

## Ken Wilber's Developmental Structures of Consciousness: an introduction. By Russell Rose. 2019

*"Everyone who is intent upon surviving....with worth and dignity, and living rather than passively accepting life, must sooner or later pass through the agonies of emergent consciousness."*

Jean Gebser. 'The Ever-Present Origin.' 1985.

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Wilber's developmental system defines **structures of consciousness** that each human passes through in our process of body-mind growth, from neonate through childhood, adolescence, and the duration of adulthood: the physical self, the emotional self, the conceptual self, the role and rule self, the mature self, the authentic self, and the integrated self.

These structures parallel the **quantum mutations of consciousness** that have emerged in the cultural evolutionary journey from primal-man to the relative maturity of the modern-day human: the archaic, the magic-tribal, the magic-mythic, the mythic-conformist, the rational-modern, the post-modern, and the integral.

What emerges in the cultural evolutionary process  
emerges also in the subjective developmental process.

It is understood that these mutations emerge spontaneously, both in culture and in subjective developmental process, as **a manifestation of latent possibilities**, an **emergence of inherent predisposition**. They are hard-wired, non-volitional and, short of developmental arrest, paradigm-shifting and inevitable. These leaps in consciousness can be understood as evolutionary macro-mutations, to the Darwinian micro-adaptations.

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Each new structure signifies an expansion of awareness, a broadening of perspective, a de- and re-centring of narcissism into an ever-widening worldview; a new perspective, moral position, outlook upon life, and self-focus.

**Undifferentiated, to Symbiotic, to I and It, to I and You, to Us,  
to The Planet, to All Of Us, to The Universe.**

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Although presented as individual structures, successive stages, this is to some extent a reductive convenience, as:

**Firstly:** although demonstrating distinct worldviews, there is a certain fluidity and overlap. Except in the very early stages of developmental consciousness, few people would ever be in solely one structure.

**Secondly:** these structures actively and unconsciously conflict, as well as actively and unconsciously merge; and to some extent can be understood by their relationship to each other.

**Thirdly:** each new emergent structure subsumes and integrates its precedents, and so cannot be entirely distinguished from them. Each structure is **transcended by** and **included within** the subsequent higher structure; which embraces and envelopes the integrated growth and stability, the lessons, energies, traumas, arrests, and mis-translations of experience.

This process of 'transcending and including' is fundamental, quintessential to nature: sub-atomic particles are subsumed by atoms, transcended by them but included within them; atoms by molecules, molecules by cells, cells by organisms; each subsequent 'level' more sophisticated

## Ken Wilber's Developmental Structures of Consciousness: an introduction. By Russell Rose. 2019

than the precedents that remain nevertheless embraced at its core. A human is, for example, though clearly more sophisticated than atoms, non-existent without them. And, perhaps more to the immediate point, we have **transcended** but **included** everything that we have ever been.

In individual growth-process these structures are clear fulcrums, developmental forks-in-the-road, and these fulcrums comprise three fundamental processes.

- **Fusion:** a functional **identification** with this emergent structure. *This* is who I am.
- **Differentiation:** a new and higher structure begins to emerge in consciousness, and is identified with, the current structure thereby consolidated and differentiated from self-identity. It is **transcended**. *That* is who I am.
- **Integration:** an integration of the differentiated structure. It is both **transcended** and **included** as it is incorporated into the body-mind psyche of the next higher structure.

A developmental arrest can occur during any of these processes, and can be brought about by organic, psychological, or cultural cause - a developmental incapacity, a developmental wound, or a cultural environment that disallows the emergent consciousness; for example, a rational-modern perspective in a mythic-conformist culture.

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Wilber carefully details stages beyond those that I will be presenting, states of self-transcendent consciousness, the spiritual realms. I haven't addressed them because, whereas these presented-structures are significant to everyone, the transcendent states are significant to few - and few of the few would be likely to seek mainstream psychotherapy as a support-system for this experiential navigation. However, this system's emphasis on a subjective predisposition to structures of emergent consciousness that first emerged in cultural history does suggest that this process of unfolding, from birth to death, has a spiritual quality, rather than being a solely bio-psychological journey.

It is also an ecological journey, charting the relationship between human and nature, both as a species and as an individual. The painful differentiation from nature into separate existence that manifests in the *instinct* and, later, the *belief* that nature can be controlled, thwarted or overcome by magic, myth, or rational modernism, through to a re-unification with and a surrender within nature that is characteristic of the transcendent states.

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Wilber acknowledges influence from the work of Jean Gebser, a multi-disciplinary philosopher. His book, 'The Ever-Present Origin' is an exceptional and profound piece of work, systematically detailing quantum mutations in consciousness that have brought us to where we are today; or, at least, until 1953, when this book was first published. He draws upon an analysis of art, architecture, concepts of space and time, literature, language, science, and pretty much anything significant to cultural expression and identity throughout the ages in his poetic and theoretically robust formulation - which I know will take me five years to fully read and twenty to digest. In addition to acknowledging Jean Gebser, I've referred to the following (of many) named influences:

- **Self-needs:** Abraham Maslow.
- **Cognitive line:** Jean Piaget and Sri Aurobindo.
- **Self identity:** Jane Loevinger.
- **Values:** Clare Graves.

**Ken Wilber's Developmental Structures of Consciousness: an introduction.**  
**By Russell Rose. 2019**

**Fulcrum 1:**  
**The Birth of The Physical Self.**  
**Emerges around 4 to 9 months of age.**  
**Undifferentiated self.**  
**Pre-moral.**

**Evolutionary roots:**  
**began about 300,000 years BCE**  
**(Foraging)**

**Basic Sphere of Consciousness:** archaic.  
**Cognitive line:** basic sensorimotor.  
**Self-identity:** undifferentiated.  
**Values:** survival.  
**Bottom line:** staying alive.  
**Characteristic Pathology:** psychoses. Schizoid characters.

Having survived birth, the first few months of life are an adualistic transition-phase, in which there is no separate self, except in the eye of a beholder. No inside or outside, no body or environment, but an undifferentiated, pre-temporal, pre-spatial, pre-conscious world where everything is everything and there is no I. Freud's 'primary narcissism' and Jung's 'Pleromatic fusion.'

Our first emergent task is to begin to identify with our physical body, to gradually develop a perception of where we begin and the environment ends, towards a *seating of consciousness* in the physical body. A reliably accurate perception of physical self and boundary will take time and practice, but this is the dawning of self-distinction. I and It.

There is an increase in sensorimotor co-ordination and dexterity, a capacity to experience the world through the senses, the emergence of primitive emotions, and the beginnings of a fight or flight response.

If consciousness fails *adequately* to centre itself in the physical body, the experience of self and object will remain highly confused, with significant characteristics of this structure in adults being severe reality-distortion, hallucinatory images and thoughts, narcissistic delusions of reference, and hallucinatory wish-fulfilment. Physical contact can be felt as inherently confusing, disturbing and invasive.

If consciousness fails *completely* to centre itself in the physical body for organic reasons, the consequences for self-care and self-identity will be likely severe; and, if for developmental reasons, will likely manifest in psychoses.

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**Ken Wilber's Developmental Structures of Consciousness: an introduction.**  
**By Russell Rose. 2019**

**Fulcrum 2:**

**The Birth of the Emotional self:**  
**Emerges around 15-24 months of age.**  
**Emotionally Symbiotic.**  
**Pre-moral.**

**Evolutionary roots:**  
**Began about 50,000 BCE**  
**(European Early Modern Humans 45,000 BCE)**  
**(Language established 50,000 BCE)**  
**(Horticulture 20,000 BCE)**

**Basic Sphere of Consciousness:** magic-tribal.

**Cognitive line:** pre-operational (symbiotic).

**Self needs:** physiological.

**Self-identity:** impulsive.

**Values:** magic-animistic.

**Bottom line:** safety and security.

**Characteristic Pathology:** narcissistic-borderline. Splitting and fusion of self and object-representations, and a splitting of all-good and all-bad objects.

Although the separate physical self is on the path to becoming more clearly distinguished, the emotional self remains fused with those around it, especially the mother, in an intense boundary-less narcissism. As the emotional self begins to differentiate from the emotional environment, we begin to wake up to the conflicted experience that we are each a separate self. **I** and **You**.

The boundaries between self and object are still developing and on a spectrum of differentiation. The self can confuse itself with its environment, the environment can be seen to take on human-like qualities, and the self can be imagined to magically influence the environment. The perception tends to be fantasy-based, wherein every wish is expected to materialise, and every wish that does materialise does so because it has been willed. The world is enchanted, and there is a capacity to sense and attach to mystery and magic.

The wishes are basic in an infant, and announced with a cry that is magically responded to (hopefully) by an enormous, looming, loving 'Goddess'; although sometimes the cry summons the angry, impatient, exhausted, or self-absorbed 'Witch'. All-good, and all-bad; a theme whose common manifestation in cinema suggests the extent to which many of us still identify with or at least resonate with this structure.

Significant characteristics of this structure if it doesn't go well are that the self may remain in fusion at an emotionally narcissistic stage, whereby others exist as an extension of the self, leading towards narcissistic pathologies; or else differentiation begins but remains unresolved and unintegrated, leading towards borderline pathologies. The self remains confused with the other, and perception of other can remain split between all-good and all-bad. A belief in voodoo-like curses and good-luck charms, magical beliefs, superstitions and mystical signs, practices believed to influence nature, such as rain-dances.

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**Ken Wilber's Developmental Structures of Consciousness: an introduction.**  
**By Russell Rose. 2019**

**Fulcrum 3:**  
**The birth of the conceptual self:**  
**Emerges around 4 years of age.**  
**Egocentric.**  
**Pre-conventional.**

**Evolutionary roots:**  
**Began about 15000 years ago.**  
**(Agrarian Revolution 11000 years ago)**

**Basic Sphere of Consciousness:** magic-mythic.  
**Cognitive line:** pre-operational (conceptual). The representational mind.  
**Self needs:** safety.  
**Self-identity:** self-protective.  
**Values:** egocentric.  
**Bottom line:** power and action.  
**Characteristic Pathology:** psycho-neuroses. Repression, dissociation.

By now, the self has hopefully transcended its exclusive identification with the emotional level of consciousness, and is no longer only a collection of sensations, impulses, and emotions, but also beginning to identify with the mental or conceptual self, with the representational mind - which comprises **images**, which begin to emerge around 7 months; **symbols**, in our second year; and **concepts**, which dominate from 4-7 years.

The mind is now structured and strong enough to repress and dissociate lower impulses, to establish neurosis, and an anxiety about safety and security fuelled by a strong set of power-drives and a continuing inability to *clearly* take a perspective other than our own, can leave us inclined to take what we want, and believe that whatever we want is right because we want it.

The self is understood as egocentric. This doesn't suggest a strong and robust ego. To the contrary, the egoic sense of self is still underdeveloped, but the immediate world and its inhabitants, although now differentiated, are still very much seen from our own perspective.

In the previous magic stage we will have experienced an enchanted and magical merging with the environment, which is imagined to be influenced by our will, but we are now gradually emerging insecurely into the realisation that this isn't so. We cannot control nature, but *someone* can. Gods, Goddesses, all-powerful God-given leaders, spirits, superheroes - all given energy through this increased power-drive and our insecure sense of existence. An attention to superstitions, prayer, and worship will protect us.

**Egocentric magic power gives way to egocentric prayer and ritual.**

Significant characteristics of this stage are the beginnings of a healthy drive towards self-empowerment, seeking of opportunity, self-promotion, and conceptual thinking. Self-interest is heightened - our own needs, protection, security, and power. Vigilance and aggression, courage and determination, an attachment to the mythic, an idealised attachment to gurus and prophets, mentalities of conquering and domination, heroism, the demand for immediate gratification, the chronic need for respect, the supernatural.

**Ken Wilber's Developmental Structures of Consciousness: an introduction.**  
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**Fulcrum 4:**  
**The birth of the Role Self and Rule Self:**  
**Emerges around 7 years of age**  
**Ethnocentric.**  
**Conventional.**

**Evolutionary roots:**  
**Began about 5000 BCE.**  
**(Organised Religion.)**  
**(Writing and recorded history 3000 BCE)**

**Basic Sphere of Consciousness:** mythic-conformist.

**Cognitive line:** concrete operational.

**Self needs:** belonging.

**Self-identity:** conformist.

**Values:** absolutistic.

**Bottom line:** stability and purposeful life. Love and belongingness.

**Characteristic Pathology:** script pathology. False self.

We can now take the role of the other and seek to identify ourselves within a group - the tribe, family, peer-group - within which we begin to take **roles**, and our new interest in the integrity of the community encourages the development of **rules** to protect it. We are no-longer egocentric, but ethnocentric. **Us**.

This can be a highly conformist and absolutistic stage of consciousness. Thinking is concrete, and things are taken literally, including family scripts and religious myths which offer some kind of meaning, understanding, or purpose in life. Those who don't conform can become outcast. In families, this will be the black-sheep, the scapegoat whose power is diminished by pity and the implication of mental health problems.

Significant characteristics of this stage are the focus on a mission, laws, regulations, rules, discipline, duty, honour, morality and righteous living, right and wrong, black and white, one correct way to think, convention, conformity, us versus them, puritanism, fundamentalism, nationalism, totalitarianism, salvation, primary prophets, a sin-free-life, heaven upon death, codes of chivalry and honour, devout patriotism, an habitual role within the family or group; and a clear sense of self may be sacrificed for a group-cause or belief-system. There may be a distorted personal and worldview narrative, inherited family-scripts, and an identification with the *false self*. Feedback can be heard as personal disapproval. Values that differ from our own may be entirely dismissed or scorned.

**Culture wars:**

Historically, this structure conflicted ideologically with its magic predecessor, most explicitly in The Church's condemnation of heretic magical practices such as witchcraft and paganism, although interestingly The Church does of course celebrate the magical in its own scriptures, under the guise of miracles; and it conflicted also with the emerging sciences, such as of Galileo. As an absolutistic structure, there was an inclination to respond to both of its ideological enemies with banishment, imprisonment, or death.

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**Ken Wilber's Developmental Structures of Consciousness: an introduction.**  
**By Russell Rose. 2019**

**Fulcrum 5:**  
**The Birth of The Mature Self.**  
**Emerges in Adolescence.**  
**Worldcentric.**  
**Post-conventional.**

**Evolutionary roots:**  
**Began about 1750.**  
**(European enlightenment)**  
**(Industrial Revolution)**

**Basic Sphere of Consciousness:** Rational Modern.

**Cognitive Line:** formal operational awareness.

**Self needs:** self-esteem.

**Self-identity:** conscientious.

**Values:** multiplistic.

**Bottom line:** success and autonomy. Achievement.

**Characteristic Pathology:** Identity neuroses.

Concrete Operational Awareness operates on the concrete world, actually needing to do something in order to see how it's done. Formal Operational Awareness, typical of this Rational Modern stage, operates on thought itself. Thinking about thinking, the capacity to reflect upon reflections with a self-critical eye, and to see the world more objectively; all leading towards a greater self-awareness.

Concrete Operational Awareness allows for different perspectives to be taken, but Formal Operational Awareness allows them to be understood as being relative to each other.

Introspection is possible, and our inner visions are no longer from external nature, from mythic gods, or from conventional others, but from an inner voice. The moral stance moves from conventional to post-conventional, and we can criticise our own conventional society rather than being merely identified with it. Rules and roles can be judged rather than accepted wholesale.

However, this can lead to an identity-crisis when we find that we no-longer befit the family-convention, narrative and myths. If I don't belong here, where do I belong?

A **planetary** consciousness emerges in line with a further narcissistic de-centring, another transcendence. No longer fully identified with conformity, with fitting-in to a localised sense of group, the self now has global perspective and wants to succeed independently and stand out from the crowd.

Significant characteristics of this stage are a focus on progress, prosperity, optimism, self-reliance, risk-taking and competitiveness, goals and professional development, rationality, objectivism, demonstrated results, technology and the power of science, the spread of wealth, advancement, capitalism and materialism, "if it's not quantifiable or measurable it can be dismissed", a sense of justice, equality.

**Cultural wars:** Rational Modernity, in evolutionary terms, brought much to the party. Modern science, medicine, physics, biology, collective medical-care, the prevention and combatting of disease, a belief in universal rights, democracy, the legal end to slavery, the rise of feminism, and so on. The beneficial impact of Rational Modernity can be seen and experienced on nearly every

**Ken Wilber's Developmental Structures of Consciousness: an introduction.**  
**By Russell Rose. 2019**

level of our functional existence. All of these developments were made possible, in large part, by the differentiation between the the arts, morality, and science that Rational Modernity forged. No longer, for example, would a scientific discovery or theory be silenced under the threat of heresy, or an artist condemned for not having a religious muse. Mythicism was the convention, and Rational Modernists were set free by post-convention.

Rational Modernity can be reductively seen to have emerged in response to, and as a perceived antidote to, the excesses and domination of its Mythic predecessor; but as with its predecessor it is, at its extremes, absolutely certain of itself. Rational Modernism believes itself to be the road to truth.

Just as the myth (an archetypal reservoir *for* the collective psycho-spiritual human experience) became pervasively understood in literal terms, so the empirical perspective became reductionist and positivistic to an extreme; existence explained solely in terms of matter/energy and reducible parts: the death of the spiritual, the symbolic, the holistic, the systemic, the interpretive, the uncertain, and the subjective along with the literal-mythic.

It's worth noting in passing that a number of significant physicists of the twentieth century expressed belief in a realm of existence that is unexplainable by the abstraction of maths, and this acknowledgement was a foot in the door of postmodernism.

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**Ken Wilber's Developmental Structures of Consciousness: an introduction.**  
**By Russell Rose. 2019**

**Fulcrum 6:**  
**The Birth of The Authentic self.**  
**Emerges in adulthood.**  
**Worldcentric.**  
**Integral-aperspectival**

**Evolutionary roots:**  
**Began about 1960**  
**(Information revolution.)**

**Basic Sphere of Consciousness:** Pluralistic post-modern.  
**Cognitive line:** pluralistic mind. (Meta-systemic planetary mind).  
**Self needs:** self-actualisation.  
**Values:** relativistic, communitarian, egalitarian.  
**Self-identity:** individualistic.  
**Bottom line:** community harmony, equality, and human-bonds.  
**Characteristic Pathology:** existential pathology.

When the self's centre of gravity identifies with this stage we can *inhabit* a global perspective rather than just talk about it or use it to our advantage. There is a sensitivity towards others and to the environment, as an antidote to the relatively-cold rationality of Modernism. **All of us.** Reality is now a question of subjectivity, intersubjectivity and interpretation in a minefield of social-constructs, and we become more conscious and tolerant of the complexities of life, as well as of individual and cultural struggles, as we begin to question old identities and understand systemic connections. Whereas *thought* was central to the Rational Modern stage, *feeling* is central to the Post Modern Pluralist; which is a significant movement towards the experience of an integrated body-mind self.

Significant characteristics of this stage are a focus on harmony and equality, reconciliation, consensus, dialogue, relationships, bonding and spirituality, deconstruction, diversity and multiculturalism, relativism and pluralism, civil rights and environmentalism. A scientific focus moves towards quantum, complexity and chaos rather than its more cause-and-effect and reductionist precedent. We become more interested in personal accomplishments that are independent of socially-sanctioned reward.

**Culture wars:**

The *postmodern performative-contradiction*, its theoretical blindspot, is seen at the extremes of this stage of consciousness: the pure postmodern vision is that, due to everything being a social-construct, the highest understanding of life is that there is no higher understanding of life. The most advanced perspective on life is that all perspectives are equal.

So for example: a racist worldview that de-privileges those from a different ethnic group would have to be understood by strict postmodernism as being of equal value as a worldview that does not; such as postmodernism itself. Postmodernism can thereby champion exactly that which it disclaims.

When this performative-contradiction remains unresolved, the tension between the absolute but mutually-excluding positions can collapse into itself, toxifying its contradiction with a rigid code, a thought-police mentality, or an enforced definition of political-correctness that is aimed at anyone who is non-adherent, and with an ironic disregard for context. This contradiction becomes reconciled in the subsequent *Integral* structure of consciousness.

**Ken Wilber's Developmental Structures of Consciousness: an introduction.**  
**By Russell Rose. 2019**

**Fulcrum 7:**  
**The Birth of The Integral Self.**  
**Emerges in adulthood.**  
**World-centric.**  
**Beginning of transpersonal.**

**Evolutionary Roots:**  
**(The leading edge of evolution)**

**Basic Sphere of Consciousness:** integral.

**Cognitive line:** low vision-logic.

**Self needs:** self-transcendence.

**Values:** systemic.

**Self-identify:** autonomous.

**Bottom line:** wholeness.

Characteristic of the previous structures is our fixation with and within them, an identification that can be distrustful or contemptuous of the perspectives of other structures. This is most obvious culturally, with the relationships between magic and mythicism, mythicism and modernism, modernism and post-modernism; each to some degree being an antidote to the extremes of its predecessor, inspiring a mutual disregard.

This *Integral* sphere understands, values, sees the benefit and inevitable necessity of all of the structures. As a 'nested-hierarchy', all of the preceding structures have been subsumed and embraced within the most sophisticated of the structures. To disregard the value of any particular structure of consciousness would be to misunderstand the process of evolution. However relatively unsophisticated an atom might be, there can be no organism without it; no family, community, no species, no planet, no universe. A fully mature adult is still the once-newborn, and the modern human still the once-primal man.

Precedent structures are not only understood as essential stepping-stones towards a greater wholeness, but their perspectives have significant value unto themselves. If evolution has manifested differences, then differences must be crucial to the expression and process of evolution.

Differing perspectives may now be consciously processed ***dialectically***; with a focus upon the ***integration of apparent opposites*** (rather than their unresolvable conflict) being the path towards truth or growth.

However, although all stages and perspectives are understood as being definitively of value, they are not necessarily recognised as having *equal* value or sophistication. There *is* a growth-hierarchy that is intuitively understood and celebrated. A worldcentric vision *is*, in developmental terms, more sophisticated than an ethnocentric vision.

Feeling (central to postmodernism) and thought (central to modernism) are of equal significance to us at this stage, and their integration into a bodymind experience of the self is a characteristic. However, the observing self is beginning to transcend both the mind and body, and be conscious of them as objects in awareness; which is a significant movement towards the transcendent states.

## Ken Wilber's Developmental Structures of Consciousness: an introduction. By Russell Rose. 2019

Other significant characteristics of this structure are a focus on integration, holism, systemic processing, inter-connectedness, complexity and chaos, inter-relatedness within conflict, a comfort with paradox and dialectics, the celebration of an all-embracing and universal humanity, and an emerging focus on transcendence. Our perspective is holistic-systemic and integrative. **Everything.**

Whereas the previous structures that we are subjectively tasked with navigating are already widespread in cultural humanity, this structure is at the leading edge of evolution. It is estimated that perhaps as few as five per cent of the world's population have significantly dipped their toes into this worldview, and it is understood that once that number reaches about ten to fifteen percent there becomes a cultural tipping-point, the spread becoming exponential rather than incremental.

Ultimately this new emergent structure will become as integrated into cultural and subjective availability as, say, rational modernism is today.

### **Culture wars:**

The postmodern performative contradiction is no-longer understood as a paradox of mutual-exclusives, but as being easily reconcilable. The postmodern perspective inherently distrusts hierarchy as being socially-constructed, which is generally true of typical dominator-hierarchies.

However, the structures of consciousness are a *growth*-hierarchy, a hierarchy of actualisation; and, for example, an ethnocentric perspective and self-identity, as in fulcrum 4, is definitively less sophisticated than the worldcentric perspective and self identity of fulcrum 6.

The Integral Perspective has no difficulty in seeing that the postmodern attitude is more highly developed and sophisticated than an ethnocentric attitude that privileges in value only those we immediately identify with. Postmodernism has expanded its centre of consciousness far beyond that of Ethnocentricity, and whilst Ethnocentricity is still understood as having significance and value it is demonstrably less advanced than postmodernism. A cell may not be 'better' than an atom, but it is undeniably of a higher sophistication given that it has both transcended and included the atom.

This Integral structure has no instinctive vehemence towards other structures. Although it does not see everything as equal, it does see everything as relevant and valuable. This structure's next emergent step is into the transcendent states of consciousness.

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### **To Finish:**

What I've presented here is an introduction to a particular strand of Ken Wilber's Integral Theory of the subjective, objective, cultural and social-institutional evolution of the species. Integral Theory is a Meta Theory, a theory about theories, drawn from and integrating a wide-range of multi-disciplinary sources. Wilber has written many books, and all contain reference to Integral Theory in one way or another and usually in a language that is generally accessible. A good introduction can be found on YouTube: [https://youtu.be/H4jcxJ\\_0ok](https://youtu.be/H4jcxJ_0ok)

For more information and depth of explanation, try:  
'Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: the spirit of evolution.' By Ken Wilber.  
'Ever-Present Origins.' By Jean Gebser.  
'The Origins and History of Consciousness.' By Erich Neumann.