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TRANSCENDING FLATLAND

Implications of Ken Wilber's meta-narrative for futures studies

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The Western futures project was originally founded on empiricist notions of prediction, forecasting and control. While other approaches to futures work, other traditions and ways of knowing, have certainly become established, the early framing of Futures Studies arguably occurred out of this broadly reductionist framework—what Wilber has since termed 'flatland'. As a result, current ideologies such as: economic growth, globalisation, the pre-eminence accorded to science and technology, and 'man's conquest of nature'—were insufficiently problematised. Technology-led views of the future remain influential within Futures Studies, bureaucratic thinking and popular culture. In this view, the future is less open than it might be because it is seen merely as an extension of the present. Critical Futures Studies question such assumptions. The paper explores how the work of this leading transpersonal synthesist can contribute both to a broadening and deepening of Futures Studies and thus help to activate cultural options that are presently obscured. © 1998 Richard A. Slaughter. All rights reserved

The bad news

Those of us who live in the late 20th century cannot but be aware of the great schisms in our midst: islands of affluence in seas of poverty and despair; technical virtuosity amid global pollution and species extinctions; profound insight into the structure of the universe contrasted with a nihilistic, often angry pop culture endlessly lost in its own hostility and fear. In other words, this is a time of great polarities and severe contradictions. We

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are left searching for an anchor point, a grounding, ways of understanding and action that move us forward beyond the conflict and confusion.

Western-style progress has all but overwhelmed the globe. To many it seems unquestioned, unstoppable, hegemonic; quite simply: 'the way things are'. But the path to the future which originated in the European Enlightenment and drove the Industrial Revolution, which, in a word, created the modern world, was never fully convincing. From the earliest days there have been protests, counter-currents, critiques and traditions that held out other possibilities, the seeds of quite different futures.

Western industrial civilisation grew powerful because it had discovered instrumental rationality and used it to interrogate nature in quite new ways. In so doing it uncovered the secrets of raw technical power. Its method was science, its language was mathematics and its goal was to re-make the earth. The confidence that accompanied this process was well expressed during Victorian times and given prominence at the great expositions, particularly that held at the Crystal Palace in London in 1851. Here the language of progress was writ large. The dawn of the modern era was characterised by notions of growth, optimism and vitality, but it was not to last.

Those who were involved in this process could clearly see the benefits of the emerging new technologies, along with the culture, society and economics that supported them, but the costs of the whole process took longer to emerge. As time went by and social experience accumulated, so the costs of this type of progress became increasingly evident. It was evident to the frame-breakers of the early 19th century whose livelihood was destroyed by the machines and the institutions that they were embedded in. It was clear to Karl Marx when he sat down in the reading room of the British Library and penned his great critique of alienated labour. It was clear to the great American environmentalists of the late 19th century: John James Audubon, John Muir and the rest. It was clear to the suffragette movement which demanded votes for women. It was also clear to the critics of colonialist expansionism.

The drawbacks to science and technology-led progress were fully evident to H.G. Wells. As time went by so his vision darkened. His *A Modern Utopia* became, at the end of his life, *Mind at the End of its Tether*. An early warning of the dangers of over-dependence on technology was sounded in a story by E.M. Forster, which was published in the first decade of the 20th century. It was called *The Machine Stops*, and it remains relevant to this day. Lewis Mumford, author of *The City in History*, began his monumental overview of humankind's obsession with the machine. Works such as *Technics and Human Development*, and *The Pentagon of Power* lucidly described the bargain that humanity had made with its powers of reason and its clever, tool-making abilities. Rachel Carson drew attention to the careless use of pesticides in *Silent Spring*. Academic critiques sprouted rapidly in the post-war years: Ellul, Roszak, Marcuse and so on. As the century moved on, so the critique deepened. Foucault and Habermas added their substantive contributions and critique became intellectually respectable.

In other words, while Western culture proceeded on its world-conquering mission, the perception of dysfunctions, costs and dangers also grew. Then modernity seemed to be overwhelmed by a number of brash new disciplines: structuralism, linguistic analysis, semiotics. For a while it seemed that everything was in question. No 'meta-narrative' was possible. Authority was gone. Values and social forms were all 'socially constructed' and hence suspect. How could a society cohere when all of its members were 'radically de-

centred', problematised, rendered impotent in a blitz of media images and endlessly contested sites? Gender relations became a nightmare for nearly everyone.

When we consider these contrasts of life in the late 20th century, we are struck by major polarities. On the one hand there are all the real achievements of a powerful and sophisticated technological culture; on the other are the mounting human and ecological costs of a growth-addicted economic system. It is no wonder that fragmentation, stress, alienation and fear are so common; or that rates of youth suicide are so high or that drug-taking is so common in most technically advanced countries. The very sense of self in such times is under genuine threat. Questions such as: 'who am I?' or 'what are my central needs, purposes?' become very difficult to pose—let alone answer, and over it all the apparent 'normalcy' of everyday life casts a bewitching spell. The sun rises; the lights work; we are not starving, so what is the problem?

The problem, in a word, is that Western technological civilisation has, by virtue of its very success and dynamism created a world that teeters unsteadily on the edge of a future it can neither acknowledge nor avoid. Once it looked as though that abyss could be precipitated by nuclear war. That is still possible, but more likely now is a world devastated by ever-growing human demands and impacts; a world that is mined out, polluted, grubbed up, cut down, modified, compromised beyond the possibility of repair. An awareness of how the human project itself is under threat from its own 'success' can be truly overpowering. I refer to this as 'living in the breakdown'. By this I mean living in a sense and a reality that something has gone wrong at such a deep level it cannot be clearly articulated, let alone resolved. The difficulties for those with only a past and present view were identified some years ago by Donald Schon when he wrote the following:

Social systems provide for their members not only sources of livelihood, protection against outside threat and the promise of economic security, but a framework of theory, values and related technology which enables individuals to make sense of their lives. Threats to the social system threaten this framework. (Thus)... a social system does not move smoothly from one state of its culture to another... Something must come apart in order for something new to come together. But for individuals within the system, there is no clear grasp of the next stable state—only a clear picture of the one to be lost. Hence the coming apart carries uncertainty and anguish since it puts at risk the basis for self-identity that the system had provided.¹

This passage accurately diagnoses a key part of the dilemma outlined above. There is a clear sense of what is being lost, but very little sense of what Schon called the new 'stable state'. Yet it is precisely here that a well-grounded approach to futures studies should be most helpful. So it is useful to state, and to state clearly, that the bad news is only a part of the picture, the most obvious part. Balancing the breakdown, the bad news, are parallel processes of recovery: the good news.

The good news: recovery is already under way

The good news is that paralleling all the processes of breakdown outlined above are processes of recovery. Critique, protest, perception of dysfunction are all starting points for recovery. Women did win the vote. Environmental awareness did spread and become a mainstream concern. A truly vast range of social innovations—from trades unions to alternative technology and permaculture—have sprung up around the world. Futures studies today is a globally distributed discipline with the ability to support a wide range of socially, culturally and economically progressive initiatives.

The realm of instrumental rationality clearly over-reached itself. While the proponents of 3D-TV, universal digital communication and nanotechnology continue on their self-appointed quest, many, many people are waking up to the fact that Western industrial culture was one-sided, that it left out much that is vital to people and to civilisation generally; that the apparent victory of science over religion was miss-cast and misunderstood; that, at base, there are other ways of knowing, other realities, other potentials to activate; that this is not the end of the road. Though it has been widely overlooked, Dystopia was ever and always only the end of the industrial system, not that of the human race.

In very many places around the world a new cultural synthesis has been taking place. It is one that looks freshly not just at Western culture, but at cultures *per se*, and sees very clearly that there are many options, choices, strategies and so on, from which to re-fashion a viable view of the world. This 'worldview problem' has preoccupied perceptive people for some time. It is a central question within Critical Futures Studies. The question has been, 'OK, so we know we need to reconstruct a truly post-post-modern culture, but how do we do it? How do we discern and assemble the pieces? How can they be induced to cohere?'

Such questions are not easily answered, in part because they presuppose some sort of 'meta-map', a structural account of 'where things fit'. Such a map would have to have certain systemic features that convincingly integrated human existence with what we know of the wider universe. While it goes without saying that any such map would be socially constructed (and hence liable to critique and the usual tests of validity) could it help to establish a different *modus operandi*? Clearly this is a tall order. What follows is an assessment of the attempt by Ken Wilber to establish such a metanarrative. I will suggest that, while certain criticisms can be levelled against it, Wilber's account provides an example of the kind of big picture thinking that we require as we contemplate the transition to a new century and a new millennium.

Aspects of Wilber's meta-narrative

It is not possible to cover every aspect of Wilber's account in a short paper, so I will here mention a few key concepts and ideas. It must be emphasised that the reader should consult the original before drawing hard and fast conclusions. A central theme is the evolution of consciousness and depth in the universe, both of which are held to be manifestations of spirit. Each stage of evolution involves a creative emergence in which one stage transcends and includes earlier ones. Two key concepts are those of 'depth' and 'span'. The former refers to vertical layers of existence, the latter to the lateral elaboration of elements on a particular level. Hence there are always fewer bodies than cells, fewer cells than molecules, fewer molecules than atoms, and so on.

Wilber expands Arthur Koestler's notion of the holon which is both a whole and a part. It leads to the notion of holarchy, the nested hierarchy of life, consciousness and meaning. Through a detailed analysis of a variety of individuals and traditions of enquiry, Wilber argues that Western culture mistakenly assumed that rationality was the culmination and the end of evolution—whereas in this view it is seen a stage which may be transcended (and included) in a larger synthesis. In this perspective, the world of modernity, of industrialism, was constructed on a pattern that extinguished vertical distinctions and reduced them to the rational, measurable, interlocking elements of 'flatland'. This is

interpreted by Wilber as providing a key to the pathologies that have plagued our century. He writes:

Instead of an infinite above, the West pitched its attention to an infinite ahead. The vertical dimension of depth/height was ditched in favour of a horizontal expansion, and emphasis not on depth but on span... An 'other world' of any sort was thrown over; and the eyes of men and women settled steely on the horizons not above but in front of them, settled coldly on this world, and this world, and this world again. If salvation could not be found on this small Earth, it could not be found at all.²

Later he adds:

In short, depths that required interpretation were largely ignored in favour of the interlocking surfaces that can simply be seen... valueless surfaces that could be patiently, persistently, accurately mapped: on the other side of the objective strainer, the world appeared only as a great interlocking order of sensory surfaces, empirical forms.³

In this view, the consequences were devastating. Individuals and cultures were stripped of inner meaning and the external world (including the global ecology) was rendered into a set of things, mere resources. Consequently the world of modernity was built on the illusion that only half of reality mattered: the external, objective, measurable part. In human terms, the achievement and the disaster of the modern world is what Wilber calls 'the disengaged ego'. The cry 'no more myths' led to the abandonment of any possibility of further development and to the 'disenchantment' of self and the world. In other words, what Wilber calls 'the big three', that is the world of 'I', that of 'we' and that of 'it', became dissociated each from the other. In this view, the great task of post-modernity is to re-integrate them.

A meta-map for a renewed worldview

Wilber's synthesis produced a framework that suggests ways of moving beyond the dilemmas sketched above. Matters are made clearer by his use of four quadrants: a simple division between 'inner' and 'outer' on one axis; and between 'individual' and 'social' on the other (see *Figure 1*). Each quadrant is used to trace the process of evolution in that particular field. So there are four parallel process, each intimately linked with the other of: interior-individual development; exterior-individual development; interior-social development and exterior-social development. In Wilber's words, 'the upper half of the diagram represents individual holons; the lower half, social or communal holons. The right half represents the exterior forms of holons—what they look like from the outside; and the left hand represents the interiors—what they look like from within.'⁴

Figure 2 outlines the stages of development in the four realms as drawn from the work of many different observers. 'The upper right quadrant runs from the centre—which represents the Big Bang—to subatomic particles to atoms to molecules to cells to neural organisms to triune-brained organisms. With reference to human behaviour, this quadrant is the one emphasised by behaviourism.'⁵ The upper left quadrant 'runs from the centre to prehension, sensation, impulse, image, symbol, concept and so on... With reference to human beings, this quadrant contains all the 'interior' individual sciences (among other things), from psychoanalysis to phenomenology to mathematics.'⁶ The lower right quadrant runs through the stages of galactic and planetary evolution. With reference to humans it 'then runs from kinship tribes to villages to nation states to (the) global world system'.⁷

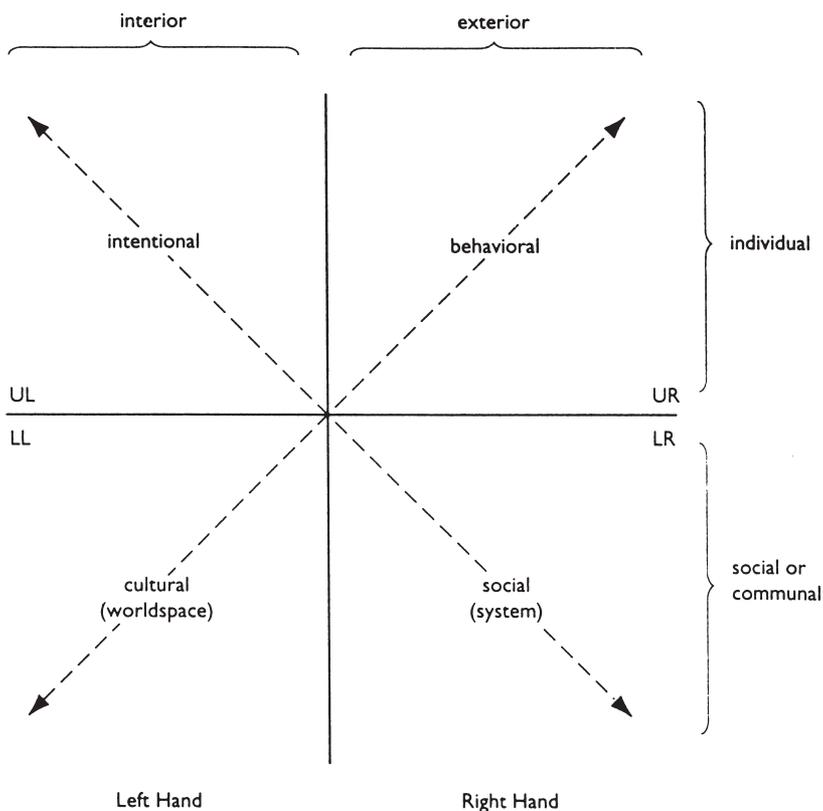


Figure 1. The four quadrants. Reprinted with permission.²

It also incorporates the physical realms of architecture, technology etc. Finally, the lower left quadrant outlines the interiors of social systems; that is their culture, values and world-views. These range from what Wilber calls the 'physical-pleromatic' stage to the 'mythic, rational and centauric' stages.⁸

One use of this approach is to provide a diagnosis of the modernist path to our present day 'flatland', a path that Wilber suggests involved repressing or dissociating much of the inner world (the left hand side of the diagram). If there is any merit in the scheme the story does not end there. It advances two key suggestions about cultural recovery: the reintegration of the 'big three' and the further development of new stages beyond those already achieved. This is partly why Wilber's work is relevant to futures studies.

Grounds of cultural recovery

The above is but a partial summary of a detailed account of individual and collective development over a long period of time. From it Wilber has drawn some provocative insights about the possible grounds of cultural recovery. I will here touch briefly on five general aspects. I then summarise some of the criticisms of this ambitious project before exploring some of implications for futures studies.

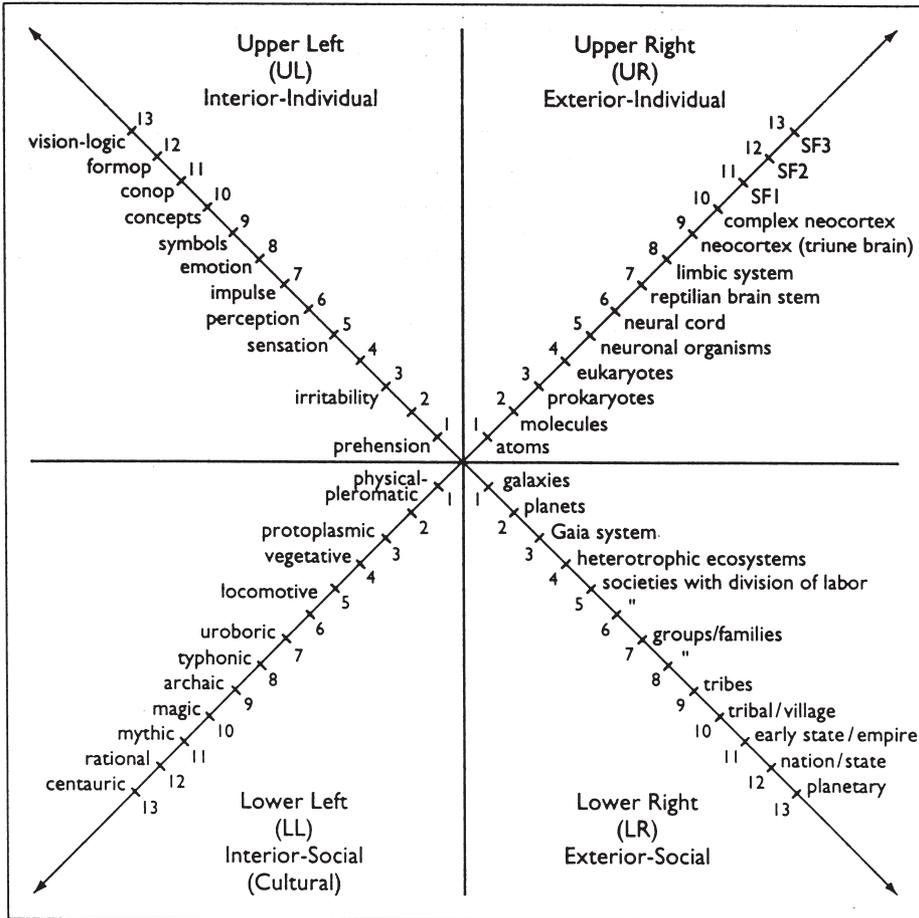


Figure 2. Some details of the four quadrants. Reprinted with permission.²

First, Wilber’s account seeks to re-establish a vertical dimension that, if not lost, was certainly obscured during the modern period. In his words:

once the weight of the Big One is lifted from the shoulders of awareness, the Big Three jump instantly back into focus, and interior depths once forbidden to serious discourse... now unfurl before the mind’s inward eye: the surfaces are not surfaces at all, the shadows hide something else. The appearances don’t just reveal, they conceal: something other is going on.⁹

Second, he attempts to clarify the sources and resolutions of modern pathologies. In this view, they are associated with different types of arrested development, corresponding to each of the levels of evolution. For example, a key pathology of the industrial period is the ‘disengaged ego’. While the ego is seen as a tremendous step forward from more primitive stages, Wilber argues that its tendency to move from separation to dissociation leads on to many of the self-indulgent behaviours of our age.

Third, he carries forward the work of the great technological sceptics of our age, writers such as Lewis Mumford and Jaques Ellul. Wilber writes:

I trace a large part of this dissociation and resultant emphasis on the Big One (of instrumental/objectivist rationality) to the strong influence of industrialisation and the machine mentality...: the techno-economic base supported instrumental-purposive activities, and in a way out of all proportion to the instrumental-purposive rationality that did in fact build it: a positive feedback loop that sent calculative rationality spinning out of control, precisely in the avowed purpose of gaining control.¹⁰

Fourth, he provides a rationale for re-establishing a central role for human agency and aspiration. For example, he notes that: 'as for the coming transformation itself, it is being built, as all past transformations have been, in the hearts and minds of those individuals who themselves evolve to centauric planetary vision.'¹¹

Fifth (and this theme is treated more fully below) he suggests what he considers the most promising ways ahead. Put briefly, this means understanding and refusing the modernistic 'flatland' in all its many guises and manifestations, and then clarifying and pursuing further stages of personal and social development. However, this is not a trivial 'new age' view full of sweetness and light. Rather, it has a gritty reality to it: 'contacting the higher self is not the end of all problems but the beginning of the immense and difficult new work to be done.'¹²

Critique of Wilber's thesis

A thesis as provocative as that which Wilber has been developing for the past two decades does not exist in isolation. Indeed, it has spawned many pages of dialogue and discussion on the internet. However, one of the most penetrating critiques was published by John Heron in a small British journal called *Collaborative Inquiry*. The following three points are derived from this source.

Spiritual training vs. enquiry

In his discussion of how 'inner' knowledge is validated, Wilber claims that this can be done within the tradition established by spiritual schools. Heron makes it clear that the appeal to tradition, and recourse to the authority of a guru within it, is merely *training*. This is a long way from *spiritual enquiry* in which some part of the necessary authority (to validate good practice from bad) actually originates within participating individuals and groups. Heron comments:

I have little doubt that the training within many an ancient oriental spiritual lineage is still today closer to experiential indoctrination than it is to experiential enquiry. The spirit of the teacher's authority pervades such a lineage, not the spirit of enquiry. It is an established experiential tradition, based on a strong appeal to external authority precisely because it doesn't have a methodology of experiential inquiry and will invariably resist such inquiry.¹³

The difficulty of inter-cultural consensus over space and time

One of the assumptions of Wilber's view is that mystical (inner) insights can be gleaned from people of diverse cultures and eras. More broadly, his four quadrant account is syncretic, being drawn from the work of countless individuals from widely scattered locations in space and time. However, there are real problems involved in interpreting insights from such disparate sources. Can they be assembled into a smooth interpretative

continuum such as Wilber has proposed? Or are some insights incommensurable? Wilber assumes the former, but does not satisfactorily deal with the latter objection at all. Heron comments on the difficulty of interpreting ancient texts. He writes:

ancient writings are embedded in and emerge from ancient cultural and linguistic contexts. Each such context is a set of mutually shared values and meanings... The meaning of an ancient text is inseparable from this ancient set of intersubjective meanings, at both its explicit and implicit levels. Translating this meaning into modern language whose usage is embedded in its own intersubjective context... is a precarious matter.¹⁴

The 'higher' may well emerge from the 'lower'—but it remains unknowable

In Wilber's account (a) past spiritual adepts can be viewed as models for future human evolution and (b) past stages of personal and social development provide the foundations for future stages. In both cases, Wilber does not resolve the conundrum of how transcending a past stage prefigures future ones, for the latter are, in principle new, emergent, novel and hence, unknowable. Heron points out that the ancient sages could not possibly have progressed through our own level of the 'disengaged ego', nor have understood, or worked through psychological traps such as the mechanisms of repression. Hence, it is difficult to see them as literal models for our own future. Equally, there may be few paradigms of community in past history that can be directly used as models for the future because their language, values, meanings and intersubjective realities were all very different. Thus, the foundations for future stages of development based on past people or models is problematic.

Epistemological hyperbole

Beyond these specific points, there is a broader one that relates to the way that Wilber presents his thesis. Hence, one of the most persistent criticisms of Wilber's work is that he has a tendency to pursue a number of themes and ideas which go well beyond our current understanding. He writes as if his insights were law-like axioms, instead of provocative and, in many cases, untestable theses. For example, the 'four quadrants' are presented almost as if they were fact, whereas they are highly selective rational/intellectual constructs. Hence the thesis embodies a claim to a kind of quasi-transcendental status which is probably overstated. Similarly, Wilber's work is littered with injunctions derived from spiritual practice. But Wilber's own relation to the latter is unclear.

The breadth of Wilber's metanarrative and vision is as ambitious as it is impressive. Perhaps the main weakness is to overlook the absolutely central role of interpretation in the whole process. This means that the resulting perspective cannot, and should not, be regarded as axiomatic, or law-like in character. It should be seen as suggestive, not prescriptive. This is congruent with the view that, since futures studies deals with big issues and globe-spanning perspectives, its own mode of discourse should also be modest and under-stated. Hence there are a number of substantive and stylistic drawbacks in Wilber's work. However, this said, he does provide four contributions of value: first, an in-depth diagnosis of why our world is under threat; second, a prescription for actively dealing with it; third, a critique of some currently influential perspectives; and finally the

outlines of futures perspective that provides an alternative to the current technology-led view of the future.

Implications for Futures Studies

Since FS has long sought to provide high-quality guidance about 'pathways into the future' its practitioners should be prepared to look at new material and constantly to question their own assumptions. This, indeed, may be one of the main benefits of looking at history from unfamiliar viewpoints. So in what follows I consider some of the main implications for futures study of Wilber's metanarrative. This should be seen in the context of other work on macrohistory by other macrohistorians. For a superb overview of the work of macrohistorians see Galtung and Inayatullah, 1997.¹⁵

A cultural diagnosis and renewed 'world story'

Before saying anything about the future, we must first know a great deal about the past and present. Wilber offers us a cultural diagnosis which provides us with a provocative view of where we are not just within the historical process but also in the wider macro process of cosmic evolution. This is no mean feat. In this view there is a plausible explanation as to why Western culture became unbalanced and dangerous.

The synthesis of 'outer' and 'inner' perspectives can certainly be critiqued for overlooking problems of interpretation between widely scattered people and cultures. But it also highlights a significant problem for which post-modernism has had few answers: how can the external world of nature, science and technology be reconciled with the inner world of intersubjectivity and human development? Post-modernism has little to offer in this regard. So, imperfect though it is, Wilber's model gives us a different place to start. It is model for a more balanced account of human culture. As such, it provides a basis for a *renewed* world story; an account of reality that gives real hope and inspiration, provides multiple pathways into futures beyond Dystopia, the vast and sterile empire of machines.

Critique of systems, ecology, chaos theory (and futures studies)

One of the main developments in futures methodology has been that of systems thinking. This provided us with new tools and ways of understanding our world, but Wilber raises the possibility that systems approaches can too easily spring from a 'flatland' frame of reference and, instead of providing solutions, lock us even more firmly into that diminished frame. Hence, 'depths that required interpretation were largely ignored in favour of the interlocking surfaces that can simply be seen... valueless surfaces that could be patiently, persistently, accurately mapped...'¹⁶ In Wilber's view this was not a step forward for 'the holistic flatland world left no point of insertion for the subject with depth... and thus arose what has been called the central problem of modernity: human subjectivity and its relation to the world.'¹⁷ In other words, here is a strong warning about the danger of reductionism in systems thinking.

What Wilber calls the 'Eco' camps may also benefit from testing their underlying assumptions against those offered here. The earlier representatives of this tradition—from Rousseau to Whitman—yearned for a unity with nature, indeed a communion with it.

But in Wilber's view later proponents could not resolve the contradiction of how people who were supposed to be part of nature could also be differentiated from it: part of, and not part of, as it were. He comments:

instead of seeing that differentiation is the necessary prelude to a deeper or higher and emergent integration, it was seen, in all cases, as a disruption, a division and destruction, of a prior harmonious state. The oak was somehow a violation of the acorn. And in this confusion... all true critical edge was lost, because the cure for the actual dissociations that had indeed beset modernity was mistakenly thought to be a regression to a state prior to all differentiation whatsoever.¹⁸

From these brief comments it is clear that it may be useful for those using systems thinking and ecological perspectives to take a new look at some underlying assumptions in this light. The same may apply to chaos theory. Much has been made of its new language, concepts and metaphors. However, in the light of the above it is clear that chaos theory may be another example of what Wilber calls 'subtle reductionism', the use of materials derived from the 'right hand' realm of 'It' and the illegitimate reading of those upon the 'left hand' sectors of 'I' and 'We'. Since different phenomena following different rules apply in each of the quadrants, it is a mistake to generalise across these distinctions. However, we should also remember that the four-quadrant view of the world is itself a construction. So what is being compared here is not a set of tentative perspectives and one authoritative one, but different interpretative worlds.

An implicit critique of FS itself emerges from the above. In this view, the dominant tradition of futures work can be said to be actively complicit in re-inscribing aspects of the past and present upon the emerging future. If FS too was born in 'flatland', ie the taken-for-granted world of post-war modernity, it would, as I have suggested, have been imbued with interests typical of that time: predominantly interests in forecasting, prediction and control. These arguably fitted well with the ideology of economic growth, the pursuit of technical power and the corporate push for global hegemony. The major weakness of the dominant empirical/analytical tradition is that it was blind to its own limitations and biases. In Wilber's terms: 'each structure weighs carefully the evidence that it can see... The hermeneutics of any world space is closed and perfectly evidential for that world space'.¹⁹

Hence mainstream FS can be seen as part of a now-defunct Modernist project. In a wider view, there is a basis for considering different constitutive interests, for seeing when futures expertise is truly progressive (ie opening out options, proposing social innovations, providing enabling tools) and also when it becomes regressive: a slave to the market, the economy, the latest technology and the transnational corporation. In this view, it is worth drawing attention to the commercial and ideological commitments of some 'big name' futurists. For it could be argued that such interests are bound up with the 'flatland' world that Wilber and others have so thoroughly critiqued. Perhaps the most constructive option for those working in such contexts is to work for the *transformation* of the old, still-influential, modernist power structures, rather their maintenance and further growth, for it seems clear that the latter leads directly to the abyss.

Re-defining the central purposes of FS

If FS is at all concerned to 'map the future' or 'plot viable pathways' or 'create positive scenarios' then Wilber's perspective has a number of implications. For in this view, it is evident that we cannot discern a way ahead based only upon the tools and methods of

the 'right hand' quadrants; the world of 'It'. Yet most of the standard tools of FS, ie those based on data, statistics, instrumental reason, spring from this region. Similarly, the long-established preoccupation of commerce and popular culture with gadgets and machines cannot provide safe pathways into the future. The familiar refrain about how 'exciting new technologies are about to transform our lives' can be seen as a persistent, but deeply inadequate, reflection of the continuing dominance of 'flatland' interests and imperatives. Were it otherwise, then the continuing extension of technical sophistication would be seen more as a functional defect of the industrial worldview, or at least as a process with costs as well as benefits: technology as a two-edged sword that 'gives' openly and with full fanfare and 'takes away' only later through concrete social experience of the costs.²⁰

While, as noted, there are certainly different traditions, worldviews, paradigms in FS, mainstream FS still remains very bound up with 'the exciting world of the technological future'. Yet in Wilber's perspective, this completely misses the point. Depth, resonance, significance and meaning are not available through technology. They are available through the progressive refinement of the instrument of knowing itself, ie through each individual person. In this view, the central purpose of FS is not to serve the already-powerful, not to explore the horizontal explorations of 'flatland', the barren landscapes of the technological 'wonderland', but to illuminate the way beyond limited and instrumental interests altogether to shared transpersonal ends. This involves identifying the 'escape route' from 'flatland' and helping to facilitate the re-integration of 'the big three': the 'It', the 'I' and the 'We'. The purpose and goal of this work is to facilitate personal and social evolution beyond the present mental-egoic, capitalist-hegemonic, technical-narcissistic stage to other stages of personal development and the corresponding new stages of civilised life. In other words, this is a project for the progressive realisation of human and cultural potentials that demands careful and critical attention.

Re-defining the path ahead

For Wilber, the possibilities for further transformations of human life and culture come from inner work, daily practice, not mere intellectualism stuck within its own heady isolationism.²¹ Yet this transformation is already developing 'in the hearts and minds of those individuals who themselves evolve to centauric planetary vision'. Such individuals play a key role, they:

create a 'cognitive potential' in the form of new worldviews... that in turn feed back into the ongoing mainstream of social institutions, until the previously 'marginalised' worldview becomes anchored in institutional forms which then catapult a collective consciousness to a new and higher release.²²

Further stages of individual and social development are not just abstract potentials because they are founded on structures of consciousness beyond those of the mental-egoic level. This is one of the distinctive features of Wilber's account: he is not writing merely as a rational intellect. He *has* a rational intellect and it is used to great effect, but it is modulated with a deep insight into higher forms of consciousness which can only arise from personal practice and the direct experience which emerges from it.

So in this view, the way forward, as noted, to reintegrate the 'big three' and in so doing, to balance out the 'eye (or way of knowing) of the senses', the 'eye of reason' and the 'eye of contemplation'.²³ This view provides a real challenge for FS, not merely a marginal comment. It should also be stressed that Wilber's account is not deterministic.

The human experiment on Earth is indeed imperilled. Moreover, the civilisations ahead of us cannot be pre-specified in any detail; at this point they exist only as emergent potentials. Thus 'these higher structures (psychic, subtle, causal, nondual) are potential world spaces, pre-ontological world spaces, that are given only in deep form, not in surface manifestation.'²⁴ This means that there is indeed much work to be done. As ever 'we have to make the future that is given to us.'²⁵ In this respect, a familiar topic in FS is given new significance.

Hence the central project of FS can be re-framed and re-constituted, taken beyond the polarities of modernity and post-modernity, re-situated in a larger world that is resonant with meaning, purpose and emergent potential. For a rare and outstanding example see Elgin, 1993.²⁶ It follows that futures workers can join with other workers and traditions to move out of the confined epistemological, ontological and technological spaces of the late-industrial 'flatland' to explore a new synthesis of 'I', 'we' and 'it.'

Conclusion: transcending flatland, or, the most interesting futures...

Wilber's analysis should give pause to those futurists who have learned to market their insights and ply their trade within the limited boundaries of late industrialism, with all that that implies. It suggests that at worst they may be supporting the continued dominance of 'flatland' rationality, while at best they may be agents of transformation. Equally, the perspective provides some support for those who have always believed that the route to a livable future was not just by the door marked 'instrumental reason, technology, progress'.

What Wilber essentially offers is a broader, higher and deeper frame than those that thrived during the industrial era. It certainly has a number of flaws and drawbacks, some of which are noted above. Yet as an interpretative scheme, it also challenges us to lift our eyes, and our aspirations, from the usual measures of success, wealth and well-being that have become 'normal' in these late industrial, highly abnormal, times. As noted, the perspective offers a decisive rejoinder to all those who think that the keys to the future will be found via genetic engineering, the internet or nanotechnology. It links the central project of FS with social movements that are attempting to recover from three centuries of industrial expansionism.

Equally, Wilber's account gives heart to all those who believe that individuals do matter, that what they do (or fail to do) has real consequences. The path of social innovation is clear. It runs from the clear understanding of particular individuals, their commitment to whatever form of practice that will elevate their consciousness from the mental-egoic to that of vision-logic and beyond. From here the outputs of higher-order engagement are expressed in a variety of practices: in social innovations of many kinds, inner and outer. This has long seemed a most productive output of successful futures work—*inventing the future 'from the ground up'*, as it were. The present perspective provides significant support for that view.

It follows that the most interesting futures are not those which spring from the world of reference represented by one or two of the four quadrants, but from that represented by all of them. It is easy to imagine futures in which vision-logic, the transpersonal realm and those beyond it were never achieved; easy because the Dystopian consequences have been clearly displayed in books, films, TV, computer games and so on. In this context, the continuing emergence of powerful new technologies can only lead to what I have termed 'a continuing disaster' because the 'It' world contains no principle of self-

limitation. If left to itself it will engulf human cultures and the world they are located in. For a stark and convincing 'outer' view of the nightmares ahead see Broderick, 1997.²⁷

If we shift the scene, change the parameters, a different world picture emerges. In a world where the 'average level' consciousness moved toward the vision–logic stage or above, the powers of new technologies would be seen in their wider context. It is highly likely that raw technical power would be reigned in because it would be understood that such power, taken alone, was entirely defeating of the human project. In other words, *the most interesting futures are those in which human and social evolution matches that of scientific and technological development*. One term for this is 'transformational futures'. The latter should not be seen merely as 'flaky' notions to be dismissed by hard-headed realists. The latter only need to look carefully at the 'high-tech wonderland' (the 'It' world) with clear-eyed awareness to see within it structural limitations and the seeds of its own demise. However, beyond all the pathways to despair and breakdown lie futures that are qualitatively different and which hold out quite new human and cultural options. As I have noted elsewhere:

when a right relationship is re-established between people, culture and technology a whole new world of options emerges. This is the key which unlocks the future, takes us beyond the collapse of industrialism, moves us decisively beyond the abyss, proves that there can indeed be 'light at the end of the tunnel'.²⁸

Here, then, is a challenging programme for futurist expertise and aspiration to focus upon. In this view a central task of FS could be to map the parameters of a more subtle world and to assist others into an active engagement with their own potentials in a vastly expanded and infinitely more benign universe.

Notes and references

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