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# A Reply to Capriles

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The Editors introduced Capriles' 2009 paper, *Beyond Mind III: Further Steps to a Metatranspersonal Philosophy and Psychology*, as a thought provoking reframing of transpersonal theory from the perspective of Dzogchen Buddhism that challenges much of contemporary transpersonal studies and identifies Wilber's model as the most problematic among these. The main focus of this brief reply to Capriles is to explore possible inaccuracies in his depiction of Wilber's theories.

Both Capriles and Wilber have been, for over 30 years, Buddhist practitioners and within a variety of Buddhist traditions both are practitioners of Dzogchen (although this is not Wilber's exclusive practice). They have both, for over three decades, produced original writings relating to the field of transpersonal studies. Very few of Wilber's other critics have such corresponding backgrounds. Capriles' critique of Wilber's theories is therefore particularly noteworthy, and can be expected to encourage debate, particularly if Wilber's long standing complaint that many of his critics misunderstand and misrepresent his theories can be seen to be addressed.

In fact, many of Capriles' points seem to be insightful critiques of Wilber's model, but some are more applicable to the state of Wilber's understanding in 2000, when the work that Capriles summarized in his 2009 paper was originally written. Notable in this respect is:

1. The absence of any reference by Capriles to Wilber's publications during the past decade means that some of Capriles' criticisms are liable to be historically rather than currently correct. For example Capriles took no account of the Wilber-Combs lattice that completely separates *stages* of development from spiritual *states* (Wilber, 2006, pp. 88-93) and thereby overlooked the fact that Wilber now agrees with Capriles that a person's attainment of *any* spiritual state can occur at *any* stage of their development.

2. The omission of reference to Wilber's (2001) end note 1 in *Sex, Ecology and Spirituality*. This 12,000+ word note is arguably significant in relation to some of Capriles important criticisms. It is concerned with Wilber's explanation of the Buddhist "no-self" but its relevance here is the way Wilber weaves some of his theories with an explanation of the Tantric and the Dzogchen Buddhist concepts of emptiness, and how this relates to the nondual state. For example, in relation to Dzogchen, and seemingly in accord with Capriles' work, Wilber commented:

Different meditation practices engineer different states and different experiences, but pure Presence itself is unwavering, and thus the highest approach in Dzogchen is "Buddhahood without meditation": not the creation but rather the direct recognition of an already perfectly present and freely given primordial Purity (Wilber, 2001, pp. 730-731)

Contrary to some of Capriles' criticisms, note 1 can be read, *to some extent*, as making the case that Wilber's theories are consistent with both Tantric and Dzogchen Buddhism. In particular:

- a) Capriles dismissed Wilber's 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> "progression of realization" fulcrums, because "[they do] not match any of the levels of realization that obtain in genuine paths I am familiar with" (p. 80); and he supported this with a number of convincing arguments. Without detracting from the force of most of his criticisms, there are some possible sustaining arguments for Wilber's model. Associated with this, Wilber presented his concept of Ascending and Descending and argued this is equivalent to processes described by Tantric Buddhism.

b) Capriles argued that Wilber's 10<sup>th</sup> nondual fulcrum involves subject-object duality but Wilber is clear in his note 1 above and elsewhere in his writings that subject and object disappear in the nondual.

Capriles pointed to the central premise of Wilber's theories of spiritual attainment, namely, that they are based on developmental steps leading to Nondual state of Suchness, where some minimum level of attainment of each development step must occur before one can move to the next step. Capriles powerfully refuted this throughout his three part *Beyond the Mind* work (that commenced publication in 2000 and concluded in 2009, in the pages of this journal). This refutation draws on the doctrines of Dzogchen Buddhism according to which true Awakening results only from the spontaneous liberation of delusion. This spontaneous liberation, Capriles explained, will manifest generally among humans at the end of the current cycle of evolution by the mechanism of *reductio ad absurdum*. Prior to this the only mechanism for true Awakening is an authentic spiritual path such as Dzogchen. The spontaneous liberation of delusion which can manifest in practitioners of an authentic path *can occur at any stage of development* and Awakening, which can follow repeated occurrences of spontaneous liberation of delusion, *can also occur at any stage of development*.

Remarkably, considering Wilber had held the above view for at least two decades, by 2006 he had admitted it was wrong and his current theories, which make use of the Wilber-Combs lattice, imply he is in agreement with Capriles insofar as people *in our present age*<sup>1</sup> can advance to any spiritual *state* at any *stage* of their development. Michael Daniels (Rowan et al., 2009, pp. 14-15) explained Wilber's (2006) change of view:

what [Wilber] is saying is wrong... he made the mistake—and he admits this very explicitly in the book—of simply adding the stages of the Eastern meditation techniques on top of the stages of the Western psychological model. And he says it almost flippantly in the book: “So... what we did was simply to take the highest stage in Western psychological models... and then take the three or four major stages of meditation (gross, subtle, causal, nondual) ... and stack those stages on top of the other stages ... East and West integrated!” (p. 88).

Wilber's change of view, which surprisingly, Capriles did not identify, is further clarified in this extract about states and stages from an exchange between Wilber and Andrew Cohen:

Wilber: Those who have an understanding of ground, because they've often gotten it through a traditional path that doesn't have an understanding of evolutionary manifestation, are taught to express their realization in rather static forms—oneness with nature as is, or oneness with the now moment—all of which is fine. But it's really not an up-to-date version of what that satori could be. And so they tend not to get stages, and they don't get the evolutionary unfolding. It's a “one taste,” but it's a very static kind of one taste.

And then, on the other hand, if people get the evolutionary unfolding, they usually haven't had that experience of prior emptiness or of the unborn or the changeless ground. And because of that, they tie their realization to an evolutionary stage. “I have to be at this stage; then I can realize.” And that's not it at all, because that ever-present state is ever present, and you can have that realization virtually at any point. But in order to stabilize and ground it, you do indeed have to then grow and develop. So they just understand the evolutionary side of form, and the other folks tend to have the emptiness understood, but very rarely do you get emptiness together with evolutionary form. (Cohen & Wilber, 2005, p. 57)

Wilber's change of view helps explain what Capriles described as Sean Kelly's “brilliant denunciation of some of [Wilber's amplified lamrim] contradictions” (Capriles, 2009, p. 11). One of Kelly's objections to Wilber's model was this:

If it is possible for typhonic individuals to experience a transpersonal epiphany or “influx” (i.e., the psychic or low subtle realm) prior to the emergence of the mental ego, then it clearly makes no sense to conceive of the transpersonal as following the mental egoic ... in the same manner that the mental egoic follows the membership and typhonic [because] to do so would require an explanation of how it is possible for a supposedly holarchically “higher” structure—in this case the psychic—to transcend as it includes a lower structure—in this case the

mental-egoic—that had not yet emerged. (Kelly, 1998, as cited in Capriles, 2009, p. 11)

The Wilber-Combs lattice separates states (e.g., psychic) and stages (e.g., typhonic-magical, mental egoic) into *different dimensions*. The psychic state is not therefore a higher structure of mental egoic, typhonic or any other stage and consequently does not incur the objection Kelly ascribed to it. Kelly noted that Wilber recognizes that the self can have access to temporary experiences from the transpersonal domains. But Kelly objected:

If all levels of the Great Chain manifest the same principles of holarchical integration, why is it possible for transpersonal influxes [i.e., experiencing transpersonal states] to occur at virtually any lower level of organization [i.e., any stage]... whereas it is impossible for someone at, say, cognitive stage 2 (preop) to experience... an influx from cognitive stage 4 (formop)? Clearly, the transpersonal “levels” as a whole are of a completely different order than the ones that “precede” them. (Kelly, 1998, as cited in Capriles, 2009, p. 11)

What Kelly referred to as transpersonal levels are now acknowledged by Wilber a) to be psychic and “higher” transpersonal states, and b) to be of a completely different order than what Kelly referred to as “ones that ‘precede’ them” which Wilber now acknowledges as stages. Wilber’s (2007) explanation for being able to access any state from any stage of development started with pointing out, “the three great states of consciousness (waking, dreaming, sleeping) are said to correspond with the three great realms of being (gross, subtle, causal)... an idea found in... Vajrayana” (p. 1). According to Wilber, different worlds such as the three realms of gross, subtle and causal are disclosed by different states of consciousness, and any different state of consciousness is potentially available at any time and to anyone at any stage of their development, because all humans have access to the waking, dreaming, and deep sleep states. But, Wilber explained that “stages CANNOT be skipped, because each stage is a component of its successor (this would be like going from atoms to cells and skipping molecules)” (p. 10). Going from first person perspective (magical/typhonic stage) to second person perspective (mythic stage) to third person (rational stage) is a process of development where, according to Wilber and supported by researchers such as Jane Loevinger (1976), Robert

Kegan (1982), and Susanne Cook-Greuter (2005), stages cannot be skipped.

Wilber now acknowledges that an authentic spiritual path such as Dzogchen is required to understand emptiness, and this can be accomplished at any stage of development. But Wilber has gone further to suggest it is advantageous for practitioners to pursue higher stages of development. Where is Wilber going with this assertion? Two responses to this come to mind. Firstly, in his 2006 book *Integral Spirituality*, Wilber made the case that identifying an object in the Kosmos involves at least two factors: degree or stage of development (altitude) and perspective (one of his four quadrants). Thus Kosmic address = altitude + perspective. In doing this he is postulating that the comprehension of more complex aspects of samsara will require correspondingly higher stages of development. For example, the appreciation of ecosystems will only appear to someone at a high enough stage of development. Thus only people at post-conventional stage development will be prone to make sacrifices to tackle the ecological crisis because people at lower stages will not recognize the problem. Capriles’ concern with ecological issues was clear:

The spiritual systems I practice and propound, as all metaphenomenologically/metaexistentially descending Paths, are perfectly nondual; yet... [also] descending in ... [the senses that]... they have always been profoundly concerned with ecological, social, economic, political, gender, generational, cultural, and other related issues (Capriles, 2009, pp. 7-8)

It would be therefore be interesting to know whether Capriles considers that stage development should be pursued in addition to following an authentic spiritual path. It is certainly illuminating to consider further why Wilber feels stage development is important, beginning with one way he feels it can be achieved. Wilber muddies the water by claiming that practising meditation is the best, or among the best, means of achieving stage development; in which case following an authentic spiritual path involving meditation practice would automatically result in stage progression, and the issue of pursuing stage development would be redundant. On the other hand, Wilber (2006) has controversially alleged that the Dalai Lama has an ethnocentric worldview, at least in respect of homosexuality, so that Wilber seemed to imply that however much meditation accelerates stage development, cultural factors can potentially be a dominant braking force.

This unfolding of Wilber's explanation of the importance of stage development which happens in samsara, and which therefore implies samsara has an importance beyond that Capriles ascribed to it (i.e., primarily to see through the relative into the absolute), gives no hint of its denouement. Based on Wilber's theory of Kosmic habits, Wilber, notably in his quarterly dialogues with Andrew Cohen,<sup>2</sup> asserted that the creative potential in emptiness can be actualised by practitioners being in touch with the ground of being (emptiness), and interacting together to co-create with Spirit, novel structures of consciousness that if repeated often enough lay down in the Kosmos new stages of consciousness—stages that did not previously exist. Wilber and Cohen assert this process as a process in samsara that has a Kosmic purpose (i.e., co-creation of novel stages of human consciousness), and that pursuing this is as important as pursuing a path to spiritual Awakening:

The real key to this discussion, I think, is when you understand that the only way you can permanently and fully realize emptiness is if you transform, evolve, or develop your vehicle in the world of form. The vehicles that are going to realize emptiness have to be up to the task. That means they have to be developed; they have to be transformed and aligned with spiritual realization. That means that the transcendent and the immanent have to, in a sense, flavor each other... The best of a nondual or integral realization is that we have to basically work on both [the world of time and "the timeless"]. We have to polish our capacity, in a sense, to fully realize emptiness, moment to moment. But it's the emptiness of all forms arising moment to moment. So we have to have a radical embrace of the world of samsara as the vehicle and expression of nirvana itself. (Cohen & Wilber, 2002 FIND PP at ITP)

The foregoing illustrates that by apparently overlooking Wilber's work over the past decade, Capriles does not address the contemporary position of Wilber.

Capriles does not refer to the article-length end note 1 in *Sex, Ecology and Spirituality* (Wilber, 2001, pp. 717-741). For example, note 1 includes a number of citations from Geshe Kelsang Gyatso's<sup>3</sup> (1982; see Wilber, 2001, pp. 726-729) tantric meditation manual, *Clear Light of Bliss*. Wilber used Gyatso's descriptions of tantric progressive realization to illustrate how his model of progressive spiritual states (or what Capriles referred

to as his model of progression of realization fulcrums, 7<sup>th</sup> through to 10<sup>th</sup>) corresponds to the sequence of realizations on the Tantric path. Wilber's model of progressive spiritual states relates to progressively higher spiritual realms (e.g., gross, psychic, subtle, causal/very subtle), and the realm that spiritual states manifest in, as described by a range of spiritual traditions. Capriles argued that Wilber has used the Upanishads concept of gross, subtle, and causal realms and misapplied them to Buddhism by, for example, correlating these with waking, dream, and deep sleep states. Capriles referred to this as an example of "trans-religious fallacy" (p. 56) where Wilber has transferred elements of one tradition to another where they do not fit.

Capriles has some convincing arguments to support the view that Wilber's descriptions of gross, subtle and causal states/realms do not appear to correspond to the *nirmanakaya*, the *sambhogakaya*, and the *dharmakaya* respectively. This fact should not entirely subsume the point that Wilber (2001) has demonstrated some measure of correspondence between his model of progressive spiritual states and extracts of Gyatso's descriptions of Tantric Buddhism (cf. pp. 726-729). Wilber noted that his Ascending model in which gross mind subsides during meditation, and subtle dimensions unfold in developmental sequence culminating in causal cessation, corresponds to Gyatso's description:

"Beginning with the fifth sign [of advanced meditation, which is called white luminosity appearance] the subtle minds are experienced. They manifest from the beginning of the mind of white appearance to the mind of red increase [which are both subtle-level illuminations] to the end of the mind of black near-attainment [causal cessation]. Each successive mind is subtler than the last. Each is classified as subtle because during its arraial there are no gross dualistic conceptual thoughts." (Gyatso 1982, p. 139, as cited in Wilber, 2001, p. 727)

There is therefore support here for the similarity between Wilber's Ascending model and Tibetan Buddhist progression of experience in meditation as set out by Gyatso. This supporting citation concludes with a definition by Gyatso of the Subtle level, which Wilber notes is very similar to his own in that it has no gross referents in cognition. Wilber's definition of the causal level is similarly structured: it has no gross or subtle referents in cognition.

While Capriles correctly pointed out that the nirmanakaya, the sambhogakaya, and the dharmakaya do not fit Wilber's model, it is interesting to note that Wilber's definition of the Subtle and Causal levels provide a possible explanation for this being so. For example, in Capriles' critique of Wilber's inclusion of nirmanakaya in his psychic (i.e., lower subtle) level, Capriles implied that while nirmanakaya may manifest in the gross level (which Wilber's psychic level relates to), it is also *of* the nondual level in the sense it is *Buddha's* body. Similarly this applies to the sambhogakaya, and the dharmakaya. Cosmic consciousness is another example of a spiritual state that Wilber asserts to be in his psychic level, but does not, for the same reason as above, appear to fit there. This can be deduced from Daniels' (2005, pp. 200-202) discussion of its apparent misfit where he pointed out that, although cosmic consciousness may manifest in the psychic level in the sense that it relates only to gross phenomena and not to the subtle or causal domains, it is otherwise indistinguishable from "One Taste" or "Ultimate" nondual consciousness which is *of* the nondual. Thus Capriles' objection to Wilber's ascribing nirmanakaya, sambhogakaya, and dharmakaya to the psychic, subtle, and causal realms respectively can be reframed as a critique of the inherent limitations of Wilber's definition of these levels. But equally, Wilber might claim that most of the spiritual states that he asserts belong to these realms are correctly placed because they *do* relate to his definitions of those realms; in other words, the above examples appear to be the limited exception.

Wilber further cited Gyatso to support his Ascending/Descending model:

"The distinguishing factor of secret mantra [Vajrayana] is its assertion that the deluded mind of self-grasping depends upon its gross mounted wind. This gross wind developed from a subtle one which in turn developed from the very subtle wind mounted by the all empty mind of clear light." (Gyatso, 1982, p. 194, as cited in Wilber, 2001, p. 728)

Wilber noted that Gyatso here provided a description that corresponds precisely with his definition of involution/Descending. As has already been shown, Gyatso also provided a description of developmental sequence that somewhat corresponds to Wilber's Ascending. Thus, in partial contrast to Capriles' criticisms of Wilber's Ascending/Descending model, it does have some demonstrable correspondence to Tantric Buddhism.

Another issue that Wilber's note 1 illuminates concerns Capriles' argument that Wilber's 10<sup>th</sup> nondual fulcrum involves the subject-object duality. There is insufficient space here to discuss the merits of Capriles' argument but Wilber is clear in his note 1 and elsewhere in his writings that subject and object disappear in the nondual. For example,

for the Madhyamika, the Real [nondual] is neither one nor many, neither permanent nor momentary, *neither subject nor object*... These are relative to each other and are equally unreal. (Murti, 1955, p. 239, as cited in Wilber, 2001, p. 720, emphasis added)

Wilber, writing about the non-dual state: "And thus, resting in simple, clear, ever-present awareness, I notice that there is no inside and no outside. There is *no subject and no object*." (Wilber, 1997, p. 292, emphasis added)

Capriles argued that Wilber's "universal map," constructed by piecing together descriptions that different traditions make available, wholly fails to correspond even to gradual or Lamrim paths. However, this appears not to take account of the evidence presented here. Capriles offered a definition of supreme spirituality that would ostensibly include all authentic traditions and overcome the problems presented in Wilber's model: "all that is involved in the transition from samsara to nirvana" (p. 15). But I have argued that Wilber would see such a definition as partial. It apparently takes no account of Wilber's view that the generation of novel stages of human consciousness in samsara is part of the "basic rule" of spirituality which is the uniting of nirvana with samsara:

But the basic rule is: resting as emptiness, embrace the entire world of form. And the world of form is unfolding. It is evolving. It is developing. And therefore resting as blissful emptiness, you ecstatically embrace and push against the world of form as a duty. (Cohen & Wilber, 2002 FIND PP at ITP).

Capriles does not seem to consider this aspect of Wilber's model perhaps because, as mentioned earlier, Capriles does not appear to consider any of Wilber's work over the past decade. However, this, and the other criticisms presented in this brief response, relate to a relatively small part of Capriles' profound and major work and similarly to his many insightful criticisms of Wilber's model.

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## Notes

1. But not historical eras. Although Wilber has agreed that people of previous eras can advance to spiritual states irrespective of their stage of development, he has continued to posit (as in *Up from Eden*, 1981) that some of the most advanced spiritual states were not attained in previous eras. That is, the most advanced state increased from psychic in the magic era, through subtle and causal in succeeding eras, and only reached nondual in the current era. This is clearly completely at variance with Capriles degenerative view of evolution. Capriles would apparently maintain that true Awakening/nondual states were potentially available, *in any era*, to anyone, at any stage of development, following an authentic spiritual path such as Dzogchen.
2. *EnlightenNext* magazine (previously named *what is enlightenment*) has featured 25 dialogues between Ken Wilber and Andrew Cohen since the series commenced in the Spring/Summer 2002 issue.
4. Geshe Kelsang Gyatso has been a practitioner and teacher of Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism for over 30 years and is described in one of his books as someone who is “born in Tibet and is a fully accomplished meditation master and internationally renowned teacher of Buddhism. Resident in the West since 1977, he is author of 21 highly acclaimed [Buddhist] books... He has also founded over 1200 Kadampa Meditation Centres and groups throughout the world” (Gyatso, 2010, back cover).

## About the Author

*John Abramson, MSc*, has recently attained a Masters degree in Consciousness and Transpersonal Psychology from Liverpool John Moores University in England. Now retired, one of his main academic interests is in the critique of some contemporary authors' publications which he argues have partly misunderstood Ken  
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Wilber's work, particularly over the past decade or so. His personal ambition is to put into practice a too long delayed intention to fully take up a spiritual path. He can be contacted on [johnabramson@btinternet.com](mailto:johnabramson@btinternet.com)

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