
Dangers of Transpersonal Psychology: A Reply to Ken Wilber

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This article is a reply to Ken Wilber's critique of Albert Ellis's "Fanaticism that may lead to a nuclear holocaust," which outlines some of the dangers of transpersonal psychology and psychotherapy.

Since the editor has given me only 240 lines to reply to Wilber's (1989) diatribe against my objections to transpersonal psychology (Ellis, 1986), let me *very* briefly reply.

1. Wilber may be surprised to know that I have read scores of books and articles by "respected writers in the field" of transpersonalism, as cited in my forthcoming book, *The dangers of transpersonal psychology* (Ellis & Yeager, in press).

2. I was once close to logical positivism but since 1976 have followed Karl Popper and W.W. Bartley, who uphold critical rationalism (or critical realism), which holds that scientific theories are to be stated so that they are falsifiable—as the theory of logical positivism is not stated.

3. I am opposed to scientism—and to all kinds of dogmaticisms (Ellis, 1962). As Wilber admits, believers in scientism and absolutism "tend to be fanatics." I am glad that he endorses this main point of my criticized article!

4. Wilber wrongly quotes me as saying that "we must incorporate therapeutic teachings and bring them to all the masses." Using rational-emotive therapy (RET), I said *had better, not must*. Bringing antimusturbatory teachings to the masses is *not* utopian, as Wilber claims, though *convincing* all of them certainly may be! And I certainly would not *force* the world's population to learn RET—only *encourage* them!

5. I do not "approach religion as if it were a disease . . . to be cured at all costs." Instead, I oppose *religiosity*, which I have defined as a dogmatic, fanatical belief in theological religion (e.g., Christianity) and in secular religion (e.g., fascism and Freudianism)(Ellis, 1982, 1985).

6. Wilber denies that mysticism has dogmas or formalism that claim to be the best and only way to describe reality. *Some* mystics, such as Buddha and Wilber, are, of course, open minded. But how about St. Augustine, John of the Cross, Joseph Smith, H.P. Blavatsky, Emanuel Swedenborg, the Fox sisters, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Jim Jones, Sri Swami Rama, and so forth?

7. Virtually all mystics, as Wilber notes, believe in an "absolute spirit," and, as he also states, "believers in absolute systems tend to be fanatics." Again, he endorses one of my main points of view!

8. Wilber claims that mystics "call Spirit many who is really one" and that therefore they are tolerant of diverse religious beliefs. But if you firmly believe that there is only One Truth, One God, and One Spirit you can easily fight, censor, and per-

secute any group that holds pluralistic or different views. Many mystical cults are combative!

9. Wilber contends that when asked what absolute reality is, mystics respond with silence. What mystics? Not St. Augustine! Not Madame Blavatsky! Not Khomeini!

10. Wilber says that mysticism is undogmatic because "it relies for its validation on direct experience." But direct *personal* experience unbacked by *other* more objective experimentation is unfalsifiable and dogmatic! Science, contrary to Wilber's allegation, does *not* rely on personal direct experience but on *repeated* observations. The "direct experience" of mystics includes highly biased, dogmatic *interpretations* and *conclusions* that are usually vague and nondisputable.

11. Wilber notes that "zealots and fanatics come in all flavors (Nazi doctors, for example) just as there are religious fanatics." Right. *Secular* religionists, as I pointed out previously (Ellis, 1982), can easily be fanatical and terroristic. But I hypothesize that whereas relatively few scientists are fanatics (and have strong *religiosity* when they are), a much higher proportion of mystics are dogmatists and zealots; and that zealotry tends to be a concomitant of profound mysticism and pious religiousness. I would also guess that zealots and bigots tend to be significantly more mystical and religious than do liberals and democrats.

This hypothesis, of course, merits empirical study. But, as I note below, such study had better be carefully done.

12. Wilber cites many leading philosophers, psychologists, and scientists who are mystical. True. But I could easily cite some outstanding people, including scientists, who piously believed in astrology, Tarot card reading, clairvoyance, psychokinesis, ghosts, reincarnation, UFOs, astral projection, psychic surgery, exorcism, gurus with godly powers, and other "psychic" phenomena.

13. I still would uphold the view, which Wilber quotes me on, that even the greatest thinkers and psychologists who hold transpersonal or transcendental ideas not *necessarily* but *very often* "promulgate almost exactly the kind of absolutistic ideology that is devoutly held by the religious and political sectarians who may some day atomically annihilate the whole human race." Many of them *do* hold this ideology that encourages the sectarians to think in the confused, absolutist way that they think—and act! Wilber keeps pointing out that not *all* transpersonalists are devout, absolutist, or violent. Of course they are not. But my point is that if we thoroughly examined a thousand transpersonalists and another thousand nontranspersonalists, a significantly higher percentage of the former than the latter would be found to be dogmatic, bigoted, and violence prone.

Before such a study is actually done, however, let me warn that many transpersonalists who answer any questionnaire about

their dogmatism and hostility will very probably *claim* to be open minded and tolerant—just as many religious people *claim* to be happily married when it is dubious that they actually are. So let the researchers beware!

14. Wilber claims that morality is based on human sameness. We do good for others because we realize, with Schopenhauer, "that we all share the same transcendental self or consciousness." This is drivel, since the human sameness on which morality is often based is a very down-to-earth, observable human sameness and has nothing to do with the transcendental or superhuman concept of self or commonality.

15. Wilber points out that most Eastern followers of reincarnation and karma "don't even like to kill insects, let alone people." He forgets that *some* of these followers devoutly believe that they will be rewarded in their afterlife if they *do* kill the disbelievers and "heathens" in this life—and that they will be severely punished if they don't!

16. Wilber states that I give "four suppositions that are supposed to define the entire field" of transpersonalism. For brevity's sake, after the editor had cut down my originally longer paper, I mentioned these four concepts in my article, but I include no less than 35 basic transpersonal ideologies in my forthcoming book on the dangers of transpersonalism (Ellis & Yeager, in press). And I do not believe that *all* transpersonalists subscribe to these concepts, but as far as I can see, virtually all of them subscribe to many of these ideas.

17. Wilber: Ellis "cannot give so much as a single case of a person describing himself or herself as a transpersonal psychologist who has ever engaged in terrorist or similarly grave antisocial activity." In my book on the dangers of transpersonal psychology (Ellis & Yeager, in press), I cite scores of instances where transpersonalists definitely did resort to terrorist and to similarly grave antisocial activity.

18. Wilber quotes a few transpersonalists who do not strictly go along with my statement that "absolute reality exists, and when we find the true doctrine that reveals it, we reach absolute, invariant, unchangeable, ineffable truth." But he fails to note that innumerable transpersonalists do subscribe to this view or something close to it.

19. Wilber states: "I do not know anybody who thinks reincarnation has been empirically proven." Well, his contacts are strictly limited! I personally know and have heard of many believers in reincarnation—e.g., Shirley MacLaine!—who are positive that they and other people have talked to dead "spirits." Although Ian Stevenson was agnostic about the issue of reincarnation, hundreds of other investigators have been quite convinced of its "empirical" existence.

20. Wilber takes me to task for saying that transcendentalists believe that "all living and inanimate things merge into one fundamental unit." But he merely shows that *he* takes issue with my word *merge*. Many mystics *do* see all things as merging into one unit. Thus, Deikman (1972, p.1), a mystical-minded psy-

chiatrist, says that mystics believe that "the awareness of a tree is not different from our own, it is continuous with it and awareness is the origin of the entire system." And Taoism, the world's most popular form of mysticism, definitely holds that inanimate matter and animate life are one, and essentially merge.

21. Wilber: "Most transpersonalists are extremely sympathetic to science, and wish that the spirit of scientific enterprise—a certain honesty, integrity, and openness in research—be used as much as possible." No, transpersonalists often give lip service to science and use scientific findings (as Fritjof Capra does) to illegitimately bolster their mystical beliefs. But Webster's New World Dictionary defines *mystic* as "of obscure or occult character or meaning" and "beyond human comprehension." And it defines *transcendental* as "based on a search for reality through spiritual intuition." Surely this is not science! Modern philosophies of science, moreover, while abjuring logical positivism, hold that to be "scientific" a hypothesis had better be falsifiable. As far as I know, none of the truly transpersonal theories are falsifiable.

22. Wilber says that I do not understand the crucial difference between regressive *pre-rational* states (which presumably include the dangers I have accused transpersonal believers of fomenting) and "higher development *trans-rational* states." No, I do not quite understand this difference, though I have read his well-written article on the *pre-trans fallacy* (Wilber, 1982). As far as I can see, both states are equally mystical, magical, and transpersonal. But even if Wilber is right, he himself (in his *pre-trans fallacy* paper) accuses many transpersonalists of adhering to the *pre-trans fallacy*, so that he substantiates the major point of my criticized paper. For I did not say that *all* transpersonalists are dangerous but that a *great many* are. Apparently, Wilber agrees!

As can be seen, I hope, from the above comments, Wilber's critique of my critique has much heat and little light. Exactly what I would expect of most transpersonal thinkers!

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