

# AN ONTOLOGICAL MODEL OF DEVELOPMENT

by William S. Schmidt, Ph.D.

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The field of Pastoral Care in general and Psychology of Religion in particular has increasingly attempted to look at issues of spiritual development and movement toward optimum human potential. This interest has emerged as a necessary supplement to our understandings of psychodynamics and psychopathology.

However, the current prevailing perspectives are inadequate for understanding the full range of human consciousness, as well as inadequate as a guide for therapeutic and pastoral interventions when it comes to facilitating movement toward the Ultimate.

Most developmental schemes, such as those developed by Freud, Piaget, Loewinger, Erickson, or Kohlberg, tend to operate out of an ego-bound paradigm. Even the recent book, *Stage of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* by James Fowler, squeezes faith and spiritual development into the narrow confines of ego psychology.<sup>1</sup> This study does not intend to overturn the insights gained up to this point, but to supplement them with a trans-egoic paradigm which can begin to map the "farther reaches" of psycho-spiritual development.

One of the major theorists who is attempting to grapple with the new paradigm is the transpersonal psychologist, Ken Wilber, who has emerged as one of the foremost psychologists of religion of our time, and is on the cutting edge of new developments in consciousness studies and transpersonal psychology. His insights demand integration and such serve as the frame of reference for this article.

There are some basic questions which must be addressed in any analysis of human development. How is Being related to the process of human development? Is spiritual development continuous or discontinuous with current development theory? How do recent discoveries in consciousness research and transcendence affect the overall scheme?

The basic developmental phases which Wilber

outlines (Figure 1) are (1) the prepersonal or subconscious realm, (2) the personal or self-conscious realm, and (3) the transpersonal or superconscious realm.<sup>2</sup> It is vitally important to grasp Wilber's distinction between "pre" and "trans" before proceeding to more detailed discussion of the various realms of Being and the developmental dynamics present within and between these realms. Wilber's distinction between "pre" and "trans" is an attempt at correcting long-standing confusion between the prepersonal and transpersonal dimensions of human experience.

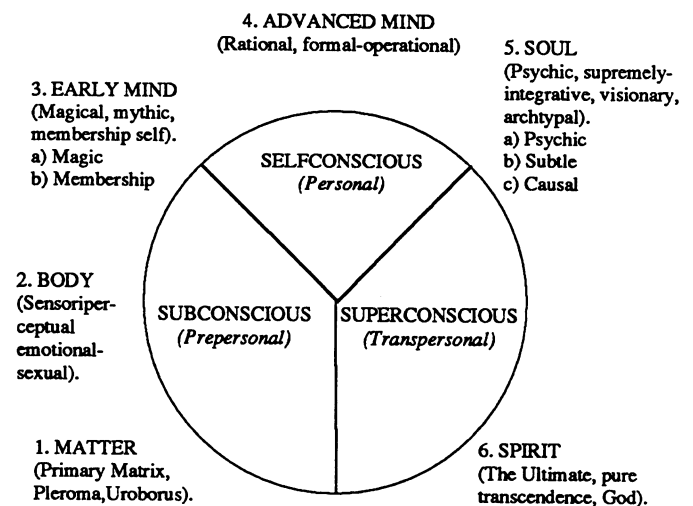


FIGURE 1  
Adapted from Wilber, *Up From Eden*, p. 9.

Such distortions have taken two basic forms, claims Wilber—either an elevation of the prepersonal to the transpersonal (Jung), or the reduction of the transpersonal to the prepersonal (Freud).<sup>3</sup> If preference is given to the Freudian model, then development is seen as moving from a prepersonal grounding in nature through the culmination of development in the *personal*. If preference is given to the Jungian model then development is seen as moving from a *transpersonal*, "heavenly" source to its culmination in an alienated state of sinful personhood, although Jung seemed to suggest a type of reconnection to this spiritual source through the ego-Self axis.<sup>4</sup>

Both views are half correct and half wrong. Jung is correct in that existence means a separation from spirit; he is wrong in his conclusion that the individual ego is the point of maximum alienation from Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

Freud is correct in positing a prepersonal, irrational element, but wrong in his denial of the transpersonal component and the reality of a fall or descent from Spirit, that is, a fall from union with the Godhead.

Wilber strongly criticizes Jung for his confusion of much which is prepersonal with the transpersonal, that is, Jung failed to differentiate between lower and higher realms of the unconscious.<sup>6</sup> Jungian development is limited for Wilber due to its seeing only movement from Self to ego and back to Self, instead of movement from pre-ego to ego to trans-ego Self. Thus Wilber critiques Jung for glorifying infantile expressions of the psyche as well as for Jung's regressive understanding of Spirit. The Jungian "autonomous ego" is not the high point of alienation for Wilber, but the high point of *recognition* for alienation, and the halfway point of return or the overcoming of alienation.

The same critique can be leveled against all anthropological formulations which see transpersonal Spirit in prepersonal manifestations.

Wilber writes: "They consequently imbue the primitive and barbaric rites of pre-ego savages with all sorts of trans-ego symbolism, and read deeply mystical insights into crude rites of ritual butchery. They damn the rise of modern intelligence and slander the use of logic, and make it appear believable by elevating every inarticulate slobber of the savage to transcendental status."<sup>7</sup>

### THE PRIMARY MATRIX

A further preliminary element which needs to be addressed is that of the primary matrix of the urobolic state and its role and meaning in human development. The Jungians, of course, see that matrix constituted by the initial total, all-encompassing unity of ego and Self. However, Wilber sees a fatal flaw in the conclusion that this state of primary fusion is to be equated with the state of oneness with the world. He writes:

The infant is not one with the mental world, the social world, the personal world, the subtle world, the symbolic world, the linguistic world, the communicative world—because in fact, none of those yet exist or have yet emerged. The infant is not one with these worlds, he is perfectly ignorant of them.<sup>8</sup>

The rupture which occurs at this point is not primarily with the Self or Spirit but with the prepersonal matrix. Furthermore, claims Wilber, it requires a strong and conscious ego to break this fusion and begin the journey toward the Self. As the ego begins to differentiate it leaves the bliss of unconscious ignorance and begins to become aware not only of its departure from innocence, but also of its distance from the Self or the Spirit. Anxiety thus arises both out of the loss of prepersonal ignorance *and* because of a broken ego-Self unit.<sup>9</sup>

Thus the primary matrix should not be confused with a final state of transcendent oneness. The primary matrix then, is *pre-subject/object*, *pre-ego*, and primary *pre-conscious union*. It is not *trans-subject/object*, *trans-ego*, or *trans-personal union*.<sup>10</sup>

### DEVELOPMENT AND ONTOLOGY

Among Wilber's most unique contributions to developmental theory is his assessment that most developmental schemes confuse ego-based developmental stages with ontological structures and hierarchies. What Wilber has brilliantly accomplished is to integrate levels of Being with an understanding of the psychological process of development.<sup>11</sup>

The human life cycle reveals a chronological unfolding and development of various psychological systems, structures, and stages, and at the same time hierarchial movement to higher levels of Being. In the developmental cycle there are psychological structures and components of consciousness (or Being) which remain in existence as the self moves on its path, while other structures and components become discarded. The components which remain Wilber calls "*basic structures*," while those which pass are called "*transition or replacement structures*," that is, temporary structures which are discarded as development continues.<sup>12</sup>

The basic structures can be described as the rungs of the ladder of development and include the following being-levels on the "great Chain of Being": 1. Matter, 2. Body, 3. Mind, 4. Soul, and 5. Spirit.<sup>13</sup> What Wilber has proposed is to integrate these levels of Being with our understanding of the psychological stages of development. Thus within the basic structures of Being-levels there are also to be found transition structures which must ultimately be transcended if development is to continue. The basic structures of Being would thus include the following:

1. *Physical*—contains the level of matter, nature, lower life, and urobolic states, represented in human consciousness as the primary matrix.
2. *Body*—includes high bodily life forms and simple sensorimotor intelligence, as well as the emo-

tional-sexual component.

3. *Early Mind*—contains early-ego stages and the first symbolic cognitive mode; essentially primary process thinking. It includes the sub-categories of:
  - a) *Magic*—contains non-differentiated simple images and symbols in which subject and object are fused, not integrated. Piaget's preoperational thinking is representative of this level, as well as Kohlberg's pre-conventional morality.
  - b) *Membership*—here one finds the beginnings of operational thinking as well as Loevinger's conformist stages and Maslow's belonging needs. This level is characterized by membership awareness.
4. *Advanced Mind*—this is the level of formal-operational and self-reflexive thought. It is correlated with Kohlberg's post conventional morality and Maslow's self-esteem needs, and is supremely rational.
5. *Soul*—this is the first transpersonal level which moves beyond boundaries of the ego; it contains the psychic, subtle, and causal levels.
  - a) *Psychic*—the level of "panoramic vision" and of deep integration, what Wilber calls a "higher-order synthesizing capacity."<sup>14</sup> It is able to see deeper relations of truth and knowledge.
  - b) *Subtle*—this is the region of the archetypes and of transcendent awareness.
  - c) *Causal*—the source or ground of all structures and the realm in which the subject-object duality is transcended.
6. *Spirit*—this is the realm of the Ultimate, of pure transcendence, of pure-Being of Being-as-such; in theological language, God!<sup>15</sup>  
(Figure 1 illustrates these structures.)

## BASIC AND REPLACEMENT STRUCTURES

As indicated above, the *basic structures* are *ontological structures* which are never outgrown, but integrated in hierarchial fashion, while the *replacement* or *transition structures* must ultimately be transcended in order for development to continue. Within each of the basic structures or levels a self-system emerges, which generates the transitional elements discovered by Loevinger, Kohlberg, Maslow and others.

An example will perhaps illustrate the above most effectively. Within the basic structure of the membership mind is the function of concrete operational thinking as described by Piaget, in which the self can act upon its environment as well as take the role of others. At this level the self begins to identify with the wishes and opinions of others and exhibits conformity to whatever role is expected. Since a subsequent level *has not* emerged, there is *yet* no capacity to judge critically or evaluate these identifications. In other words, although conformity initially arises within the

membership mind, the *need* to conform is generated by the attachment to the membership mind. If the attachment is broken, so too is the conformity need. This need is, of course, the equivalent of Maslow's belongingness needs, Loevinger's conformist stage, and Kohlberg's stage of conventional morality.

An individual at the level of the membership mind has access to all prior levels or structures such as body, the emotional-sexual component, and pre-operational thought. Such an individual will have access to all prior basic or ontological structures, but will not exhibit the prior replacement structures, only those pertaining to his/her current stage of development. That is, the person will not be able to be a conformist and a negating child at the same time. Thus, even though the basic *ontological structure* of the membership-mind remains, the *transitional structures* contained therein must be discarded and replaced if development to higher levels is to occur.

The basic and transitional structures do not necessarily follow the same development timetable. The basic structures have a loose yet recognizable chronological age-related rate of development, while the replacement structures tend to be somewhat less age-dependent but primarily determined by the degree of attachment to a particular structure.

How then does this developmental movement occur? Are there differences between inter-realm and intra-realm development? What is the nature of the attachment dynamic?

There are four major directions of movements possible within this developmental scheme. The movements *between* realms of Being or *interrealm movement* are described by the dual directions of *evolution* and *involution*. The remaining two directions are the movements within realms, described by the terms *preservation* and *release*. The movement between realms is therefore conceptualized as a vertical flow, while the intra-realm movement is horizontal. (See Figure 2).

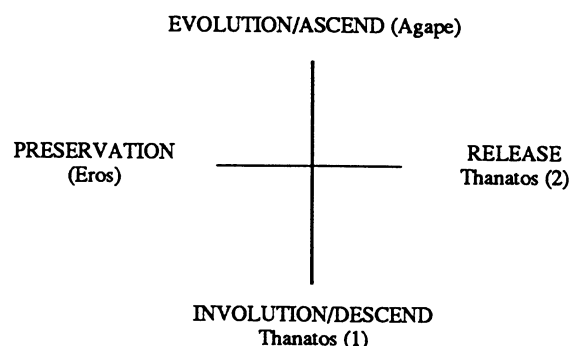


FIGURE 2

Adapted from Wilber, *The Atman Project*, p. 168.

*Inter-Realm Movement.* Concerning inter-realm movement, *evolution* describes the movement from lower to higher, from less-developed structures to structures revealing increasing integration, transcendence and unity. *Involution* on the other hand is regressive, alienating, and disintegrating. Wilber summarizes: "Where the aim of evolution is the resurrection of the ultimate unity in only Spirit, the aim of involution is the return to the lowest unity of all—simple matter, physical insentience, dust."

Thus the movement of evolution is the emergence or unfolding of higher orders of Being from the lowest toward the fuller union with the Absolute. Involution on the other hand describes the opposite movement, namely, from the higher to the lower in which the higher disappears into the lower. At the point of maximum involution there exists simply the "pleroma" or matter, with all higher states of Being only present as undifferentiated potentialities.

Basically, then, the six major Being levels identified above are the milestones of development through which the individual moves towards greater communion with the Ultimate. The fully unified person has access to all these levels but is not bound to any of them. Although there is no separate ego or self in this final state, a self-system emerges and rests on the successive levels of these states of Being. This self-system is the *vehicle* of development and growth, but not its final object. Although the self climbs the rungs of structural organization, I must emphasize that this is not to be seen as a monistic absorption or eventual dissolution of the self, which is where Wilber seemingly ends up. Rather, there emerges an ever fuller and diversified communion of Spirit with spirit.

The self as the "navigator of development" has the four possible directions of movement mentioned above available to it. That is, it can *ascend* or *descend* vertically, and/or *preserve* or *release* horizontally. If the self is to "ascend the hierarchy of structural organization," in other words grow or move evolutionarily, then it must eventually "release or negate its exclusive identification with the lower levels to allow a higher identification with more senior levels of structural organization." The self must accept the death or negation of any prior level, "it must dis-identify with or detach from an exclusive involvement with that level—in order to ascend to the greater life, unity, and integration of the next higher level." Once the new level is reached, then the self works to consolidate and solidify the gains or release of that level, and in such a manner move toward greater conscious participation in Spirit.

Whereas for *evolution* the movement is in increasing

higher-order increments toward the Ultimate, in *involution* the movement is opposite, that is, a downward movement in which the self refuses to die to its present structure, to dis-identify with it, but attempts to attain Unity in a counterfeit, substitute fashion. In traditional psychological language this is the phenomenon of regression or fixation.

There are implications for psycho-spiritual pathology which grow out of these dynamics. Namely, fixation can be seen as a failure to negate or dis-identify with a particular structure, while regression is a premature dying, a dis-identification before adequate and full integration of a particular level.

The process of development is marked by every stage, then, by increasing differentiation, integration and transcendence. In other words, each stage of growth must not only incorporate but also transcend its predecessor. If development derails at any point then differentiation will be replaced by dissociation and transcendence by repression. The higher state instead of integrating the lower state, will repress and compartmentalize it as a dissociative aspect of personhood, cut off from consciousness. However, the key factor which determines this outcome is *intra-realm movement* to which we now turn our attention.

*Intro-Realm Movement.* Within intra-realm movement we find the two directions of *preservation* and *release*. These two alternatives serve as a fulcrum which guides vertical movement in the direction of either evolution or involution. On each given level, the self can within certain limits choose whether to preserve and hold into its present identification, which guides the movement toward descent, or choose to die or release the attachment to that level, thus guiding development in ascending fashion toward transcendence. Wilber summarizes: "The self must balance the two dilemmas—preserve/release and ascend/descend—and navigate its developmental course by those four compass points. The self does not merely float down the stream of consciousness. For better or worse, it pushes and pulls, holds on and lets go, ascends and descends, steers and navigates. How the self as "navigator" handles the resultant tensions and functional dilemmas appears to be a large part of the story of self-development and self-pathology."<sup>16</sup>

All along this evolution/involution path, the self finds substitute gratifications in place of its final goal, namely, greater communion and Oneness with God. In order for the ego to find Oneness, it would have to die to itself and it is this final death which the ego avoids, setting up the many substitutes for the desired Unity. Thus, every identity level or "waystation" on the developmental journey erects symbolic substitutes of this unity.

For example, a self located at the body level is faced with the option of remaining on its present level of structural organization, or to release its present level in favor of another. Among the manifestations of the body level would be the libido energy of sexuality. This element would need to be integrated, consolidated and appropriated in order for development to another level to continue. However, once that task were accomplished, then the self would need to dis-identify its *exclusive* attachment to this level, that is, die to this exclusive identity (I am my sexuality) in order to move to another integration.

Fixation, then, would occur if the self refused to die to the exclusive gratifications of that level. Or, a premature dis-identification or dying to one's identity as a sexual being before adequate integration had occurred, would result in repression. It is very important to understand, however, that sexuality or any structure or "rung of the ladder" is not destroyed as development continues, only the exclusive *attachment* to a particular level as *the* locus of identity.

*Agape and Thanatos.* Before concluding with some implications for pastoral therapy, a brief analysis of the agape/thanatos qualities of the development process is in order. *Agape* (divine love) is the fuel which drives the self toward its goal of union with the source of love. *Thanatos* (as discussed by Freud) refers to the death drive, the movement of involution toward the lowest level: inanimate matter.

However, it must be clear that there are in actuality two types of death. On the one hand there is the ultimate death of involution, a primary masochism, namely, the impulse to love to a lower level in order to achieve a kind of counter-feit union, in this case with the inorganic state (thanatus (1)). On the other hand, there is the very necessary death which accompanies the release of self-identification with various levels; in essence the ego-death of lower-order unities so that higher-order integrations can emerge (thanatos (2)).

Eros acts as the force which attempts to preserve the status of each level and thus creates all manner of death-denying structures. Whereas agape is the force which pulls development forward, so to speak, eros attempts to preserve the current structure and thus resists release or thanatos (2). In this instance involution wins out. However, when thanatos (2) or release of a particular level's attachments begins to win out, then transformation and vertical movement can begin again.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR THERAPY

The many therapeutic perspectives currently in use

each address different aspects or stages of the spectrum of Being. Psychoanalytic and contemporary ego psychologies as ego-level therapies are a valuable resource when dealing with pathologies of that level. For instance, the ego must be strengthened in persons caught up in prepersonal fixations and complexes. To encourage the transcendence of the ego before full integration of the psyche with a flood of pre-egoic infantile states, therapy first needs to facilitate an integrated egoic self-system and only then proceed to ego transcendence.

Other therapies, such as Gestalt, existential psychology, and biofeedback, attempt to bridge the gap between the body realm and the total Self, by becoming more fully connected to one's emotional-sexual organism. These too are very necessary therapeutic modalities which ought to remain a part of a therapeutic repertoire.

Nevertheless, approaching the higher levels or realms of Being as represented by Soul and Spirit, requires a trans-individual and trans-egoic perspective which Pastoral Care is in the unique position to provide. Here the goal becomes one of union and communion with Ultimate Reality; it requires the healing of dualisms and splits and results in the fuller awakening of God-consciousness. However, what are the assumptive foundations of such a developmental perspective?

A first assumption and perhaps most central is that the personality is a sub-system or our universal identity as children of God. Although the entire person, including the body, emotions, and the ego, must be taken very seriously, one's true identity does not reside exclusively with any of these elements. This universal identity extends through and beyond the confines of the personality. Therapy which restricts itself to personality concerns has been called "auto-body repair work," having little to do with essence.<sup>17</sup>

A second assumption is that consciousness or Spirit is central both as the instrument of change and as the goal toward which persons move. Furthermore, personhood is vital within the flow of Spirit or consciousness since communion with Spirit is both the process and the goal. However, the experience of many selves or sub-personalities is the product of partial identifications and attachments, of artificial unions at various levels of Being.

#### REVISED GOALS FOR PASTORAL THERAPY

The revision of goals for pastoral psycho-spiritual intervention is an important outgrowth of the above model. Perhaps the most basic goal which runs as a thread through all other goals is the connection of

persons to Ultimate reality, namely, the reality of Spirit. In other words, pastoral counselors ought to approach persons at the level of Being and not simply at the level of the psyche. As was emphasized in the earlier discussion of the developmental process, this does not preclude the development of personality, since the self is the vehicle which transports the individual up the rungs of the ladder of development toward a more fuller union with Being.

The reality that there are centers of Being beyond the center of the ego should be an implicit assumption behind any pastoral encounter. Of course, persons must be initially experienced and recognized at whatever level of Being they reside. This requires skills of assessment and a sensitivity to the developmental flow in all its complexity. In no instances are persons to be yanked from one level to another simply because the therapist thinks it would be a good idea (not that this would even be possible). What it does require is a sensitivity and receptivity to the subtle movements of Spirit within the entire realm of Being. One then becomes aware of how Being is attempting "to draw the entire created order unto itself," even with all of the blockages and resistances to such development.

Above all, the entire person must be taken seriously. For instance, since many individuals are cut off from their bodies, therapy must begin by connecting such a person to the body level of Being. However, connecting to the body is insufficient if the person stays there; the newly found body-awareness and feelings must be integrated and taken up into a higher stream of awareness.

For instance, a fuller connection to the body level of Being goes hand in hand with the experience of emotion. In traditional psychotherapeutic activity, emotion is handled by amplification and working through. However, with the focus on Being in addition to the focus on the psyche, a modified approach can be undertaken. Given this new paradigm and its broader perspective, the emotions are allowed to be fully experienced and "befriended," but with the additional feature that one passes through them "to the ground of basic aliveness from which they arise."<sup>18</sup> In other words, feelings are respected as forms of energy but are not seen as end in themselves since this can result in endless attachment and preoccupation with the emotions only, at the expense of the more basic unity and oneness which is to be discovered through them.

In essence, then, an openness to Being brings with it the possibility of an ontological event occurring. It allows for pastoral encounter to move beyond the narrow confines of personality or ego concerns to the

wider ground of Being. It recognizes that "at-homeness" in the universe as the fundamental concern of the human pilgrimage.

We have been describing in this study a cosmic process, a developmental path built into the very structure of reality. This ontological perspective provides a necessary supplement to the personality-restricted focus of much contemporary pastoral therapy. At best this paper has offered a skeleton of the many implications of such a broadened perspective, which will hopefully be fleshed out by subsequent theoretical and clinical reflections.

#### FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Steven S. Ivy, "Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning," *The Journal of Pastoral Care*, 1982, Vol. 36, pp. 265-274.
- <sup>2</sup> Ken Wilber, "The Pre/Trans Fallacy," *ReVision*, 1980, Vol 3, p. 52.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 55.
- <sup>4</sup> Edward F. Edinger, *Ego and Archtype* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1973), P. 6.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>6</sup> Wilber, *Op. cit.*, p. 56.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p.47.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p.61.
- <sup>9</sup> This article understands the Self with a capital "S" as the center and essence of personhood. It is the center through which integration of personality and spiritual realization occurs. It can be seen as the equivalent of Spirit. The self with small "s" is equivalent to the personality and has much in common with what is commonly referred to as the ego.
- <sup>10</sup> Wilber, "The Pre/Trans Fallacy," p. 56.
- <sup>11</sup> Ken Wilber, "Ontogenic Development: Two Fundamental Patterns," *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 1981, Vol. 13, pp. 33-38.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p.34.
- <sup>13</sup> Ken Wilber, *Up From Eden: A Transpersonal View of Human Evolution* (New York, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1981), p. 7.
- <sup>14</sup> Wilber, "Pre/Trans Fallacy," p. 64.
- <sup>15</sup> Wilber, "Ontogenic Development," p. 45.
- <sup>16</sup> Ken Wilber, *The Atman Project* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1980). p. 170.
- <sup>17</sup> Ram Dass, "Ram Dass Lecture at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center: Part II," *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 1973, Vol. 5, p. 180.
- <sup>18</sup> John Welwood, "Working with Emotion: Western and Eastern Approaches," in Rosemarie Stewart (Ed.), *East Meets West: The Transpersonal Approach* (Wheaton, IL: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1981), p. 64.