

# From the Great Chain of Being to Postmodernism in Three Easy Steps

## Introduction

The following is an excerpt from the first draft of volume 2 of the Kosmos trilogy, tentatively titled *Sex, Karma, and Creativity* (volume 1 of that trilogy was *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*), slated for publication in 2006. The first four excerpts can be found at [wilber.shambhala.com](http://wilber.shambhala.com); they explain the general approach itself. “**AQAL**” (pronounced *ah-qwul*) is short for “all quadrants, all levels, all lines, all states, all types,” which is the metatheory of the integral approach, and which will be explained as we go along.

The theme of this excerpt is simple: given the devastating critiques leveled by both modernity and postmodernity against the great premodern wisdom traditions, is there any way that their important knowledge-claims can be verified and redeemed in the modern and postmodern world?

I will suggest “three easy” steps that can do so. While done in a light-hearted manner, there is scarcely a topic that is more serious.

## Background

The traditional “Great Chain of Being” is usually given as something like: **matter**, **body**, **mind**, **soul**, and **spirit**. In the Vedanta, for example, these are, respectively, the 5 sheaths or levels of Spirit: *annamayakosha* (the sheath or level made of physical food), the *pranamayakosha* (the level made of élan vital), the *manomayakosha* (the level made of mind), the *vijnanamayakosha* (the level made of higher mind or soul), and *anandamayakosha* (the level made of transcendental bliss or causal spirit. Vedanta, of course, adds *turiya*, or the transcendental ever-present Self, and *turiyatita*, or the nondual, ever-present,

unqualifiable Spirit-as-such, but the simpler five-level scheme will work for our introductory purposes. We will return to the more “complete” version later.)

This five-level Great Chain of Being can be represented schematically as in figure 1. Although we have to be very careful with cross-cultural comparisons, interpretive schemes similar to this Great Chain or “Great Nest of Being” can be found in most of the wisdom traditions of the “premodern” world, as indicated in figures 2 and 3, which are diagrams used by Huston Smith to indicate the general similarities (or family resemblances) among these traditions.

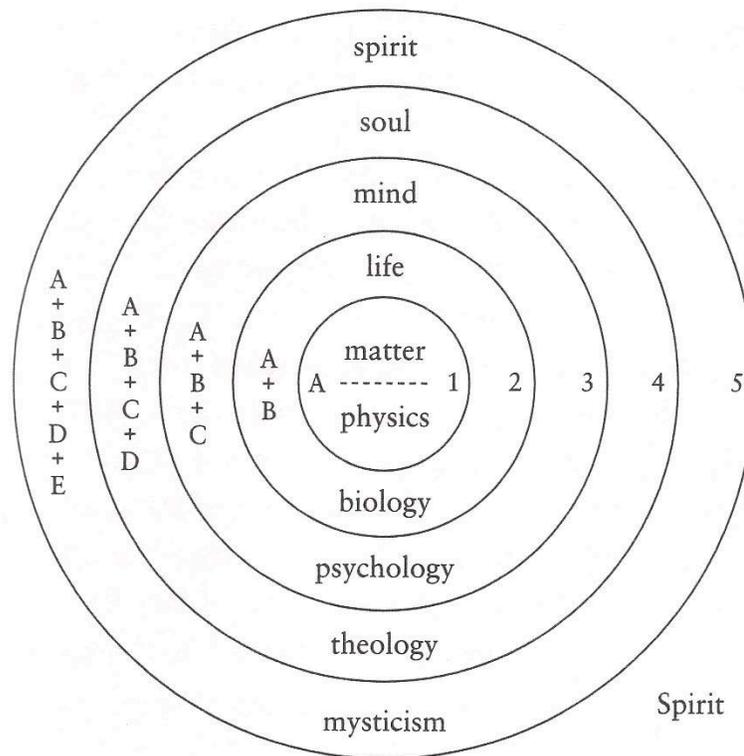


Figure 1. *The Traditional Great Chain of Being*

With reference to figure 1, notice that the Great Chain, as conceived by its proponents (from Plotinus to Aurobindo), is indeed more of a Great Nest—or what is often called a “holarchy”—because

each senior level goes beyond its junior levels but envelopes them (or nests” them)—what Plotinus called “a development that is envelopment.” Each higher level, however, also radically transcends its juniors and can neither be reduced to its juniors nor explained by them. This is indicated in figure 1 as (A), (A + B), (A + B + C), and so on, which means that each senior level contains elements or qualities that are emergent and nonreducible.

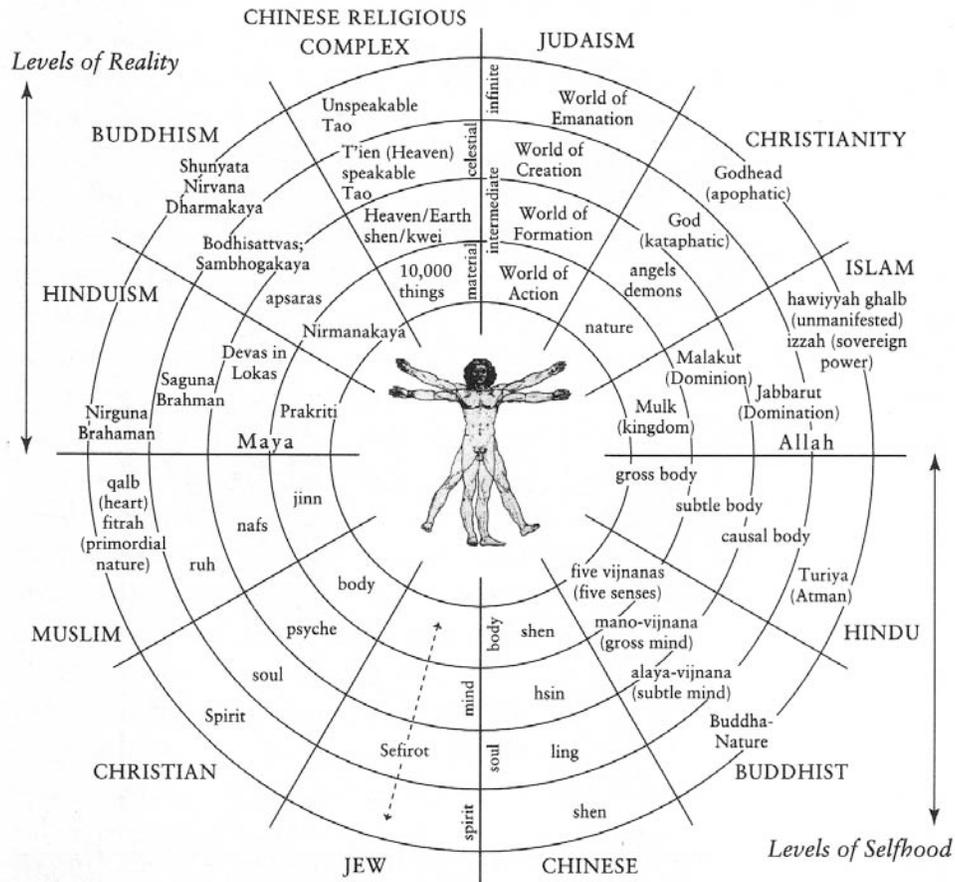


Figure 2. *The Great Chain in Various Wisdom Traditions*, compiled by Huston Smith (graphic layout courtesy of Brad Reynolds).

For example, when life (A + B) emerges “out of” matter (A), it contains certain qualities (such as sexual reproduction, interior emotions, autopoiesis, élan vital, etc.—all represented by “B”) that cannot be

accounted for in strictly the material terms of “A.” Likewise, when mind (“A + B + C”) emerges out of life, mind contains emergent characteristics (“C”) that cannot be reduced to, nor explained by, life and matter alone. When soul (“A + B + C + D”) emerges, it transcends mind and life and matter. Evolution, then, is this “unfolding” of Spirit from matter to body to mind to soul to Spirit itself, or the realization of the absolute Spirit that was the Goal and Ground of the entire sequence.

The best introduction to this traditional notion remains Schumacher’s classic *A Guide for the Perplexed*, a title borrowed from Maimonides’s great exposition on the same topic. The general idea is of a great holarchy of being and knowing, with the levels of reality in the “outer” world reflected in the levels of self (or levels of “interior” knowing and being), which is particularly suggested by figure 3.

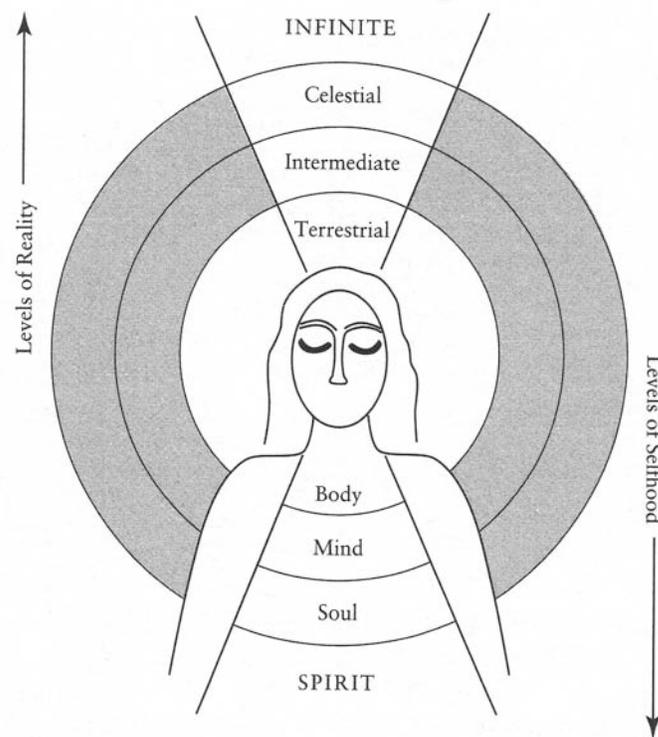


Figure 3. “As Above, So Below” (from Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth*; reprinted with permission.)

But, according to the traditions, this entire process of *evolution* or “un-folding” could never occur without a prior process of *involution* or “in-folding.” Not only can the higher not be explained in terms of the lower, and not only does the higher not actually emerge “out of” the lower, but the reverse of both of those is true, according to the traditions. That is, the lower dimensions or levels are actually sediments or deposits of the higher dimensions, and they find their meaning because of the higher dimensions of which they are a stepped-down or diluted version.

This sedimentation process is called “**involution**” or “**emanation**.” According to the traditions, before evolution or the unfolding of Spirit can occur, involution or the infolding of Spirit must occur: the higher successively steps down into the lower. Thus, the higher levels appear to emerge “out of” the lower levels during evolution—for example, life appears to emerge out of matter—because, and only because, they were first deposited there by involution. You cannot get the higher out of the lower unless the higher were already there, in potential—sleeping, as it were—waiting to emerge. The “miracle of emergence” is simply Spirit’s creative play in the fields of its own manifestation.

Thus, for the traditions, the great cosmic game begins when Spirit throws itself outward, in sport and play (*lila, kenosis*), to create a manifest universe. Spirit “loses” itself, “forgets” itself, takes on a magical façade of manyness (*maya*) in order to have a grand game of hide-and-seek with itself. Spirit first throws itself outward to create soul, which is a stepped-down and diluted reflection of Spirit; soul then steps down into mind, a paler reflection yet of Spirit’s radiant glory; mind then steps down into life, and life steps down into matter, which is the densest, lowest, least conscious form of Spirit. We might represent this as: Spirit-as-spirit steps down into Spirit-as-soul, which steps down into Spirit-as-mind, which steps down into Spirit-as-body, which steps down into Spirit-as-matter. These levels in the Great Nest are all *forms of Spirit*, but the forms become less and less conscious, less and less aware of their Source and Suchness, less and less alive to their ever-present Ground, even though they are all nevertheless nothing but Spirit-at-play.

If we can represent the major emergent stages in evolution as (A), (A + B), (A + B + C), and so on—where the addition signs mean that something is emerging or being *added* to manifestation—then we

could represent involution as the prior *subtraction* process: Spirit starts out full and complete, with all of manifestation contained as potential in itself, which we can represent in brackets: [A + B + C + D + E]. Spirit first steps down into manifestation—and begins to “lose” itself in manifestation—by shedding its pure spiritual nature and assuming a manifest, finite, limited form—namely, the *soul* [A + B + C + D]. The soul has now forgotten “E,” or its radical identity with and as Spirit, and, in the ensuing confusion and angst, the soul flees this terror by stepping down into mind [A + B + C], which has forgotten “D,” its soul radiance; and mind flees into life, forgetting “C,” or its intelligence; and finally life sheds even its vegetative vitality “B” and appears as inert, insentient, lifeless matter, “A”—at which point something like the Big Bang occurs, whereupon matter blows into concrete existence and it appears that in the entire manifest world, there exists nothing but insentient, dead, lifeless matter.

But this matter is curiously frisky, is it not? It doesn’t just seem to lie about, on unemployment insurance, watching TV. This matter astonishingly begins to wind itself up: “order out of chaos” is what complexity physics calls it—or dissipative structures, or self-organization, or dynamic becoming. But the traditionalists were more straightforward about it: “God does not remain petrified and dead; the very stones cry out and raise themselves to Spirit,” as Hegel put it.

In other words, according to the traditions, once involution has occurred, then evolution begins or can begin, moving from (A) to (A + B) to (A + B + C), and so on, with each major emergent step being but an unfolding or remembering of the higher dimensions that were secretly infolded or sedimented in the lower during involution. That which was dis-membered, fragmented, and forgotten during involution is re-membered, reunited, made whole, and realized during evolution. Hence, the doctrine of *anamnesis*, or Platonic and Vedantic “remembrance,” so common in the traditions: if involution is a forgetting of who you are, evolution is a remembering of who and what you are: *tat tvam asi*: you are That. *Satori*, *metanoia*, *moksha*, and *wu* are some of the classic names for this realization.

## 1. Step One

As beautiful and brilliant as that interpretive scheme is, it is not without its problems. It is not so much that the scheme itself is wrong, as that the modern and postmodern world has added several profound insights that need to be added or incorporated if we want a more integral or comprehensive view. This is what is meant by “from the Great Chain to postmodernism in three easy steps.”

### *The Problem*

The Great Nest, involution and evolution, dimension-levels of being and knowing: those were some of the profound contributions of the great saints and sages of the premodern world, and can indeed be found in everything from the *Enneads* of Plotinus to the *Lankavatara Sutra* to *The Life Divine* of Aurobindo, all expressions of the great metaphysical systems.

But there is one item we should perhaps keep in mind as we moderns attempt to assess those ideas: the great metaphysical systems were, in the last analysis, interpretive frameworks that the sages gave to their spiritual experiences. These schemes, such as the Great Chain, were *interpretations* of living *experiences*—they were not some sort of fixed, rigid, ontological grids that are true for all eternity. If, in the following, I question the adequacy of some of these interpretations, I am not at all questioning the authenticity of the experiences or realizations of these great sages. I am simply suggesting that, as evolution itself continues to move forward, new horizons can be used to recontextualize and reframe these experiences in interpretive meshworks that are more adequate in the light of modern and postmodern contributions, so that the net result is something of an integration of the very best of premodern, modern, and postmodern forms of Spirit’s own unfolding.

Toward that end, I will suggest three central difficulties with the interpretive frameworks of the great metaphysical systems, as well as three suggested remedies. In my opinion, we want to keep as much as possible of the great traditional systems while jettisoning their unnecessary metaphysical

interpretations, interpretations that not only are *not necessary* to explain the same set of experiences, but interpretations that *guarantee* that spirituality will not get a fair hearing in the court of modern and postmodern thought.

The first difficulty can be seen with this example. If you look at any of the figures representing traditional metaphysics (figs. 1, 2, 3), notice that all of the levels higher than matter are indeed *meta-*physical, which means beyond physics or beyond matter. The material level includes, for example, the human brain as a complex material entity. This means, according to the metaphysical systems, that the feelings of a worm (which are level 2) are on a higher level of reality than the human brain (which is level 1).

Something is clearly not quite right with that scheme. Part of the problem is that the relation of human consciousness to human neurophysiology is something that is *not obvious* (and not even available) to introspective phenomenology (i.e., to meditation or contemplation), which means that items such as dopamine, serotonin, synaptic pathways, the Krebs's cycle, hypothalamic regulation, and so on, were not generally available to the ancients. Again, this does not mean that their spiritual realization was flawed or inadequate, but simply that they did not have the advantage of some of the finite facts that modern science has discovered. Were Plotinus alive today, you can bet that several chapters of the *Enneads* would be devoted to brain neurophysiology and its relation to spirit. Were Shankara alive today, his commentaries on the *Brahma Sutras* would no doubt have extensive discussions on the relation of the *nadis* to neurotransmitters.

*Suggested Solution*

What might Plotinus or Shankara have concluded about the relation of spiritual realities to material realities such as the brain? I believe they would have agreed to the following; but in any event, here is suggestion #1:

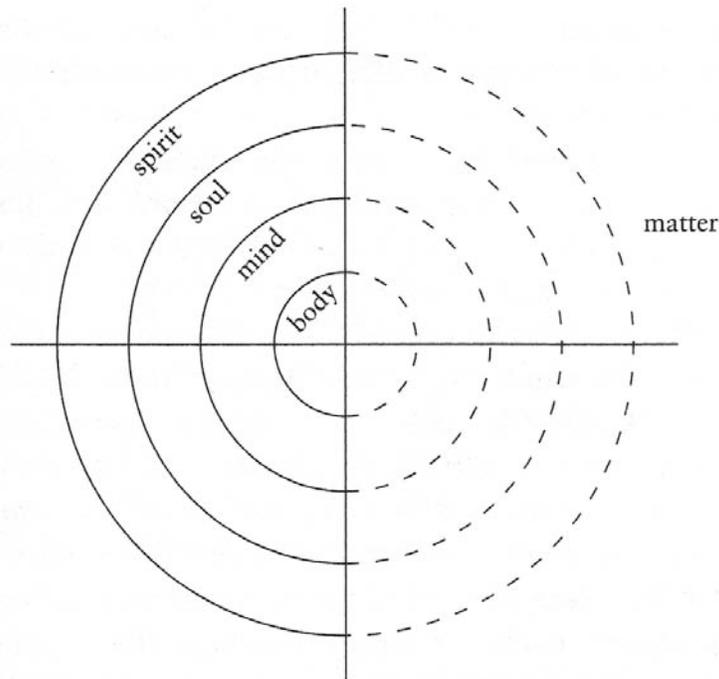


Figure 4. *Step One*: Matter Is Not the “Bottom” of All Levels  
but the “Exterior” of All Levels.

In the manifest world, what we call “matter” is not the lowest rung in the great spectrum of existence, but the *exterior form* of every rung in the great spectrum. Matter is not lower and consciousness higher, but matter and consciousness are the exterior and interior of every occasion.

This can be schematically represented as shown in figure 4, and in more detail in figure 5. The basic move here is to take what appears as “matter” off of the bottom level of the Great Chain (where all the other levels are seemingly higher and “meta”-physical) and instead make it the exterior form of all of the other levels. The traditions always understood that the levels “higher” than matter were “invisible” to the ordinary senses, and the same is true with our reformulation: namely, all the “interior” dimensions

(feelings, mutual understanding, compassion, awareness, consciousness, etc.) are invisible to the exterior senses; but we can do so without unnecessary “metaphysical” interpretations.

(What about reincarnation? Should evidence warrant it, there is room for such a hypothesis, but it is beyond the scope of a short introduction; please see Excerpt G, “Toward a Comprehensive Theory of Subtle Energies,” at [wilber.shambhala.com](http://wilber.shambhala.com), where the idea is explored at length. For this introduction, we are dealing with embodied earth-side consciousness.)

Notice that, in the **Upper-Right quadrant** (fig. 5), we can see the evolution of exterior or “material” or “physical” forms, as disclosed by modern science. These exterior forms include, in order of increasing evolutionary complexity, items such as: atoms, molecules, early or prokaryotic cells, true or eukaryotic cells, organisms with a neural net, organisms with a neural cord (e.g., shrimp), a reptilian brain stem (e.g., lizard), a limbic system (e.g., horse), a neocortex or triune brain (e.g., humans, with several higher “structure-functions” also listed).

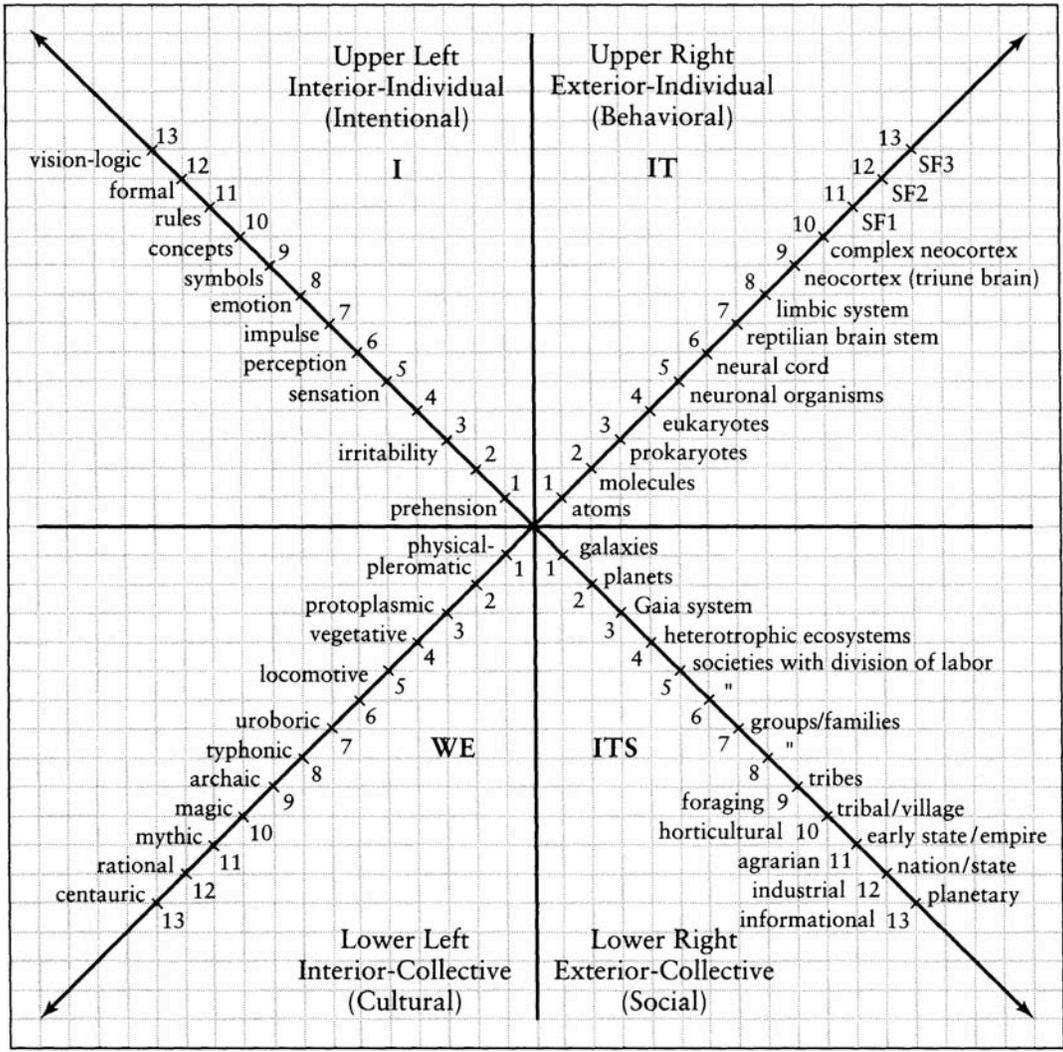


Figure 5. *The Four Quadrants.*

Those are all “exterior” or “material” forms, in that you can see them in the exterior, sensorimotor world. But each of those material forms of *increasing complexity* has, as an *interior* correlate, a level of *increasing consciousness*. Thus: atoms, whose exterior forms are physical entities such as neutrons, protons, and electrons, have an interior of prehesion or proto-feelings (as Whitehead would put it); neuronal organisms possess interior sensations; organisms with neural cords have perception; the

emergence of animals with a reptilian brain stem sees the emergence of interior impulses and instincts; an exterior limbic system emerges with interior emotions; a triune brain is the exterior or material form of an interior consciousness that can contain, among many other things, formal operational cognition, postconventional morality, vision-logic, linguistic capacities, and so on. (You can see some of these correlations between the Upper Right and the Upper Left in fig. 5.)

In other words, matter is not on the bottom rung of that evolutionary spiral, but is rather the *exterior* form of an evolution whose *interiors* contain correlative levels of feelings, awareness, consciousness, and so forth. AQAL metatheory handles this by saying that every mind (UL) has a body (UR), or every state of consciousness (UL) has a corresponding signature state of matter-energy (UR), or every interior prehension has an exterior form—in short, every occasion in the Upper-Left quadrant has a correlate in the Upper-Right quadrant, and vice versa. It is not merely that higher levels (of life and mind and soul) imprint matter or leave footprints in matter (which itself remains on the lowest level), but that what we call matter is the exterior form of each of those interior levels (as suggested in figs. 4 and 5).

Thus, what the premodern sages took to be META-physical realities are in many cases INTRA-physical realities: they are not above matter, nor beyond nature, nor meta-physical, nor super-natural: they are not above nature but within nature, not beyond matter but interior to it.

There is simply no way a premodern saint, in deep meditation on the nature of the soul, would or could know that his or her brain-wave patterns were settling into theta-alpha states; no way to know that serotonin was increasing, neural lactic acid was decreasing, cellular oxygen requirements were significantly diminishing, and hemispheric lateralization was occurring. All of the interior revelations of the soul therefore seemed and felt as if they were not physical, not material, not connected to nature at all, not a part of the fabric of material manifestation: they were meta-physical in every way.

As we will see, there are some aspects of the higher dimensions that might indeed be truly meta-physical; but the first thing we should note is that a great deal of what premodernity took to be *meta-physical* is in fact *intra-physical*, not above nature but within nature. This is the first step in moving from metaphysics to integral post-metaphysics.

## 2. Step Two

### *The Problem*

Step #1 involves adding, to the profound wisdom of the *premodern* traditions, the invaluable contributions of *modern* science. Step #2 involves the further addition of the important contributions of Spirit's *postmodern* turn.

These contributions are summarized in the lower two quadrants of figure 5. The upper quadrants represent an **individual** being; the lower quadrants represent a group, collective, or **system** of individual beings. The Left-Hand quadrants represent the **interiors** of an individual or group; and the Right-Hand quadrants represent the **exteriors** of an individual or group. Thus, the four quadrants are the inside and outside of the individual and the collective. (Again, please forgive these shortcuts in explanation. See, e.g., *The Marriage of Sense and Soul—Integrating Science and Religion*, for a fuller discussion.)

The important point with reference to postmodernity is simply this: just as the metaphysical interpretations that the ancients gave their authentic spiritual experiences could not take advantage of modern scientific discoveries, so they could not take advantage of the profound disclosures of postmodernism, ethnomethodology, cultural contextualism, the sociology of knowledge, and so on. All of those, taken together, deliver a devastating indictment: much of what the ancient sages took as metaphysical absolutes are actually culturally molded and conditioned.

### *Suggested Solution*

This does not mean that there are no cross-cultural truths or universals. It simply means that identifying them has to be done with much more care than metaphysics imagined; and that much of this identifying has to be done with research methodology, not speculative metaphysics.

The postmodern contribution to the discussion can be summarized by saying that every individual is nestled in systems of *cultural* and *social* networks, networks that have a profound influence on the

knowing and being of individuals themselves. These networks are the Lower-Left (cultural) and Lower-Right (social) quadrants in figure 5. The LR quadrant represents **social systems**—the *collective systems* or *collective exteriors* of individual organisms, exteriors that can be seen in the exterior or sensorimotor world (recall that all Right-Hand quadrants can be seen “out there” because they are “material” or “exterior”). These exterior systems include items such as ecosystems, geopolitical systems, modes of techno-economic production (foraging, horticultural, agrarian, industrial, informational, etc.), and all of the visible, exterior, concrete aspects of collectives or systems. Note again that, for the metaphysical traditions, all of these “material systems” would be on the *lowest rung* of existence, whereas, for integral post-metaphysics, they are simply the collective exterior dimensions of the “higher” (now *interior*) dimensions.

The LL or cultural quadrant represents all the *interiors of groups* or collectives, interiors that (like all Left-Hand quadrants) cannot be seen “out there,” interiors such as group values, identities, worldviews, cultural beliefs, background contexts, and so on. *Systems theory* focuses on the Lower-Right quadrant, and *postmodern poststructuralism* focuses on the Lower-Left quadrant—representing the exteriors and interiors of the collective.

Systems theory in its many forms emphasizes the fact that every individual organism is inseparably interconnected with its environment in dynamic webs of relationships and ecosystems, *all of which can be seen “out there”*—which again shows that “matter” is not the lowest level of being but simply the exterior form of all interior levels of being (in this case, the *exterior* form of the collective or *communal system*).

Of course, nothing in systems theory or ecology deals with interior states of beauty, satori, samadhi, mutual understanding, values, worldviews, and so forth, because all of those are indeed interior (and therefore inaccessible with ecology or systems theory). Attempting to reduce all realities to one quadrant, as systems theory often does (e.g., Fritjof Capra), is known as *quadrant absolutism*, and is something an integral methodological pluralism attempts to avoid.

Postmodernism, on the other hand, is known for focusing on those interior or cultural aspects of an individual's being-in-the-world, where it emphasizes that much of what any society takes to be "given," "true," and "absolute" is in fact culturally molded, conditioned, and relative. That postmodernism itself is often caught in its own quadrant absolutism (where it tries to reduce everything to cultural constructions in the LL) should not detract from the important truths that it has contributed—all of which we summarize by saying that every occasion has a Lower-Left quadrant or dimension.

The four quadrants, then, represent four inseparable dimensions of any individual's being-in-the-world. These dimensions are so fundamental that every major natural language contains them as first-person, second-person, and third-person pronouns, which can be

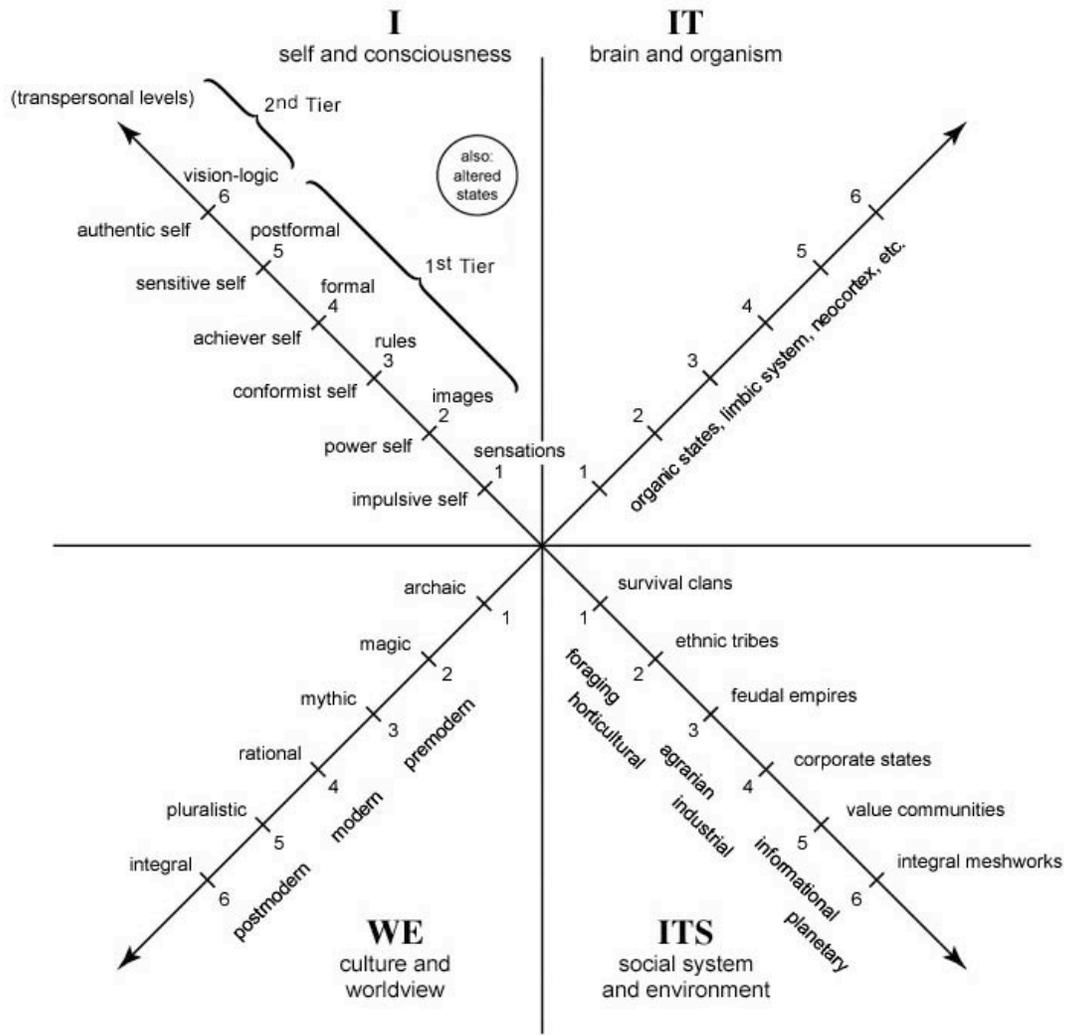


Figure 6. *Some Aspects of the Four Quadrants as They Appear in Humans.*

summarized as “I,” “we,” “it,” and “its.” The **Upper Left** is “I,” or the interior feelings or awareness of any individual sentient being (atoms to ants to apes). The **Upper Right** is “it,” or the exterior form of a sentient being (i.e., its matter and energy—which includes subtle energy). The **Lower Right** is the exterior form of a group, collective, or system of sentient beings or individuals. And the **Lower Left** is

the interior or collective consciousness, collective values, intersubjective backgrounds, cultural contexts, and so on. Again: the interior and the exterior of the individual and the collective.

I have included one more diagram, which is the four quadrants narrowed to some of their forms as they appear in humans (see fig. 6).

I am not going to make a long drawn-out argument for this, but simply state my own opinion in the strongest way: any premodern spirituality that does not come to terms with both modernity and postmodernity has no chance of survival in today's world. One way to effect this integration is by using AQAL ("all quadrants, all levels"), which combines the enduring contributions of premodern, modern, and postmodern. The "**all levels**" part refers to the great spectrum of being and knowing first interpreted so brilliantly by the great premodern sages—matter to body to mind to soul to spirit (we will return to these levels in a moment). The "**all quadrants**" part refers to the refinements brought by modernity (namely, matter is not on the bottom of the rung but on the exterior of the rungs) and by postmodernity (namely, every individual is set in cultural and social contexts).

Adopting something like an AQAL framework is the second major step in moving from metaphysics to integral post-metaphysics.

### 3. Step Three

#### *The Problem*

Here we begin to address the role and nature of energy—gross energy, subtle energy, and causal energy. I have already suggested that mass and energy are aspects of the UR-dimension of every individual being—that is, they represent some of the *exterior forms* of every individual (and every system, as we will see).

The problem here might be stated as follows. Given (1) the premodern lack of clarity about the role of matter, and (2) the fact that the ancients therefore pictured subtle energies as fundamentally *meta-*physical or super-natural; but given (3) the modern understanding of matter as not bottom but exterior,

then (4) how can we re-interpret in a more adequate fashion the relation of subtle energies to gross material forms?

Put simply, because matter is not the bottom of all levels but the exterior of all levels, where does subtle energy fit into this scheme? In the premodern traditions, subtle energy or “prana” was usually depicted as the second level in the Great Chain (e.g., pranamayakosha): it was a level of etheric or astral energy “above” physical matter and energy. But if matter itself is re-interpreted, how can subtle energy likewise be reinterpreted to keep pace with modern and postmodern revelations of Spirit’s own unfolding?

### *Suggested Solution*

The suggested solution in this case comes in the form of three hypotheses, two of which we have seen already, and the third of which deals directly with this issue.

#1. *Increasing evolution brings increasing complexity of gross form.* In the Upper Right, for example, we find quarks to protons to atoms to molecules to cells to complex organisms. This increase in complexity of form (via such processes as differentiation and integration) has long been noted by evolutionary biologists. Ervin Laszlo: “Thus, while a new level of organization means a simplification of system function, and of the corresponding system structure, it also means the initiation of a process of progressive structural and functional complexification.” I think this “complexification” is fairly obvious and needn’t detain us.

#2. *Increasing complexity of form (in the UR) is correlated with increasing interior consciousness (in the UL).* This was Teilhard de Chardin’s “law of complexity and consciousness”—namely, the more of the former, the more of the latter. As we might put it more precisely, the greater the degree of exterior complexity of material form, the greater the degree of interior consciousness that can be enacted within that form (i.e., correlation of UR and UL).

#3. Further—and this is the connecting hypothesis—*increasing complexity of gross form is correlated with increasingly subtlety of energies*. As evolution proceeds to more and more complex gross forms, the increasing degree of gross complexity is accompanied by subtler and subtler corresponding (or signature) energy patterns. Since we are at this point focusing on individual beings, we have this: increasing evolution brings increasing *complexity of gross form* (in the UR), which is correlated with an *increasing degree of consciousness* (in the UL), and, in the UR itself, a *subtilization of corresponding energies*. Thus, instead of interpreting higher levels as being essentially divorced from gross matter or gross form, the complexification of gross form is the vehicle of manifestation for both subtler energies and greater consciousness.

If those connecting links hold, that would be the third major step in the move from premodern metaphysics to integral post-metaphysics, a move that, I believe, retains the enduring truths of the great metaphysical traditions but without what appears to be their outmoded interpretative frameworks.

But whatever we decide on subtle energies, simply using the 4 quadrants gives us a framework that finds room for premodern, modern, and postmodern truths. Such an integral embrace makes a certain amount of sense, in that these three great epochs are simply three turns in Spirit's own revelation and self-understanding, 3 easy steps in the history of your own Original Face smiling out on the world today....