



This and several other reviews were contained in the celebrations of Ken's work that we recently posted to KenWilber.com. The editors of the site went through the archives and pulled out dozens of old reviews, containing mostly positive criticism, and put them together as a type of celebration of Ken's work over the past 25 years. For the full collections, please see: **Meta-genius: A Celebration of Ken's Writings**—[Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), [Part 3](#)

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### **A Light In the Wilberness**

Reviewed by Brian Van der Horst

Books by Ken Wilber

*The Eye of Spirit: an integral vision for a world gone slightly mad.* Boston & London: Shambhala, 1997. Hardback. 414pp.

*A Brief History of Everything.* Boston & London: Shambhala, 1996. Paperback. 339pp.

*Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: the spirit of evolution.* Shambhala, 1995. Hardback 831pp.

*Grace and Grit: spirituality and healing in the life and death of Treya Killiam Wilber.* Shambhala, 1991. Hardback. 371pp.

*Up from Eden: a transpersonal view of human evolution.* Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1981. Hardback. 372pp.

*The Atman Project: a transpersonal view of human development.* Wheaton, Ill.: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1980. Paperback, 204pp.

*No Boundary: eastern and western approaches to personal growth.* Shambhala, 1979. Paperback. 160pp.

*The Spectrum of Consciousness.* Wheaton, Ill.: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1977. Paperback.

What can you say about a guy who can write a book a year and was called the “Einstein of Consciousness,” at the publication of his first book, written at the age of 23?

If you haven’t heard about Ken Wilber yet, you will. His body of work is prodigious. Brilliant. Genius. You could also call him the Darwin, or William James, or Plato of our times. He has written dozens of books, and edited scads more. There are 271 web sites on the internet discussing, eulogizing and criticizing him. Psychological and philosophical masters like Huston Smith, Michael Murphy, Rollo May, Daniel Goleman, Larry Dossey and Roger Walsh variously call him the greatest thinker of our time, or call his magnum opus, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, one of the most important books ever published. Our own Robert Dilts often seems to have been influenced by him. And Robert McDonald, who is said to be trying to *memorize A Brief History of Everything*, has been inspired to create a Wilberian-flavored psychology called “psychoteleology.”

So what’s he got? What can Wilber contribute to our discipline? What is worth knowing? Especially when reading any of his tomes seems like a monastic practice in itself.

Ken Wilber is a modeller *par excellence*. Neither primarily nor exclusively a behavioral modeller but a cognitive modeller. And a lot of people think he’s come up with the model of models. Naturally, his books cover everything. But he is no instant intellectual jack-of-all-trades.

“Wilber’s approach is the opposite of eclecticism,” says Jack Crittenden, in his foreword to *The Eye of the Spirit*. “He has provided a coherent and consistent vision that seamlessly weaves together truth claims from such fields as physics and biology; the eco-sciences; chaos theory and systems sciences; medicine, neuro-physiology, bio-chemistry; art, poetry, and aesthetics in general; developmental psychology and a spectrum of

psychotherapeutic endeavors, from Freud to Jung to Piaget; the Great Chain theorists from Plato and Plotinus in the West to Shankara and Nagarjuna in the East; the modernists from Descartes and Locke to Kant; the Idealists from Schelling to Hegel; the postmodernists from Foucault and Derrida to Taylor and Habermas; the major hermeneutic tradition, Dilthey to Heidegger to Gadamer; the social systems theorists from Comte and Marx to Parsons and Luhmann; the contemplative and mystical schools of the great meditative traditions, East and West, in the world's major religious traditions. All of this is just a sampling.”

Of course this is an incomplete list. From his footnotes and bibliographies alone, Wilber seems omniscient. And he keeps putting out a book a year.

I love assignments like this. It doesn't pay anything, of course. But it gives me the motivation to plow through this stuff that usually gets buried by a dozen new science fiction novels in my reading pile. And as with meditation, clean living and exercise, one feels so much better after reading a little Wilber. So I've pulled some of my favorite Wilbers off my bookshelves to aid the novice reader in understanding what all the fuss is about.

Let's do this chronologically. *The Spectrum of Consciousness* was rejected by twenty publishers until it was finally published three years after he wrote it at the age of 23, in long-hand in three months of 12-hour bouts. He had no formal training in psychology. Most of his wisdom came from his own self-taught quest for knowledge: reading, meditating and practicing. He looks like a bald-headed ascetic now; but he started shaving it as a Zen filigree in his early 20s--after having been captain of the football team and valedictorian in high school in Nebraska. He had left a PhD in chemistry unfinished to write *Spectrum*, but when it came out in 1977, James Fadiman, a founder of the Association for Transpersonal Psychology said, “Wilber has written the most sensible, comprehensive book about consciousness since William James.”

In *Spectrum*, Wilber proposed a basic model of consciousness (reproduced in Figure 1). ~~Turn it upside down, and it looks a little like Dilts's neuro-logical levels (this line is crossed out in the manuscript handed to me by Ken, CT).~~ Essentially, Wilber was making one of the first complete post-modern statements. He was able to create a synthesis of religion, philosophy, physics and psychology that the world had not seen

before. Much of this model comes clear if you compare it with the basic map of therapies and the spectrum that becomes apparent in his second book, a shorter, popularizing version called *No Boundary* which, for added reader interest, had a lot of how-to-get-better tips from his own experience in therapy and meditative practices.

Then he took to proposing another, more recursive model of the development of consciousness--or how to do it--entitled *The Atman Project*.

In this volume, his models (see Figures 2 & 3) offered a path of human development. “The theme of this book is basically simple: development is evolution; evolution is transcendence; ... and transcendence has as its final goal Atman, or ultimate Unity Consciousness in only God.”

I suspect that, at this point, Wilber began thinking about co-evolution. He may be compared with the primordial anaerobic bacteria which, when it had produced enough oxygen on earth, had itself to evolve if it were to use that oxygen. This led him to *Up From Eden*, in which gave us a neuro-linguistic, philo-mystical Darwinism, or how human thinking-patterns, myths, and archetypes generate a higher consciousness, as modelled in Figures 4 and 5. Those familiar with the metaphorical work of Charles Faulkner will find some analogies here.

There are many who start reading Wilber’s works and abandon him quickly, dismissing him either as too intellectual, too mystical, or too esoteric. Imagine the complaint of a sensualist who had read only the above: with meditating two hours a day, and all that self-taught book study and writing, has he really lived?

My answer is to direct readers toward *Grace and Grit*, Wilber’s moving personal story of falling in love with his second wife, Treya, and the tragedy of discovering her breast cancer a week after their wedding. This chronicle of the last years of her life, when Wilber dropped everything to take care of his beloved, makes a compelling statement of a man who has been profoundly moulded by the summits and depths of the spectrum of human emotion.

Wilber eventually transcended these years, and was next remarked in print around the publication of the first volume of his intended “Kosmos” trilogy, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*. Here, as Tony Schwartz wrote in his magnificent chapter about Ken Wilber in *What Really Matters: searching for wisdom in America*, “In the five years since his

wife's death, Wilber has put his heart into developing and refining his full spectrum model of human potentials. He has not only addressed the levels of the spectrum--matter, body, mind, soul and spirit--he has attempted to integrate ascending and descending currents; interior and exterior; masculine and feminine; the individual and the social."

Let me try to walk you through an outline of his model. Take a look at Figure 6, "The four quadrants." Like the "fried egg" model of NLP, which divides experience into external behavior, internal computations, internal states, and beliefs, this model categorizes human experience into four categories, based on the concept of developing holarchies. Not hierarchies, but nested, encompassing frames of evolution, that speak of either interior or exterior worlds of the individual or the collective.

Now look at Figure 7 for the types of thinkers that are working in each area. The right side being descriptive, empirical, you get the physical sciences and psychologies in the upper, or individual right quadrant. The left side is interior, which interprets experience, so you start out with Buddha, and develop up to Freud. The next Figure, "Validity claims" (Figure 8), shows how each quadrant arrives at its own truth. Finally Figure 9 shows the complete model. This is a map of the integration of Wilber's previous books, and also, I believe the fruit of his trails and transubstantiations of the previous decade. How did he arrive at such an inclusive chart?

Well, if you look at the various "new paradigm" theorists--from holists to eco-feminists, from deep ecologists to systems thinkers--you find that all of them are offering various types of holarchies, of hierarchies....

So at one point I simply started making lists of all of these holarchical maps--conventional and new age, Eastern and Western, premodern and modern and post modern--everything from systems theory to the Great Chain of Being, from the Buddhist *vijñanas* to Piaget, Marx, Kohlberg, the Vedantic *koshas*, Loevinger, Maslow, Lenski, Kabbalah, and so on. I had literally hundreds of these things, these maps, spread out on legal pads all over the floor.

At first I thought these maps were all referring to the same territory, so to speak. I thought they were all different versions of an essentially similar holarchy. There were just too many similarities and overlaps in all of them. So

by comparing and contrasting them all, I thought I might be able to find the single and basic holarchy that they were all trying to represent in their own ways....

But the more I looked at these holarchies, the more it dawned on me that they were actually four very different types of holarchies, for very different types of holistic sequences.

In Figure 9, there are some examples of these type of sequence. Remember: evolution, the Big Bang, starts in the middle, then goes off in wider nested wholes. A holarchy represents a step of development that embraces, incorporates, and transcends another set.

It is crucial to realize that, in this model, each step of evolution is present on all four axes, so that step number three, for example, represents the development of early cells, prokaryotes, on the upper right; on the upper left, this equates with irritability on the interior level of an organism. On the lower left, protoplasmic culture is imminent, and on the lower right, a planetary, Gaia system can begin. Each of the four axes are equally important for this step of evolution! See Figure 10 for how the lower right axis would develop further.

*What good is this model, and why is everybody so excited?*

It now gives us a way to be truly inter-disciplinary and less short-sighted in our individual approaches to wisdom and evolution. With this model, it becomes apparent where a given discipline--like NLP--has been short on neurology, immature in psychology, clueless with the mythic and spiritual, social and political domains of human experience. It is not that we were wrong, but we have just been working with an incomplete model.

Personally, studying Wilber has given me a lot more respect and compassion for other researchers in this field that previously I had thought were too far down the track of their given predispositions. But now, when I encounter someone who is exploring wuu-wuu land spirituality; of planetary consciousness with referendums; or shamanism in the Andes; or MRI scans in the neuro-laboratory, I can use Wilber's maps to connect where they are with the other great lines of human development.

In my opinion, this tool is one of the greatest inventions every proposed for orienting human beings toward their own evolution. But what do I know?

*A Brief History of Everything* was written as a question-and-answer conversation, discussing the main themes of *Sex*, *Ecology*, *Spirituality*, and making that huge tome accessible. This book has become, I believe, Wilber's best-seller. And nicely enough, this is where Wilber comes off the most rounded, all-around human: a funny, wise, ribald, irreverent, tender sage and raconteur. An example:

Q: Is there any sex in the book?

KW: With diagrams, actually.

Q: You're kidding.

KW: I'm kidding. But yes, sexuality is one of the main themes, and especially its relation to gender.

Q: Sex and gender are different?

KW: It's common to use "sex" or sexuality to refer to the biological aspects of human reproduction, and "gender" to refer to the cultural differences between men and women that group up around the sexual or biological differences ....

Q: And these differences have their roots in the biological differences between male and female?

KW: In part, it seems so. Hormonal differences, in particular.... I don't mean to be crude, but it appears that testosterone basically has two, and only two major drives: fuck it or kill it.

And males are saddled with this biological nightmare almost from day one, a nightmare women can barely imagine (except when they are given testosterone injections for medical purposes, which drives them nuts. As one woman put it, "I can't stop thinking about sex. Please, can't you make it stop?")

His latest opus is *The Eye of Spirit*. Subtitled, *An Integral Vision for World Gone Slightly Mad*, this is the most political of Wilber's works. Here he tries to answer the question, what would a truly integral culture look like, a culture that included, body, mind, soul, and spirit? Wilber delves into art, literature, and social trends like never before: if you are looking for a model of what a world that everyone would like to belong to looks like, with operating manuals included, this book would be a good place to start your explorations.

Some people prefer delving directly into *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, but I recommend that you begin with Wilber's later books rather than his earliest. Otherwise, I recommend beginning with *A Brief History*; it is bound to seduce even the most casual reader into plunging into the intoxicating revelations of all the wise old trees to be found in the great magical Wilberness.

Brian Van der Horst is Director for Training at Repere, a Paris-based NLP Institute, and has previously contributed chapters to *Kundalini, Evolution and Enlightenment* (1979), *The Omni Book of the Paranormal & The Mind* (1983), and *Through the Gateway of the Heart* (1985). He also wrote two books on folk music, and was a columnist for *Playboy*, *New Age Journal*, and *The Village Voice*. On 23 June 1997, his teaching at Repere was featured on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal Europe*. He may be reached at [BrianVanderHorst@Compuserve.com](mailto:BrianVanderHorst@Compuserve.com) or Repere S.A., 78 Avenue du General Michel-Bizot, 75012 Paris, France.