

Experiments Of Integral Action

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A brief theory of integral practice

A combination of spiritual attitude, disciplined body work, socio-cultural commitment and capacity for rational insight: This seems to be the unspectacular formula for an *integral renaissance* as described by the American philosopher and visionary *Ken Wilber* in his voluminous and many-levelled works. However, this advice of "mens sana in corpore sano", presents a philosophical renaissance only by its superficial appearance. While it reminds one of the classical holism of Hellenistic and neo-Hellenistic maxims, integral vision actually aims at a new consciousness and bases itself on new historical conditions thoroughly changed in regard to our identity and development. Wilber's focus on "integral practice" addresses modern man, i.e. an individual characterized by mentallization, whose bonding with nature and culture have grown equally weak. And exactly from this freedom – often regarded as deficiency – stems the chance for the integral vision. The individual and self-responsible development that presently has become possible for man holds the opportunity that religions are not simply re-lived and recreated, that so-called salutary and life-reforming cultures are not just resuscitated or recreated, and that rigid systems of society are not simply re-initiated and reductionist scientific paradigms not simply re-formulated. But, if a sufficient number of modern contemporaries – thus presume Wilber and other thinkers – walk this integral path of inner work and outer commitment, then there will be a chance for a quantum jump in human consciousness; the beginning of a perception of world and self, which again has as its theme in the connectedness of history, nature and man. This time not longer as a dogma, but as a spontaneous and conscious life experience of every individual. A post-rational consciousness which, through the power of its integrating depth, not only releases spiritual perception and rational insight from their contradictions, but leads them to a new and fruitful synthesis.

Thinkers and visionaries of a new consciousness

Several thinkers of the last century, independently of each other, spoke of a transmodern "integral era". In Europe, besides *Rudolf Steiner*, the founder of Anthroposophy who had a similar vision, an outstanding figure was the Swiss-German *Jean Gebser*. In the context of mainstream academia this cultural philosopher was regarded rather as an outsider. He defined a series of epochs of human consciousness and regarded the present reason-dominated phase to be closely followed by a non-perspective integral consciousness. In the late 1940s the Russian philosopher *Pitirim Sorokin*¹ also spoke of a coming integral culture. Gebser and Sorokin, towards the end of their lives, both discovered with surprise and great appreciation that, from the beginning of the century onwards, the Indian yogin-philosopher *Sri Aurobindo Ghose* had developed a philosophy of development which was extraordinary in depth and extent and ran in parallel lines and close to their own concepts. "Gebser placed his whole concept under Aurobindo's shadow ... (Sri Aurobindo) is not yet recognized for his exceptional character neither in the Indian philosophic tradition nor in his contribution to the 'path of the spirit' in general. While direction and results are similar, he

points far beyond Gebser. Gebser, in his last publication ('Verfall und Teilhabe - Decay and participation'), places himself in the energetic field of Aurobindo, while in 'Ursprung und Gegenwart - Origin and presence' he still had assumed a side by side position of himself and Aurobindo with *Teilhard de Chardin*.²

Later, besides the work of Gebser, it was Sri Aurobindo's integral philosophy that became a central source of inspiration for Ken Wilber. Hardly perceived by anybody, Sri Aurobindo's thoughts moreover guided many of the great schools and founders of modern thought. For example *Michael Murphy*, co-founder of the influential *Esalen* institute of training and encounter, is a former member of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. From the 60s onwards, *Esalen* community, and also the *California Institute of Integral Studies*, founded by Sri Aurobindo disciple *Haridas Chaudhuri*, became important and influential sources of humanistic and transpersonal psychology and of new formulations of Eastern spirituality adapted to modern times and the West.

A future made of Eastern spirit and Western thought

In the following Ken Wilber names the two central concepts that are the foundation for Sri Aurobindo's bridge to a new consciousness. By the way, Sri Aurobindo is one of the few exponents of Indian spirituality who has been accepted by the global scientific community as philosopher and thinker in the sense that Western academia understands these.

Sri Aurobindo Ghose was India's greatest modern philosopher-sage, flowing out of a country that is one of the most astonishing and profound geographical sources of spiritual awareness on the planet. But Aurobindo's genius was not merely that he captured the profundity of India's extraordinary spiritual heritage. He was the first great philosopher-sage to deeply grasp the nature and meaning of the modern idea of evolution. And thus, in Aurobindo, we have the first grand statement of an evolutionary spirituality that is an integration of the best of ancient wisdom and the brightest of modern knowledge.

It wasn't that other great thinkers had not seen that evolution is basically Spirit-in-action (it was obvious to Schelling and Hegel, for example). Nor was Aurobindo necessarily the most enlightened spirit in modern India (many would point to the illustrious Sri Ramana Maharshi in that regard). But nobody combined both philosophical brilliance and a profoundly enlightened consciousness the way Aurobindo did. His enlightenment informed his philosophy; his philosophy gave substance to his enlightenment; and that combination has been rarely equalled, in this or any time. There is no question about it: the modern world has irreversibly discovered the fact that the world evolves—matter evolves, life evolves, mind evolves. And Spirit evolves... or, we might say, Spirit is the entire evolutionary process of its own unfolding, from matter to life to mind to the higher and superconscious realms of Spirit's own being. This evolutionary unfolding of Spirit—as it plays out in psychology, anthropology, religion, politics, psychology, the arts, and spiritual practice itself—is the central message of Aurobindo's voluminous writings.

As such, Aurobindo's message is still far ahead of its time.. The world remains, to speak in very general terms, divided into two highly contentious camps: those who believe in the

ancient wisdom traditions (and therefore tend to completely distrust the modern notion of evolution), and those who believe the modern scientific view of evolution (which completely dispenses with any notions of Spirit). Both of these views are terribly partial and fragmented, even though both claim to have the inside track on truth. But as Aurobindo saw—probably more clearly than anybody before or since—the scientific account of evolution, which relies on nothing but frisky dirt, dynamic matter, and process systems (e.g., chaos theories, far-from-equilibrium dissipative structures, autopoiesis, etc.) cannot even begin to explain the extraordinary series of transformations that brought forth life from matter and mind from life, and that is destined to bring forth, in just the same way, higher mind and overmind and supermind: Spirit alone can account for the astonishment that is the glory of evolution.

Likewise, there is nothing that authentic religion should fear in the notion of evolution. Real spirituality is not a theory about how to make the beans grow, nor is it an empirical account of anthropological data. It is not about whether or not Moses actually parted the Red Sea. It is about whether or not you can awaken to the Spirit in you which is beyond you, and which plugs you straight into the Source and Suchness of the entire Cosmos. That you can develop your own contemplative abilities to recognize this Spirit is only to say that you can evolve into your own highest Estate—and that is yet another example of Aurobindo's message of evolutionary spirituality.

Aurobindo thus stands as one of the great founders of integral spirituality and integral practice. All subsequent attempts at such integrative efforts must, I believe, at least acknowledge Aurobindo's enduring genius and in many ways still unsurpassed efforts. His influence at home and abroad has been, and continues to be, enormous. At the very least, special mention should be made of the work of Mike Murphy (*The Future of the Body*); Murphy and Leonard (*The Life We Are Given*); and my own *Integral Psychology*.³

In the context of the description of an integral culture, besides Sri Aurobindo's major work "Life Divine", also "The Human Cycle" and "The Ideal of Human Unity" need to be mentioned. According to Sri Aurobindo, "the end of history" as proclaimed by some, has not at all been reached. Sri Aurobindo however speaks of a necessary and decisive turning-point that eventually will have significance as a "cosmic milestone" as much as the transition from the consciousness of the animal to the one of homo sapiens. In his discrimination of historical cultural epochs of man's consciousness, Sri Aurobindo refers to the German historian *Karl Lamprecht*.⁴ He speaks of a sequence of eras, called the symbolic, typical, conventional and individualist. The present time is characterized as the mental individualistic. Subsequent to it, according to Sri Aurobindo, a subjective age will come when psycho spiritual reality will be directly experienced by the individual. All preceding forms of consciousness, including the mental individualistic, will be integrated and will offer man a completely new range of knowledge and action, in regard to his self as well as in regard to society and nature. At long last Sri Aurobindo envisions the development or rather, the descent of a "supramental" consciousness that may be seen as a "divine life in the world".

Beyond theory and practice

The Auroville experiment for the realization of human unity – inspired by Sri Aurobindo's work – is still a rather rare example of collective integral practice. Sri Aurobindo's philosophy of evolutionary development, Wilber's models of perception, and Jean Gebser's cultural reflections may be regarded only as the first pointers towards a practicable future. Still, they are only sketches of a narrow path between the abysses of conservative claims on spirituality and the rigidly clinging to a materialistic-humanistic world view that prevents development.

Neither can these models be simply equated in their aims and approaches. But viewed from an appropriate distance, their similarities and equivalents may prove to outweigh their differences. Sri Aurobindo, for example, regards "overmind" as a transition to supramental consciousness. This "overmind" has, in several respects, strong parallels to Wilber's "logic of vision" and with Gebser's "non-perspective view". Also the "spiritualised thinking" called for and described by Rudolf Steiner that develops from a developed "consciousness soul", seems to have a relation to this post rational understanding of consciousness. To date, studies are only in their beginning, and detailed comparisons of the various concepts do not as yet exist.⁴

Independent of all theory a growing number of contemporaries are, according to a recent American study, already on their way towards some kind of integral future. They are called "Cultural Creatives", and are characterized by their efforts to reconcile a rational analysis of reality and society with their inner perception of spiritual reality.)⁵

It may be presumed however that only a few of these post religious seekers of meaning in life know of the above-said thinkers and their concepts and fewer even may use them as maps yet.

After all this might well indicate that integral vision is more than just a theory.

Links and literature

1. Pitirim Sorokin: "The Crisis of our Age". E.P. Dutton, 1941. Cited by Paul Ray in: "Noetic Sciences Review", Vol. 37, 1996.
2. Kai Hellbusch: "Das integrale Bewußtsein Jean Gebsters – Konzeption der Bewußtseinsentfaltung als mögliche prima philosophia unserer Zeit", S.309, dissertation, TU Dresden, 1998. Bound edition available from the author: Dr. Kai Hellbusch, Malterstr.44, 01159 Dresden, Germany.
3. Ken Wilber in: A Greater Psychology – An Introduction to the Psychological Thought of Sri Aurobindo, edited by A. S. Dalal, Tarcher/Putnam, 2000
4. Karl Lamprecht (1856-1915), "Introduction in Historical Thinking", 1912
5. Selection of comparative studies to the works of Wilber, Sri Aurobindo and Steiner:
Robert McDermott (former and anthroposophical minded chairman of California Institute for Integral Studies): The need for philosophical and spiritual dialogue: Reflections of Ken Wilber's Sex, Ecology, Spirituality, ReVision, 19(2). Sowie: Toward transpersonal philosophizing, ReVision, 19(2). (also: www.kheper.auz.com/topics/Anthroposophy/Steiner_and_Wilber.htm)
6. <http://www.noetic.org> see points "archive", "1996" "Paul Ray: The Rise of an Integral Culture"