignored and structural uniformities isolated and *generalized* they become abstract.

The anatomical structures of organisms may provide a useful **analogy** for thinking about other systems and their structures, but organisms are not **homologous** with all conceivable systems. Significant differences in content and structure exist between organisms and such other systems as languages, philosophies, cultures, customs, economies, agricultures, climates, and so forth.¹²

By an act of discursive reasoning the particulars of the world in all their unimaginable diversity are converted to a common currency: the simple abstract concept “holon.” Zimmerman recognizes that the structural consistency of “transcend and include” which characterizes every holon has been one of Wilber’s most perplexing concepts.¹³ In his zeal to explain everything—“there is nothing that isn’t a holon”—Wilber commits what A. N. Whitehead called the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.

This fallacy consists in neglecting the degree of abstraction involved when an actual entity is considered merely so far as it exemplifies certain categories of thought. There are aspects of actualities [i.e., concrete objects] which are simply ignored so long as we restrict thought to these categories.¹⁴

The generalized notion of holon is mistakenly presumed to be an actual entity *in* the world. In order for the holon concept to hold equally

whenever it is employed, Wilber must make several assumptions about the world:

- i) new dimensions of reality emerge, and are ‘added to’ the total in larger and larger embraces
- ii) whatever emerges later in the evolutionary time line must be more complex
- iii) new phenomena (e.g., life) must embrace old phenomena
- iv) the more levels of reality embraced the higher the ontological status

As Wilber admits, this is a new twist on a very old idea, what A. O. Lovejoy referred to as “the Great Chain of Being.”¹⁵ To avoid any image of hierarchy Wilber prefers “the Great Nest (or Holarchy) of Being.” Holarchy or hierarchy—both are equally abstract. In Wilber’s scheme, life is categorically distinct, something transcending matter (yet still embracing it). But why must something ‘new’ be imagined as another category altogether? And even if it is categorically distinct it doesn’t have to be higher than and embracing the previous. Why not imagine these new dimensions as side by side? Why imagine new dimensions at all?

Because Wilber is committed to one type of schema everything must fit into his “transcend and include” image. Rowe, while sympathetic to Wilber’s use of holon, believes its usefulness cannot be extended beyond the basic sense of meaning volumetric containment.

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. On the homology of Chinese boxes that fit within one another, each higher level is the environment of those below. This is the sequence that Koestler accurately showed as the pyramidal or inverted “tree diagram” with the organism at the summit. Let us now take it one step further.

From the base upward, atoms are parts of molecules, which are parts of cells, which are parts of tissue/organs, which are parts of organisms, which 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 ecosystems 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.

That Nature-as-Earth represents a higher level of integration than the human is a logical extension of the holarchy of containment beyond the organism.¹⁶

As Zimmerman sees it, the ongoing debate reflects Rowe's misunderstanding of Wilber. I propose that it is not so much a misunderstanding as it is an example of the outcomes of using different ontologies. It is clear that Rowe is not so anxious to account for the emergence of consciousness (especially rational consciousness) or to explain what Life is. He is much more phenomenologically oriented, having no apparent need for transcendental dimensions that are "more real." Scholars such as R. G. Collingwood, Hans Vaihinger, and Isaiah Berlin believe that one's worldview (what Naess calls a total view) requires basic ideas which are unproven and simply taken for granted about how the world works. Berlin noticed that

we inevitably notice and describe only certain characteristics of [the world]—those which are, as it were, public, which attract attention to themselves because of some specific interest which we have in investigating them, because of our practical needs or theoretical interests . . . What is left out of such investigations is what is too obvious to need mentioning.¹⁷

What gets left out is the examination of what Collingwood called "absolute presuppositions."¹⁸ Naess has shown that it is not necessary to articulate one complete set of presuppositions which is definitive of the character of reality.¹⁹ In short, it is not necessary, nor perhaps possible, to determine whether Rowe or Wilber is absolutely correct.

Though he called the Great Chain of Being "the official philosophy of the larger part of civilized humankind through most of its history,"²⁰ Lovejoy cautioned against adopting any one metaphysical system as authoritative. He believed that among the many different cosmologies, philosophies, and religions, (of which the Great Chain is one) individuals ultimately are influenced by what he called metaphysical pathos. We tend to gravitate towards a particular though very general description of the nature of things, a

characterization of the world to which one belongs, in terms which, like the words of a poem, awaken through their associations, and through a sort of empathy which they engender, a congenial mood or tone of feeling on the part of the [individual].²¹

Lovejoy noticed that there were basic units of thought that were simply taken for granted,

beliefs which are so much a matter of course that they are rather tacitly presupposed than formally expressed and argued for, . . . ways of thinking which seem so natural and inevitable that they are not scrutinized with the eye of logical self-consciousness, that often are most decisive of the character of a philosopher's doctrine, and still oftener of the dominant intellectual tendencies of an age.²²

As Naess has shown, after deeper questioning of the reasons why we believe something, there comes a point at which we require no further justification: we simply feel at home.

Naess: Reality has Gestalt Characteristics

The dominant mode of thinking in Western industrial cultures is characterized by a dependence on analytic method and abstract models. Gestalt thinking was introduced in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century, led by such figures as Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, and Kurt Koffka, as a reaction to an overemphasis on these characteristics. Fritjof Capra explains that gestalt perception differs from atomistic and mechanistic thinking by asserting that living organisms (not just humans) “perceive [the world] not in terms of isolated elements, but as integrated perceptual patterns—*meaningful* organized wholes, which exhibit qualities that are absent in their parts.”²³ Gestalt thinking distinguishes between the concrete contents of experience and the abstract constructions we formulate.

While admitting that gestalt ontology is, “as every other ontology, deeply problematic,” Naess feels that it is vitally important to offer alternatives to the “near monopoly of the so-called scientific world-view”²⁴ with its reliance on abstract models. Gestalt perception starts with our immediate spontaneous experience of the world. “It is unwarranted to believe that how we feel Nature to be is not how Nature really is.”²⁵ The world as we immediately experience it is endlessly diverse. One does not experience holons *per se* because holons are not particular phenomena.

Rowe's ontology is unmistakably closer to Naess's, emphasizing personal, spontaneous, (what has been called “naïve”²⁶) experience of the world. It is based much more on concrete understanding than abstract schematics.

Earth, the Ecosphere, and its sectoral geoecosystems—resembling mega-terrariums and mega-aquariums with all their organic/inorganic contents—have from the beginning of time been the evolutionary source and purveyors of Life. Metaphorical language has equated *life* only with organisms. Ecological knowledge, by revealing the importance of context, shows that Earth is synonymous with Life in its larger sense. When the miraculous quality Life is located in Earth and its geoecosystems, a realistic foundation is established for a new kind of extra-human ethics: Ecological Ethics or Ecospheric Ethics. Axiomatic is the belief that organisms, including humanity, are secondary in importance to the creative Earth and its geoecosystems.²⁷

Rowe cautions against drawing sharply distinguished categories, such as “physiosphere” and “biosphere,” which suggest that Life is some extra ingredient which, by virtue of being ‘added to’ matter, has more reality.

By making “life” a short, snappy noun and thereby conferring thinghood on it, the way is eased toward believing that “life” is a kind of mobile agent that vitalizes organisms from within and whose departure marks their death. But “life” is not a thing, nor is it the possession of organisms in an otherwise dead world.²⁸

For Rowe, as for Wendell Berry, Life is something mysterious and miraculous, a source of awe and wonder. The result of abstracting the physiosphere from the biosphere, as Wilber does, is that “we have assigned the greater part of the Earth spaces where we live to the category ‘dead environment.’”²⁹ There is no need to posit extra dimensions, or new spheres transcending the mundane material realm. Gestalt ontology requires no foundation, nothing higher in ontological priority, no fundamental building blocks. The sharp difference conventionally drawn between ‘living’ and ‘non-living’ is blurred in gestalt ontology. Berry, critical of the overbearing desire of science to explain everything, writes:

I don't think creatures can be explained. I don't think lives can be explained. What we know about creatures and lives must be pictured or told or sung or danced. And I don't think pictures or stories or songs or dances can be explained. The arts are indispensable [to Western culture] precisely because they are so nearly antithetical to explanation.³⁰

Naess echoes these sentiments: “Rationalization of the nonrational is a disease.”³¹

In Wilber's terms the physiosphere is simply inert stuff ('dead environment') until the higher animating agent of life transcends matter and takes it within. One may notice a slight Cartesian hangover in Wilber's view where the physiosphere is considered simply *res extensa* which is categorically distinct from the noosphere, *res cogitans*. Gestalt ontology understands the world to already be whole and complete, a position with which Wilber would presumably agree. But the diversity of gestalts reflect different aspects of reality, not an ontological hierarchy (or holarchy). In gestalt ontology, statements like the following simply don't make sense.

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 part of the physiosphere. . . .³²

Wilber's holonic ecology arranges the furniture of the world to fit a preconceived schematic. There is nothing wrong with this in itself—we all orient ourselves in the world by “unconscious mental habits.”³³ However, it is rather presumptuous to assume that one kind of organism (i.e., humans) among the countless millions can understand the true nature of reality, and that that understanding can be easily systematized, articulated, and communicated. Rowe and Naess seem to share a concern over metaphysical entities that are claimed to be beyond or behind nature, *pure* Spirit, which somehow is more real than matter. These so-called higher realities are considered by Naess to be *entia rationis*, “abstract constructions created (by reason) to facilitate rational analysis.”³⁴

In gestalt ontology, Life evolves and diversifies *within* the ecosphere. It doesn't follow that increasingly complex organisms must transcend the presumed limitations of time and space. (Complexity, incidentally, is an ambiguous term and, hence, has been the subject of contentious debate.) Philosophical systems which convey a higher ontological status on life (bios-), or mind (noos-), or even pure Spirit hypostatize abstractions.³⁵

Ontology and epistemology are intimately interrelated. Wilber tends to treat mundane, everyday experiences as lacking when compared to mystical experiences of oneness with pure Spirit.

All excellence is elitist. And that includes spiritual excellence as well. But spiritual excellence is an elitism to which all are invited. We go first to the great masters--to Padminasambhava, to St. Teresa of Avila, to Gautama Buddha, to Lady Tsogyal, to Emerson, Eckhart, Maimonides, Shankara, Sri Ramana Maharshi, Bodhidharma, Garab Dorje. But their message is *always* the same: let this consciousness be in you which is in me. You start elitist, always; you end up egalitarian, always.³⁶

For Wilber, the only ones who really truly understand reality are a relatively gifted few who have reached the heights of spiritual excellence by experiencing the entire Great Chain of Being. For Naess, the world already displays *a kind of* perfection (again, something with which Wilber would presumably agree). Yet, because the world is already whole and complete—in the sense that nothing is lacking—one’s experience of the world also has a kind of perfection, and is therefore adequate. “*What* we experience” in moments of prereflective awareness “is more or less comprehensive and complex,”³⁷ and always unified, otherwise the world could not make sense. Experience has gestalt characteristics because the world, as it is experienced, is a world of infinite specificity. We never experience holons *per se* because a holon is an abstract concept completely purged of all particulars.³⁸ There are no absolutely “better” experiences in the sense that, for example a mystical sense of unity (whatever that might mean) is a higher experience than diversity and separateness. Compare Wilber’s elitism with Naess’s egalitarianism.

It *feels absurd* for me to think: ‘You are mere mice, I have higher inherent value because:

- a) I am much more intelligent,
- b) I am much more complex,
- c) I am much higher on the evolutionary ladder,
- d) I am capable of profound sorts of spiritual suffering,
- e) I am self-reflecting, you don’t even know yourself, and
- f) ...”³⁹

Because Naess uses a completely different ontology than Wilber, he is always egalitarian. It should be noted that one does not have to begin elitist to end up egalitarian. There is no “higher” or “deeper” world than the one we experience right now. Alan Drengson has noticed that

hierarchical systems are used by literate civilizations for many purposes. The classification systems on which they are based have many unstated presuppositions about value priorities. Hierarchical

systems reflect the social and class structures of the societies which propound them.⁴⁰

Rowe completely inverts Wilber's relation of parts and wholes based on the simple fact that Rowe is using neither an abstract model nor its incumbent logic. The concrete experience of the world leads Rowe to conclude that humans are part of Nature. For Rowe, Earth is not

merely a "life-support system," . . . no more than a passive ark serving to keep afloat its organic cargo, including humanity. The sun-warmed Ecosphere exhibits many evolved inorganic/organic processes that in endless cycles link its improbable air, water, rocks, sediments, and organisms. By integrating these diverse components, Earth shows itself to be a higher level of organization than organisms, just as organisms are a higher level than their organs, and as organs surpass in organization the tissues and cells they comprise. So far as is known in the solar system and beyond, Earth, the Ecosphere, is the only celestial body that exhibits the closely related organic/inorganic cyclic processes that have been named "living" and "dying." As such, Earth exceeds in creativity and importance all organisms, including the human species.⁴¹

Naess expressed a similar position when he wrote: "In the deep ecology movement we are biocentric or ecocentric. For us it is the ecosphere, the whole planet, Gaia, that is the basic unit, and every living being has an intrinsic value."⁴² As I understand gestalt ontology as articulated by Naess, one always experiences the same world *in its totality*. Experience is a dynamic process characterized by varying degrees of sensitivity towards wholeness and distinction, but always unified (i.e., it has meaning, makes sense).

Conclusions: "All Life Is One"

Holons are not gestalts. Contrary to Wilber's insistence, the two terms are not synonymous.

Arne Naess clearly points out that 'wholism' and 'atomism' are actually two sides of the same problem, and that the *cure for both* is hierarchy. All reality, he points out, consists of what he calls 'subordinate wholes' or 'subordinate gestalts'—that is, holons...

Further, Naess points out, this hierarchy conception is necessary to counteract *both* holism (meaning an emphasis on just wholes) *and*

atomism (just parts), because gestalts are holons; they are *both* wholes and parts, arranged in a hierarchic order of higher and lower.⁴³

Naess does not say that reality *consists of* gestalts (Wilber hypostatizes gestalt here). Rather, Naess claims, one's experience of the world has gestalt characteristics. There is a profound difference, and it is subtle, but since Wilber is determined to see hierarchy/holarchy he interprets Naess in a direction that fits these preconceptions. Although we can *talk about* higher- and lower-order gestalts, it does not follow that that is the way the world is constituted. One must be careful not to mistake abstractions, for example hierarchy, as actually existing entities themselves. Wilber does provide a model of reality which is meant to explain how all life can be one, but Naess finds it "unlikely that *any* change in the abstract *conception* of the world and the ego can permanently change [a] person."⁴⁴

There is the issue, then, of what it means to live in a unified world, a world which is already whole and complete. Unfortunately, Wilber seems more concerned about being "right" than searching for answers. Wilber finds Naess's view, based to a large extent upon gestalt ontology, to be

lacking in almost every respect when compared with the great Nondual traditions. Even Naess himself, when attempting to present the similarities, fails to account for even the simplest and most crucial issues—for example, the notion of unity-in-multiplicity, a hallmark of Nondual realization. Naess fumbles in the worst of ways: "The widening and deepening of the individual selves *somehow* never makes them into one 'mass' . . . How to work this out in a fairly precise way I do not know."⁴⁵

The sophistication, complexity, and profundity of Naess's total view — which includes elements of Pyrrhonian skepticism, epistemological and ontological pluralism, and empirical semantics—is completely lost on Wilber. It is rather unfortunate to see a world-class thinker such as Naess abused this way, especially by someone who does not know his work. Those who have carefully read Naess and appreciate all the subtle interconnections of ideas across a vast range of subjects know that Naess doesn't fumble anything. One may disagree with him, but his reasoning is impeccable. (Readers who want to gain a deeper appreciation for Naess's philosophical achievements should consult the 10 Volume *Selected Works of Arne Naess* for a representative sample of his works in English.) Naess is a more accomplished global scholar than Wilber, and so not dogmatically determined to explain everything with one model. I encourage Wilber to follow the lead of his friend and

colleague Michael Zimmerman and take more care in presenting Naess's ideas. Wilber himself knows how frustrating it is to be constantly misrepresented.

Of course Naess *may be considered* "lacking" when it comes to the Nondual tradition (whatever characteristics one chooses as definitive of nondual). Naess is not interested in promoting one definitive philosophy. There is certainly a tradition of nondual philosophy, which Lovejoy identified and Wilber promotes. It has a great and admirable history. But it simply doesn't mean that it is correct or true in an absolute sense. We do not have to make the same choice that Wilber does and use the ontology and epistemology of nondualism as the benchmark. Although Zimmerman has claimed that nondualism is central to Naess's philosophy⁴⁶ it is important to note that Naess himself *does not use the term* when commenting on his own total view. Neither does he order epistemology in the same way Wilber does. "The world we live in spontaneously cannot be degraded as being merely subjective, because it is the only world that has a content."⁴⁷ Nothing is more real. One's concrete, spontaneous, "naïve" experience of nature, in its endless diversity of creativity and form, has ontological adequacy. Naess is much more aligned with Spinoza's ontology: "The more we understand particular things (i.e., diversity), the more we understand God (i.e., unity)."⁴⁸ There is no *need* for higher experiences of something more *real*. Each person's experiences are more or less adequate, and may be said to have roughly the same value. As I understand gestalt ontology as articulated by Naess, one always experiences the same world *in its totality*, with varying degrees of sensitivity towards wholeness and distinction, but always unified.

Although I've contrasted their respective positions, I would like to stress, again, that both Rowe and Wilber are in agreement on at least one issue: All Life Is One. This is a very semantically rich statement, and there are differing interpretations of what it means. There is no need to demand one precise meaning for the phrase. Indeed, Naess shows that because language has such semantic elasticity no precise definition of such broad general statements about the whole nature of reality can be given.⁴⁹

Where, then, do we place humans in a relation to nature? Zimmerman and Wilber resist seeing humans as just another organism in the web of life because they claim that it reduces our mental and spiritual dimensions to mere matter. Wilber pinpoints spiritual transformation as the answer to the ecological crisis.

Adopting a new holistic philosophy, believing in Gaia, or even thinking in integral terms—however important those might be, they are the least important when it comes to spiritual transformation. Finding out who believes in all those things: There is the doorway to God.”⁵⁰

In this view, people must discover their identity with God in order to identify with nature. Zimmerman especially is concerned that identification with only nature—humans as strands in the web of life—*may* lead to ecofascism.

Rowe’s position is summed up thus: “*Earth before organisms. Ecosystems before people.*”⁵¹ Rowe, like Wilber and Zimmerman and Naess, is concerned for the ecological integrity of Earth. His slogan has the impact (and shortcomings) of most political slogans: general and imprecise. We are immediately presented with an array of possible interpretations, one of which could be ecofascism. But because it’s *possible* to interpret “*Ecosystems before people*” in an ecofascist direction doesn’t mean it will lead to ecofascism. (It is also possible, incidentally, to interpret Wilber as promoting narcissism through identity with God, but he clearly criticizes that line of interpretation). A slogan, such as Rowe’s, is a verbal articulation of part of one’s whole sense of reality. It is called up from the depths of the psyche, functioning more as an inspirational tool than an ontological proclamation. Such broad statements, by the very nature of their generalizing character, are open to a multiplicity of interpretations. The way a person interprets Rowe’s slogan, for example, depends on their entire worldview. In other words, one’s total view provides the context for its meaning. Zimmerman reminds us that not every interpretation will be useful.

A view based on compassion changes the interpretation of ‘ecosystems before people.’ That is, if compassion is for *all living beings*, such as that promoted by the Dalai Lama, fascism will not be a viable option. Out of the array of possibilities, the one(s) compatible with compassion will be selected, to use a word favoured by Naess, “spontaneously.”

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Notes

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- ¹ See Michael Zimmerman, "Humanity's Relation to Gaia," *The Trumpeter*, 20.1 (2004), pp. 4-20 (<http://trumpeter.athabascau.ca/content/v20.1>) and Stan Rowe, "Transcending this Poor Earth á lá Ken Wilber," *The Trumpeter*, 17.1 (<http://trumpeter.athabascau.ca/content/v17.1>)
- ² Zimmerman, "Humanity's Relation to Gaia," p. 6.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- ⁴ Arne Naess, "Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World," *The Trumpeter*, 4.3 (1987), p. 35.
- ⁵ Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 35.
- ⁶ Ken Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, Boston: Shambhala, 1995, p. 41.
- ⁷ Rowe, "Transcending this Poor Earth," no page numbers are given, see § titled *Koestler's Holons and General Systems Theory*.
- ⁸ *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, p. 95.
- ⁹ Zimmerman, "Humanity's Relation to Gaia," p. 9.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ¹¹ Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, p. 90, my emphasis.
- ¹² Rowe, "Transcending this Poor Earth," § *Logical Pitfalls*, my italics.
- ¹³ "Humanity's Relation to Gaia," p. 8.
- ¹⁴ Alfred N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (1929), New York: Macmillan, 1978, pp. 7-8.
- ¹⁵ A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1942.
- ¹⁶ Rowe, "Transcending This Poor Earth," § *An Earth-Based Philosophy*
- ¹⁷ Isaiah Berlin, *The Sense of Reality*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, pp. 14-15.
- ¹⁸ Collingwood's term.
- ¹⁹ See "Reflections on Total Views", in the *Selected Works of Arne Naess (SWAN)* vol. 10, Dordrecht, Netherlands, Springer, 2005, pp 467-482.
- ²⁰ Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, p. 26.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- ²³ Fritjof Capra, *The Web of Life*, New York, Anchor Books, 1996, p. 32, my italics.
- ²⁴ Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, p. 35.
- ²⁵ Naess, "Self-Realization," p. 27.
- ²⁶ Not in a pejorative sense, but rather meaning prereflective and undetermined by abstractions. In his book *Gestalt Psychology: An Introduction to New Concepts in Modern Psychology* Wolfgang Köhler wrote: "There seems to be a single starting point for psychology, exactly as for all the other sciences: the world as we find it, naively and uncritically. The naïveté may be lost as we proceed. Problems may be found that which at first are completely hidden from our eyes. For their solution it may be necessary to devise concepts which seem to have little contact with direct primary experience. Nevertheless, the whole development must begin with a naïve picture of the world. This origin is necessary because there is no other basis from which it can arise" (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1947, p. 3).
- ²⁷ "The Living Earth and Its Ethical Priority," *The Trumpeter*, 19.2 (2003), p. 69.
- ²⁸ Rowe, "The Living Earth," p. 71.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- ³⁰ Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, Washington, Counterpoint, 2001, p. 113.

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- ³¹ Arne Naess, personal communication, Oslo, Norway, Apr. 21, 2006.
- ³² Zimmerman, "Humanity's Relation to Gaia," p. 9.
- ³³ Lovejoy, *Great Chain*, p. 7.
- ³⁴ Naess, "Gestalt Thinking and Buddhism," *SWAN* vol. 8, p. 333.
- ³⁵ Naess agreed with this point, personal communication, Oslo, Norway, Apr. 21, 2006.
- ³⁶ Wilber's own website, <http://wilber.shambhala.com/html/misc/spthtr.cfm/>.
- ³⁷ Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, p. 57.
- ³⁸ See Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, p. 42.
- ³⁹ Naess, "An Answer to W. C. French: Ranking, Yes, but the Inherent Value is the Same," *Philosophical Dialogues*, Brennan and Witoszek, eds., p. 148.
- ⁴⁰ Drenghson, "How Rigid the Hierarchy?" *The Trumpeter*, 13.2 (1996), p.
- ⁴¹ Rowe, "The Living Earth," p. 70.
- ⁴² Naess, "The Basics of Deep Ecology," *SWAN* vol. 10, p. 18. A version of this article is also in *The Trumpeter* 21.1, pp. 61-71. For Naess the terms 'biosphere' and 'ecosphere' function more or less synonymously.
- ⁴³ Ken Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, p. 57.
- ⁴⁴ Naess, "Through Spinoza to Mahayana Buddhism or Through Mahayana Buddhism to Spinoza?" in *SWAN* vol. 9, pp. 255-276.
- ⁴⁵ Wilber, *Eye of Spirit*, 2nd ed., Boston, Shambhala, 2001, p. 276.
- ⁴⁶ Zimmerman, *Contesting Earth's Future*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994, p. 21.
- ⁴⁷ "Ecosophy and Gestalt Ontology," *The Trumpeter*, 6.4 (1989), p. 136.
- ⁴⁸ *Ethics*, V.24, trans. Samuel Shirley.
- ⁴⁹ Naess has taken up this topic in longer works such as *Communication and Argument*, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1966 (now *SWAN* vol. 7). For shorter pieces see "The Limited Neutrality of Typologies of Systems," p. 7-13 "Notes on the Methodology of Normative Systems," especially pp. 17-19, and "Vagueness and Ambiguity" pp. 56-74, all of which can be found in the special Festschrift edition of *The Trumpeter*, 22.1 (2006).
- ⁵⁰ Wilber, *A Theory of Everything*, Boston, Shambhala, 2000, p. 137.
- ⁵¹ Rowe, "From Shallow to Deep Ecological Philosophy" *The Trumpeter*, 13.1, 2001, p. 136.