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# Transpersonal Psychology and the Paradigm of Complexity

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The last few decades have seen the emergence of a growing body of literature<sup>[1]</sup> devoted to a critique of the so-called “old” or “Cartesian-Newtonian” paradigm which, in the wake of the prodigious successes of modern natural science, came to dominate the full range of authoritative intellectual discourse and its associated worldviews. Often coupled with a materialistic, and indeed atomistic, metaphysics, this paradigm has been guided by the methodological principle of *reductionism*. The critics of reductionism have tended to promote various forms of *holism*, a term which, perhaps more than any other, has served as the rallying cry for those who see themselves as creators of a “new paradigm.” More recently, the notion of *complexity* has been taken up by the more scientifically informed representatives of the new paradigm, without, however, sufficient awareness of the fact that what excites the scientists is the possibility of explaining, modeling—in short, of reducing—the phenomenon of complexity to fundamentally simple, essentially atomistic, operational counters.<sup>[2]</sup> The situation is quite otherwise, however, in the work of renowned French thinker Edgar Morin, whose professional life has been devoted to elucidating the irreducible character of genuine complexity. Because his work has yet to reach a wide American audience,<sup>[3]</sup> most new paradigm thinkers (the majority of whom are American), have not had the benefit of his masterful critique of reductionism, or simplification, as he prefers to call it.<sup>[4]</sup> Nevertheless, the principles of complex thinking which inform this critique are, to my mind, essential for any coherent theoretical challenge to the still dominant paradigm of simplification.

At the forefront of such a challenge, and in many ways the herald of the new paradigm, is the relatively new movement of transpersonal psychology. Responding to the revolution in consciousness associated with the 60s counterculture—which involved widespread interest in “altered” states of consciousness, oriental philosophies and spiritual disciplines, ecological awareness, social activism, and speculative or “fringe” science—Abraham Maslow, Stanislav Grof, Anthony Sutich, and James Fadiman proposed the term “transpersonal” to describe a new, “fourth force” psychology (the first three forces being behaviorism, psychoanalysis, and humanistic psychology). The prefix *trans* points to the concept of *transcendence* implied in a whole class of experiences involving “an extension of identity beyond both individuality and personality” (Walsh and Vaughan, p.16).

In taking seriously such experiences, transpersonal theory has been compelled to transcend the disciplinary boundaries of mainstream psychology. On the one hand, it has opened itself to the reality of “Spirit” in its many forms (as revealed in myths and visions, meditation and other contemplative disciplines, in philosophy, art, doctrines, and rituals), and so

has drawn freely from such disciplines as religious studies, cultural anthropology, and comparative philosophy. On the other hand, in its attempt to articulate more comprehensive and coherent models of the psyche capable of accommodating experiences of transcendence, transpersonal theory has also led the way in exploring the fruitfulness of conceptual analogues drawn from the leading edge of the natural sciences (the new physics, evolutionary biology, Systems Theory). In what follows, I will explore the transdisciplinary excursions of transpersonal psychology with an eye on the extent to which its theoretical innovations embody the principles of complex thinking—i.e., the *dialogic*, the *holographic* principle, and *recursivity*. It is my belief that, while transpersonal psychology has already attained a level of considerable theoretical maturity, it would be greatly assisted in fulfilling its transdisciplinary promise were it to enter into ongoing dialogue with the paradigm of complexity as articulated by Morin.

Although the official beginnings of the transpersonal movement date only from 1969, significant theoretical advances were already underway at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1903, just three years after the publication of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, Frederic Myers, in his massive (and posthumous) *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, proposed a radically transpersonal view of the human psyche based on an enormous quantity of data collected by the British Society for Psychological Research. Whether or not one agrees with Myers's conclusions regarding the probability of some kind of personal immortality, his subtle musings on the complex character of the "subliminal Self" deserve far greater attention than they have hitherto received. Steering a middle course between, on the one hand, the "old-fashioned or common sense" view of the psyche as organized around the "unity of the Ego" and, on the other hand, the then current experimental view of the psyche as a biologically driven "co-ordination" of disparate elements, Myers concluded:

I regard each man as at once profoundly unitary and almost infinitely composite, as inheriting from earthly ancestors a multiplex and "colonial" organism—polyzoic and perhaps polypsychic in an extreme degree; but also as ruling and unifying that organism by a soul or spirit absolutely beyond our present analysis—a soul which has originated in a spiritual or metetherial environment; which even while embodied subsists in that environment; and which will subsist therein after the body's decay.

Writing in his 1901 Gifford Lectures, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James regarded Myers's concept of the subliminal, or "transmarginal," Self as "the most important step forward that has occurred in psychology since I have been a student of that science... R 21;(James, 234). Commenting on the implications of the transmarginal

Self, James writes:

It is that our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different.... No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded.... [they] may determine attitudes though they cannot furnish formulas, and open a region though they fail to give a map....

Looking back on his own experiences and investigations of this region, James feels that “they all converge towards a kind of insight to which I cannot help ascribing some metaphysical significance.”

It is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity. Not only do they, as contrasted species, belong to one and the same genus, but *one of the species*, the nobler and better one, *is itself the genus, and so soaks up and absorbs its opposite into itself*. This is a dark saying, I know, when thus expressed in terms of common logic.... those who have ears to hear, let them hear (ibid., 374).

It is telling that, in recognizing ordinary consciousness as embedded within what he elsewhere describes as multiple “fields” of indeterminate extent, James is driven to transcend “the terms of common logic” and invoke an epistemology that can encompass the unity, or co-presence, of opposites. When knowledge of organization (in this case, the organization of consciousness or the psyche) reaches the threshold of complexity, as Morin so often demonstrates, one cannot avoid a corresponding reformation in the organization of knowledge. Such a reformation, as we shall see, is a characteristic trait of the transpersonal project.

C. G. Jung, one of James’s younger contemporaries, clearly had ears to hear, and struggled for over half a century to lay the groundwork for a truly complex psychology. His first move in this direction involved trying to account for the fact that the perspectives of Freud and Adler, though mutually antagonistic, were equally complementary. They were, as Morin would say, *dialogically* related (see Morin 1977, 80). While one or the other perspective might prove more therapeutically advantageous, depending upon the specific needs of the individual client, a truly coherent and comprehensive model of the psyche must be able to accommodate both. Jung concluded that Freud’s perspective, which emphasizes the sexual instinct, is primarily object-oriented—or extraverted, as he proposed to call it—while Adler’s, which emphasizes the power drive—is introverted. This fundamental typological distinction allowed Jung to

make sense not only of the conflict between Freud and Adler, but also of the analogous tension running throughout the history of ideas (with the perennial dispute between materialists and idealists, for instance).

A second tension with which Jung struggled, and which clearly signaled his break with Freud, concerns the dialogical relation between the reductive-analytic and the prospective-synthetic perspectives on the meaning of psychological symptoms. Again, Jung always granted that certain cases are best approached from a classical analytic perspective, with its reduction to early childhood experiences (the oedipal conflict). In other cases, however, such a reduction does violence to the future-oriented drive for meaning and wholeness—a drive which Jung considered as equally fundamental as the sex drive or the drive for power—where the incest motif, for instance, can be interpreted as a symbol of rebirth or psychological regeneration.

The goal toward which, however implicitly, the psyche's symbolic productions seemed to point was the actualization of a potential wholeness the phenomenology of which, though always in some way specific to the individual in question, nevertheless suggested an invariant deep structure. Jung proposed the term “individuation” to describe the psyche's process of self-actualization, and the term “Self” for that which is actualized. The wholeness of the Self is clearly complex in character, which is why, says Jung, that “it can only be described in antinomial terms” (Jung, Vol. 9ii, par.115). It is “both ego and non-ego, subjective and objective, individual and collective. It is the “uniting symbol” which epitomizes the total union of opposites” (Jung, 16: 474). Though Jung used several phrases to describe the nature of the Self— from the “psyche in its totality” and the “more compendious personality” to “the god within” (in this sense making the association with the theological notion of the *imago dei*, the Atman, and the Tao)— the most succinct formula (adopted from Nicolas of Cusa) is that of the Self as *complexio oppositorum* (See Jung, 6:790; 9ii:355, 423; 11:283, 716; 12:259).

Jung recognized that the concept of the Self is a “transcendental postulate” which, “although justified empirically, does not allow of scientific proof” (Jung, 7:404). This “step beyond science”—by which we can understand the conception of science advocated by the paradigm of reductionism or simplification—“is an unconditional requirement of the psychological development I sought to depict, because without this postulate I could give no adequate formulation of the psychic processes that occur empirically” (ibid.).

Corresponding to the concept of the Self as “transcendental postulate” is Jung's notion of the “transcendent function” which, in general terms, is the cognitive process that “arises from the union of conscious and unconscious

contents” (Jung., 8:131). This function represents a creative response on the part of the individuating ego when it finds itself trapped between two seemingly irreconcilable positions—for instance, between the promptings of intuition or feeling and the voice of reason, or between the security of habitual values and the lure of innovative change. In such a conflict situation, the confrontation of the two positions “generates a tension charged with energy and creates a living, third thing—not a logical stillbirth in accordance with the principle *tertium non datur* but a movement out of the suspension between opposites, a living birth that leads to a new level of being, a new situation” (ibid., 189). There now emerges “a new content, constellated by thesis and antithesis in equal measure and standing in a compensatory relation to both” (Jung, 6:825). This comes very close to what Morin sees as perhaps the greatest virtue of complex thinking—namely, “the aptitude of *enveloping the anti in the meta*” (Morin 1982, 317). What this means is “not letting oneself be dissociated by contradiction and antagonism... but on the contrary, integrating it in a whole (*ensemble*) where it may continue to ferment, where, without losing its destructive potential, it acquires at the same time a constructive possibility” (ibid., 318).

## II

The complexification of psychology evident in the early transpersonal models of the psyche proposed by Myers, James, and Jung, received unexpected clinical-experiential confirmation in the 1950s and 60s through the pioneering psychedelic research of Stanislav Grof, one of the original founders of the transpersonal movement. The experiential data on the effects of LSD gathered by Grof and his colleagues in Prague, and subsequently confirmed through thousands of drug-free sessions of holotropic breathwork,<sup>[5]</sup> totally undermined the paradigmatic assumptions of Grof’s materialistic, atheistic, and classical Freudian training. Deep, experiential engagement with the psyche, though it confirmed the relative truth of Freud’s “biographical-recollective” view of the unconscious, also revealed deeper and subtler realms, including the Rankian (or “perinatal”) unconscious, the Jungian-archetypal, and beyond. Human beings, Grof writes, show a peculiar ambiguity which somewhat resembles the particle-wave dichotomy of light and subatomic matter. In some situations, they can be successfully described as separate material objects and biological machines, whereas in others they manifest the properties of vast fields of consciousness that transcend the limitations of space, time, and causality. There seems to be a fundamental dynamic tension between these two aspects of human nature, which reflects the ambiguity between the part and the whole that exists all through the cosmos on different levels of reality (Grof 1985, 344).

Grof was the first transpersonal psychologist to suggest that the

holographic model which David Bohm had proposed for the new physics and Karl Pribram for brain research was equally fruitful for the realm of the psyche. According to Morin, the *holographic* principle—which involves the recognition that “the parts are in the whole which is in the parts” (see Morin 1986, 104)—is an essential ingredient of complex thinking. While ordinary, or “hylotropic” consciousness “involves the experience of oneself as a solid physical entity with definite boundaries and a limited sensory range, living in three-dimensional space and linear time” (Grof, 1985, 345), “*holotropic*” consciousness “involves identification with a field of consciousness with no definite boundaries which has unlimited experiential access to different aspects of reality without the mediation of the senses” (ibid. 346).

Experiences in the holotropic mode systematically support a set of assumptions diametrically different from that characterizing the hylotropic mode: the solidity and discontinuity of matter is an illusion generated by a particular orchestration of events in consciousness; time and space are ultimately arbitrary; the same space can be simultaneously occupied by many objects; the past and the future can be brought experientially into the present moment; one can experience oneself in several places at the same time; one can experience several temporal frameworks simultaneously; being a part is not incompatible with being the whole; something can be true and untrue at the same time; form and emptiness are interchangeable; and others (ibid.).

Clearly, holotropic experiences constitute a serious challenge to the paradigm of simplification. They demand an honoring not only of the holographic principle, but of the dialogic as well insofar as holotropic experiences tend to exist in a state of “fundamental dynamic tension” with respect to ordinary, hylotropic consciousness. While Grof considers neurotic and psychotic phenomena to be the result of “an unresolved conflict between the two modes” (ibid., 400), he envisions the possibility of a “higher sanity” for individuals “who have achieved a balanced interplay of both complementary [and, we should add, antagonistic] modes of consciousness” (ibid., 401).

While Grof, like Jung before him, has sought to expand and complexify his model of the psyche to accommodate the empirical data with which, as a clinician and researcher, he was faced, Ken Wilber, the most ambitious and formidable theoretician of the transpersonal movement, is the first explicitly and intentionally to overstep the disciplinary boundaries of scientific psychology. In his first book, *The Spectrum of Consciousness* (1977), Wilber argued for the partiality and one-sidedness of the major schools of psychology, each of which was seen to correspond to a distinct “band” of the consciousness spectrum. The higher wavelengths of the spectrum, moreover, transcend psychology altogether, and it is to the

world's philosophical and spiritual traditions that we must turn for indications of their nature (as Myers, James, Jung, and Grof, in their own way, also suggested).

In his 1983 book, *Eye to Eye*, Wilber called for a “transcendental paradigm” or “*overall* knowledge quest that would include not only the ‘hard ware’ of physical sciences but also the ‘soft ware’ of philosophy and psychology and the ‘transcendental ware’ of mystical-spiritual religion” (Wilber 1983, 1). Alongside the spectrum model, and eventually more or less replacing it in importance, Wilber appealed to the “perennial” philosophical notion of the “Great Chain of Being,” whose major “links” are Matter, Life, Mind, and Spirit, or physiosphere, biosphere, noosphere, and theosphere. Coupled with the metaphor of the Great Chain is the master-concept of *holarchy*, which Wilber has adopted, and creatively adapted, from Systems Theory and certain strands of evolutionary biology. This concept, which itself implies the idea of a nested hierarchy of spheres within spheres, is somewhat at odds with the Great Chain metaphor, which rather suggests the idea of sequentially and externally related “links.” Wilber admits that “we can use metaphors of ‘levels’ or ‘ladders’ or ‘strata’ [or links or spheres] only if we exercise a little imagination in understanding the complexity that is actually involved” (Wilber 1995, 19). At his best, Wilber succeeds admirably in doing just that. In his discussion of the Nondual character of the Absolute, for instance, Wilber recognizes that “Reality is not just Summit (omega) and not just Source (alpha), but is Suchness—the timeless and ever-present Ground which is equally and fully present in and as every single being, high or low, ascending or descending, effluxing or refluxing” (ibid., 347).

Despite, however, Wilber's occasional stressing of the equipotency in the cosmic economy of hierarchy and heterarchy (or depth and span) and Ascent and Descent (or purpose and play), he still insists that the noosphere contains the biosphere, but not the reverse (and that the theosphere contains them both, but not the reverse). In this, and certain other respects, although still highly pertinent to the transdisciplinary project, Wilber's paradigm is insufficiently spiced, as it were, with the essential ingredients of complex thinking. His understanding of holarchical integration (the higher includes the lower) gives expression to only half of the holographic principle (which implies that the lower also includes the higher). By the same token, Wilber does not seem to recognize that the various links in the Great Chain are not only holarchically, but also dialogically related. As I have similarly argued (see Kelly 1993) with respect to Hegel, holarchical integration, as Wilber advocates it, is colored by an introverted, idealist bias toward the auto (or ego)-logic of Spirit over the eco-logic of nature. This bias obscures the degree to which the “higher” (mind or Spirit) sometimes not only does not



include, but actively represses the “lower” (the body, Nature; see Kelly 1998). In such cases, the whole, as Morin would say, is not all (see Morin 1977, 123ff.). Also obscured is the paradoxical manner in which mind and spirit are subtly embedded within, and often manifest powerfully through, the body and nature (a point stressed especially by ecofeminists and deep ecologists). And this, again, despite the fact that Wilber can claim—and rightly, I believe—that, “If spirit is completely transcendent, it is also completely immanent. I am firmly convinced that if a new and comprehensive paradigm is ever to emerge, that paradox will be its heart” (Wilber 1983, 293).

The ability of the mind to countenance this paradox (and its corollaries) demands the mobilization of what Wilber calls “vision-logic” which, he writes, “is a higher holon that *operates upon* (and thus transcends) its junior holons, such as simple rationality itself.”

As such, vision-logic can hold in mind contradictions, it can unify opposites, it is dialectical and non-linear, and it weaves together what otherwise appear to be incompatible notions, as long as they relate together in the new and higher holon, *negated* in their partiality but *preserved* in their positive contributions (Wilber 1995, 185).

This description leaves no doubt that vision-logic, as Wilber conceives of it, is more or less identical with the Hegelian dialectic and its process of “sublation” (*aufheben*). While Morin honors Hegel for having recognized, with the dialectic, “the existence of a principle of negativity which transforms all things, all beings, all acts into their opposites” (Morin 1980, 82), he faults Hegel for considering contradiction a transitory “moment” of the *Aufhebung*, a moment which is ultimately annulled in the “synthesis” of the third term (see Morin 1982, 289). Wilber’s vision-logic is subject to the same strictures, particularly insofar as it subserves the idealist metaphysics associated with the root metaphor of the Great Chain of Being. Although the notion of vision-logic represents a significant step beyond the formal-operational thinking typical of the mature (Western) mental ego, it must, like the Hegelian dialectic, “itself be sublated in a dialogic... that instigates the interaction, through the joining in a manner at once complementary... and antagonistic, of two logic s—auto-logic and eco-logic” (Morin 1980, 82).

In his most recent writings, Wilber has combined the Great Chain metaphor with, and embedded it within, a “Kosmic mandala” consisting of two intersecting axes—Interior/Exterior and Individual/Collective—which, when combined, yield four quadrants or world spaces: the intentional (interior/individual), the cultural (interior/collective), the behavioral (exterior/individual), and the social (exterior/collective). Though it is possible, and indeed practically necessary sometimes, to

consider discrete “holons” as they manifest in one or the other quadrant, Wilber insists that any truly “integral,” or we might say “complex,” methodology must proceed on the basis of an “all-quadrant, all-level” approach. “This is a methodology,” he writes, of “phenomenologically and contemporaneously tracking the various levels and lines in each of the quadrants and then correlating their overall relations, each to all of the others, and in no way trying to reduce any to the others” (Wilber 1997, 91). While I couldn’t agree more strongly, it is once again unclear just how such a methodology squares with his strict adherence to the perennialist version of holarchical integration where Mind (the Interior, or “left” hand quadrants) includes Matter (the Exterior, or “right” hand quadrants), but not the reverse.

Toward the end of the first volume of his monumental Kosmos trilogy, Wilber poses the following questions:

Can we not see Spirit as the Life of Evolution and the Love of Kosmos itself...? Does not the refluxing movement of God and the effluxing movement of the Goddess embrace the entire Circle of Ascent and Descent? Can we not...see that Spirit always manifests in all four quadrants equally? Is not Spirit here and now in all its radiant glory, eternally present as every I and every We and every It? (Wilber 1995, 522).

It is in passages such as these that Wilber comes closest to realizing a truly integral or complex point of view. Though lacking a sufficiently dialogical grasp of the relations involved, his claim that “the circle of Ascending and Descending energies must always be unbroken” (Wilber 1995, 326) does suggest a recognition of the principle of *recursivity* which, along with the dialogic and the holographic principle, is one of Morin’s essential ingredients of complex thinking. According to Morin, a process is recursive when it “causes/produces the effects/products necessary for its own regeneration” (Morin 1981, 162). It is “the circuitous process whereby the ultimate effect or product becomes the initial element or first cause” (Morin 1977, 186). The recursivity evident on the metaphysical plane with the relation AscentàDescent (and DescentàAscent) is mirrored on the psychological plane in the relation personalàtranspersonal (and transpersonal à personal), as well on the methodological or disciplinary plane with the relation scienceàspirituality (and spiritualityàscience). In contrast to the situation where Ascent, the transpersonal, and spirituality would sublimate their respective correlates in a “higher” (idealist) synthesis, a truly complex (meta) point of view would insure that the “Great Circle,” as Wilber calls it, remain unbroken. For this to happen, however, the concepts of holism (or holarchy) and the Nondual, though cardinal insights in their own right, will have to be tempered with the dialogic, the

holographic principle, and the principle of recursivity.

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We have seen that what drives transpersonal psychology in the direction of complexity is its focus on transcendence (of the mental ego and of psychology's disciplinary closure). Let me conclude with a few words on how the concept of spiritual transcendence appears to function in Morin's articulation of the emerging paradigm of complexity. On a first reading, it might seem that Morin makes no room for transcendence, at least not in the sense of Wilber's holarchical ontology. Morin recognizes no theosphere, or Absolute Spirit, which includes as it transcends the phenomenal world studied by the various sciences (whether natural or human). He is unambiguous in his rejection of the religions of salvation, whether otherworldly or this worldly. "There is no salvation", Morin writes,

in the sense of religions that promise personal immortality. There is no earthly salvation, as promised by the communist religion—that is, a social solution—in which the lives of all and everyone would be freed from misfortune, uncertainty, and tragedy. We must forsake this salvation radically and definitively (Morin 1998,134).

And yet Morin does recognize that, though the human condition is irrevocably "this worldly and bound to the fate of the Earth," it nonetheless "also involves a quest for the beyond. Not a beyond outside of the world, but a beyond relative to the *hic et nunc*, to misery and misfortune, an unknown beyond that is proper to the unknown adventure" (ibid., 135). It is in this sense of transcendence as an immanent "beyond" that Morin is able to envision the possibility, and even the necessity, of a third type of religion—no t a religion of salvation, but a religion of fellowship, freedom, and love. In such a religion, "the absence of God would reveal an omnipresent mystery." Such a religion "would be without revelation (like Buddhism), a religion of love (like Christianity), of compassion (like Buddhism), although without the salvation of the immortal/risen self or deliverance through the dissipation of self." (ibid., 142) Just how we experience, and make sense of, the "omnipresent mystery" of the immanent beyond is, of course, a central concern of transpersonal psychology. Although, as we have seen, its various formulations of human selfhood—whether Myers's and James's subliminal or transmarginal Self, Jung's Self as *complexio oppositorium*, Grof's holotropic, or Wilber's holarchical Self—all represent significant attempts at coming to terms with the complex character of the immanent beyond, much remains to be explored. Transpersonal psychology is barely three decades old, and it will doubtless continue to mature in the direction of greater theoretical subtlety and sophistication. If it is to carry on, and

fulfill its role as one of the leaders of the new paradigm, it will do well to stay true to the path of complexity. We are fortunate, who walk this path, to have, in Edgar Morin, such a seasoned and trustworthy guide.

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[1] Some of the most prominent names here are David Bohm, Karl Pribram, Rupert Sheldrake, Frijtof Capra, Marilyn Ferguson, David Peat, Joanna Macy, Charlene Spretnak, Stanislav Grof, Duane Elgin, and Ken Wilber, among others.

[2] The theory of fractals, for instance, and the imaging technology which has followed from it, suggests that the seemingly infinite complexity of natural forms—in the wave patterns of a flowing stream, for example—can be exhaustively accounted for through the mechanical iteration of fundamentally simple mathematical operators.

[3] Only two of Morin's major works have so far been translated into English (and one of them, unfortunately, over-literally [see References]). To date, Morin has published over forty volumes and countless essays, most of which have been translated into just about every language but English.

[4] Nor, for that matter, of his critique of holism (see Morin 1977, 123ff.).

[5] A technique of deep experiential therapy which combines accelerated breathing, evocative music, and focused body work to mobilize the unconscious (see Grof 1988).

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