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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An Introduction to the Work of Ken Wilber
by Michel Bauwens 1998

On the back cover of the first book I ever read by Ken Wilber one of the reviewers states: ‘What Freud is to psychology and Einstein is to physics, Ken Wilber is to the study of consciousness.’ On the back cover of the more recent Sex, Ecology, Spirituality, Mitch Kapor, co-chairman and founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, an eminent ‘digerati’, claims: ‘This book changes everything.’ Yet despite the fact that a number of mortals - I amongst them - consider Ken Wilber to be the most important thinker of this century (or even the most important thinker of the next century), he is still relatively unknown, a situation that appears to be rapidly changing, as both the President and Vice-President of the United States have publicly stated they are reading his work.

Thus this article attempts to explain his work and its significance. I have chosen to present his works in the order in which I discovered them.

- The Spectrum of Consciousness
Spectrum, Wilber’s first book (1997), was written when he was 24 and immediately an impressive classic. The book presents an overview of the developmental structures of human consciousness as described not only in the various Western psychological schools (behaviourism, Piaget, Freud, cognitive psychology) but also, and this was remarkable, in the Eastern meditation systems of Buddhism and Hinduism (supplemented with further examples taken from the esoteric schools of Islam, Judaism and Christianity). The study concludes that the seeming contradictions between the various systems are more apparent than real and that their differences can readily be explained by the fact that they are concerned with different parts of the ‘spectrum of consciousness’. Wilber’s method - one he still applies - is to start by identifying ‘orienting generalizations’, in other words, he synthesizes basic conclusions from the various systems of thought, particularly those that are accepted as being beyond criticism by competing schools of thought, and then confronts these conclusions with one another. In assembling these ‘building bricks’ of thought it turns out that they are essentially consistent in their assumptions regarding a well-defined developmental blueprint. In such a context the different psychological systems not only complement one another, they also complement the Eastern systems. In Spectrum of Consciousness Ken Wilber describes this unified system, showing how as the human psyche evolves it expands to encompass an ever-increasing field of identification, developing from the neurotic individual who projects his shadow side on the world and refuses to recognize it as part of himself, to the cosmic consciousness of the consummate mystic who encompasses the whole cosmos within himself.

The logic is that in studying one’s own consciousness (applying the well-known techniques of meditation and the different systems of yoga to observe deeper and deeper) one eventually arrives at a point that is beyond all doubt. This is consciousness itself and, paradoxically enough, from this point of awareness one can observe the I, thus arriving at the source, the underlying principle of life itself. Yet all this is actually nothing new under the sun, since this finding is consistent with the wisdom literature from all religious and philosophical traditions (the notion of the Great Chain of Being and the Perennial Philosophy underpins world philosophy and Western thinking up until the Enlightenment and the philosophers of the Enlightenment also subscribed to this scheme).

To illustrate this spectrum of development: the neurotic individual is in the first phase. This individual has two aspects - the Persona (the personality, etymologically ‘the mask’) and the Shadow. The persona is how
the individual perceives himself and how he wishes to present himself to the outside world, relegating to the shadow all of the elements he does not acknowledge as being part of himself. He projects these same elements on the world by means of the well-known Freudian mechanisms. These repressed aspects are a source of disturbance making life more difficult as they seek their revenge. The purpose of psychoanalysis and other related schools of psychology is to reintegrate the shadow within the personality to arrive at a complete and mature Ego. Yet the Ego is not the whole story either, for though a person might think she has a body, the truth is she is her body. At this point the various body-oriented therapies, the Reichian methods, bioenergetics and others, aim to expand the individual’s field of identification to encompass the authentic experience of their status as a ‘bodymind’. The spectrum continues, integrating the social aspects (family and network therapies) and external nature (nature mystique and ecological therapy), until eventually it arrives at cosmic consciousness. Essentially the individual progresses from the I to the not-I, from the small ego to the cosmic Self. This simple scheme, which is not that revolutionary in itself, is corroborated with so many examples and theoretical concepts drawn from virtually every tradition that if not impressed by the possible accuracy of the thesis, the reader is bound to be impressed by the awe-inspiring erudition of the author.

Though the detailed descriptions of the transpersonal stages of development found in the literature on Eastern systems of meditation, yoga and the wisdom traditions were known before Wilber arrived on the scene, there was a general misunderstanding regarding the logical coherence and interrelationship of the different stages. Suddenly a synthesis and an integration of Eastern and Western thought was not only possible, it was now a rational necessity. Wilber succeeded in building the necessary philosophical, scientific and cultural bridges between the previously separate worlds of psychology and Eastern meditation. In doing so, Wilber was one of the most important founders of the movement of transpersonal psychology, now one of the dominant schools in the United States (though still outside the academic world which is still very much under the spell of cognitive psychology and Prozac). Spectrum also served to bridge the gap between the world of scientific psychology (and thus science in general) and the world of religion which was recognized as having a body of knowledge in the form of thousands of years of meditative practices which could now also be approached with greater respect. And this was precisely the purpose of Wilber’s third work, The Atman Project, a study of the ‘higher’ realms of the human psyche: the various stages of the transpersonal (formal-operational reason is followed by vision-logic, astral, subtle and causal, the causal experience phase is followed finally by the Non-dual phase; naturally Wilber elaborates on these somewhat technical terms.) In No Boundary, Wilber
returns to this subject from a more practical point of view, writing for those who are attempting to determine what kind of therapy or meditation techniques are best suited to their level of development and the needs of that particular level. This is also typical of Wilber’s approach: first to publish a theoretical landmark and then to follow it with a popularized version which treats the same theme in a simpler way (more recently *A Brief History of Everything* is a simplified version of *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*).

According to Wilber the spiritual teachers need to be regarded as the ‘psychologists’ of these largely unknown realms of the psyche and there is a clear link between the individual growth of these extraordinary meditators and the culture at large. Again, according to Wilber there is a spiritual elite (with its own developmental logic from shamans to saints and profits to Buddhas) and then there is the average spiritual level of the masses. The culture at large evolves more slowly but nevertheless steadily and in accordance with the same logic. Thus by studying the developmental stages of the mystics we can learn what lies ahead for all of us and, by extension, we can also gain an insight into the historical and social development into the near future.

*Up from Eden*

This was what Wilber set out to do in his fourth masterpiece, *Up from Eden (A Transpersonal View of Human Evolution)*. Here Wilber describes the development of nature and human culture, placing himself in the tradition of the ‘Great Chain of Being’ and philosophers such as Hegel and thinkers such as Teilhard de Chardin.

We see the cosmos evolve from the Big Bang and the fall of the ‘divine’ into a nature without consciousness and then the steady growth of life until self-reflective man arrives on the scene, after which Wilber regards the process of human civilization as an evolutionary process. The growth of the individual psyche is reflected in human sociology and collective psychology, thus we see society and thought evolve from magical thinking via mythological thinking to arrive at rational thinking. Wilber then goes on to describe the next stages and the social consequences of these stages. Once again Wilber gives us a vast synthesis. *Up from Eden* enables the reader to form an idea of the next stage in the history of civilization. Only in this case the idea is not based on some utopian hope but on the logical extrapolation of the evolution we can observe objectively in the past.
From a sociocultural point of view society is largely in the phase of ‘formal-operational Reason’. It now has the opportunity to make the historic leap to a new phase dominated by ‘vision-logic’.

Remarkably enough for a ‘spiritual thinker’, Wilber regards rationality as a higher phase than the magical and mythical religious systems, yet at the same time he allows for the possibility of a rational approach to the spiritual. In fact, he regards this as one of the higher potentialities of the human psyche, a capacity which dispenses with the need for ‘belief’ (a ‘believer’ is, by definition, someone who does not ‘know’, someone who has no personal experience of the higher psychic realities). The great drama of scientism, the philosophical reductionism of today’s scientific philosophy is that it is unable to distinguish between the pre-rational awareness of schizophrenia and the transrational awareness of a Buddha, which goes to show the great poverty of modern-day academic thinking. In adopting such a reductionistic approach a culture effectively shuts itself off from all possible development on psychological, ethical and spiritual levels. The now extensive scientific study material on ‘peak experiences’ (Maslow) and optimal social and ethical functioning has clearly shown that a ‘non-egoic’ stance can only emerge as a result of a deeper interiority (see Michael Murphy’s masterpiece *The Future of the Body*, a study of exceptional aptitude in all spheres of human culture).

Wilber elaborates on these sociological aspects in *A Sociable God* which looks at sociological development. The book contains some very interesting passages on the sectarian dangers of religion and how these can be recognized. Note how each book is a dialogue with a specific scientific field: psychology (*Spectrum*), cultural history and anthropology (*Eden*) and in this case sociology.

Wilber’s work is clearly founded on two important assumptions:

1. That cultural history (collective mental history) parallels individual psychic history, or to put it another way: ‘socio-genesis’ mirrors ‘psycho-genesis’.

2. That, just like nature, human beings and human culture are subject to evolution. According to Wilber there is no reason to assume that human culture has to be excluded from the scientific revolution of theories of evolution.
Naturally this does not necessarily mean that evolution is unequivocal, on the contrary. Wilber expounds on the notion that every qualitative leap to a new phase of culture and individual consciousness also brings with it a new pathology. ‘Each new phase must transcend but also include the superseded phase.’ If this fails to happen the result is repression and other pathological phenomena.

- Eye to Eye

In *Eye to Eye (The Search for a new Paradigm)* Wilber treats the subjects of hermeneutics and epistemology - also a prerequisite for a philosopher. He tries to show that spiritual systems can also be approached rationally and scientifically, albeit with suitably adapted methodology. He abhors the materialistic reductionism that aims to reduce everything to controllable material experiments. Attempting to contain the psyche in a laboratory is as impossible as an attempt to explain the works of Shakespeare by analysing the ink particles. However, the knowledge gained through meditation can be monitored through the practice of an inter-subjective group of meditators and the comparison of their concrete experiences.

Both mysticism and science are based on experiments and experience. The same does not hold true for religion and ‘belief’. Someone who believes is someone who does not know. (Wilber makes the classical Anglo-Saxon distinction between ‘belief’ and ‘faith’ which is to embark upon an experiment without there being any proof; classical science also relied on faith since in the initial phases it was impossible to detect gravity, bacteria and atoms.)

Consequently, *Eye to Eye* sets out very strong epistemological arguments for the existence of the spiritual and how it can best be approached rationally and ‘transrationally’, without having to rely on belief systems. In doing so Wilber provides a powerful set of instruments for the numerous spiritual seekers who wish to retain their critical rationality in their search for deeper values.

In *Eye to Eye* Wilber also voices powerful criticism of the pre-rational approaches (adopted not only by much of the ‘New Age’ but also by Carl Jung) as well as of those approaches that fail to distinguish between the pre-rational and the transrational. Modern-day cultural scientists, such as Fritjof Capra, who attempt to prove
the spiritual by referring to material science, also come in for criticism because they fail to recognize that each domain of knowledge calls for its own specific methodology. If one hopes to prove that the Buddha was right by referring to quantum mechanics, the minute science evolves the reality of the Buddha will be called into question. Obviously, then, this is not the right approach, we are dealing with different orders of reality. A mystic, as a mystic, has no opinion of material reality and physical laws any more than a physicist, as a physicist, is able to offer a hermeneutical analysis of the works of Shakespeare or to hold a well-founded opinion of the difference between the ‘causal’ and ‘subtle’ planes of consciousness.

- *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*

This is the first part of a magnum opus in which Wilber enters into a dialogue with modern philosophical movements up to and including the postmodernists, the feminists and the ecologists, amongst others.

This 800-page whopper begins by further refining the evolutionary scheme which has now been expanded to include sociological, physical-material and cultural aspects in addition to the original psychological scheme set out in *Spectrum*. Thus we now have a masterly synthesis not only of psychology but also of sociocultural thinking and circumstances, science and ‘materialistic’ cosmology, in other words: *A Brief History of Everything*, which is the title of Wilber’s popularized summary of *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* in dialogue form. Wilber argues that every phenomenon has an individual aspect and a collective aspect, just as it has interiority (meaning, consciousness) and exteriority. Thus a mystical experience can be approached from the point of view of individual meaning and experience (Interior-Individual), from the point of view of its (objective) social aspects (Exterior-Collective), from the point of view of its cultural aspects (Interior-Collective) and from the point of view of its measurable, material, (Exterior-Individual) aspects, such as brain waves in this case. Each of these approaches has its own methodology and a scientific set of instruments.

In fact, each phenomenon must be approached from the point of view of each of these aspects, otherwise we end up with either ‘flat’ reductionism or ‘subtle’ reductionism. A flat materialism (flatland reductionism) reduces a phenomenon to its material and individual-mechanistic aspects (atomism, traditional ‘mechanistic’ science and the split between body/matter and mind that Descartes pointed to), while the more refined
‘subtle’ reductionism, though it might view everything as part of a network (systems theory, holism), fails to recognize the ‘interior’ aspects.

Working from this basis assumption, Wilber also presents a summary of the laws of evolution and change as expressed in the four quadrants. This is a brilliant summary of the laws of dialectics. This methodology is applied to the subject matter of Spectrum and Up from Eden and is further enriched with the addition of two new quadrants (sociology and science). In the second part of Sex, Ecology, Spirituality Wilber expounds on the cultural history of the West. Certain parts were an explicit reminder of the little-read masterpiece by Friedrich Engels, Dialectics of Nature. Wilber’s analysis starts from the notion of ‘holons’, in other words, all phenomena are part of a higher entity as well as also being an entity made up of phenomena of a ‘lower’ order (atoms, molecules, cells, etc.). The first part of Sex, Ecology, Spirituality explains the ‘twenty tenets of the evolution of holons’. Never have I come across a better overview of the laws of dialectical logic including examples and also a list of the associated epistemological errors, not even in the works of Hegel and Marx.

Wilber’s introduces his approach to cultural history with an analysis of Plato (‘Western history is a series of footnotes to Plato’) who clearly united the two aspects of spiritual-material reality in himself, namely: the ‘Ascend’ - the ascent to the higher, the evolution to mystical consciousness, to the ‘One’ or ‘Absolute’ (Eros, the aspiration towards and the attraction to Unity experienced by all beings and things), and also the return to the world of multiplicity (Agape), the movement ‘downwards’ (Descend). The mystic discovers that physical reality (‘samsara’, the ‘illusion’ of the materiality of the world) veils the true underlying principle of life, yet, having experienced this, the mystic comes to the conclusion that everything is an expression of this underlying principle and therefore the mystic accepts and experiences both ‘physical’ and ‘spiritual’ reality as Love. In the ultimate non-dual phase (Advaita Vedanta) all contrast between materiality and spirituality, multiplicity and unity is abandoned. This removes any foundation for egoic interest and action and the mystic becomes a bodhisattva or saint who works for the well-being of humanity and the cosmos. After Plato comes Plotinus, who continued in the same vein. This is where the real drama begins as far as Wilber is concerned - the need to overcome pre-rational mythic Christianity. The theorizing of Christianity only recognizes Christ himself as having divine status. This makes it impossible for anyone else to become enlightened in this world and simultaneously creates a huge split in metaphysical thinking. On the one side of the coin there are the Ascenders who turn away from this world and despise it while desperately attempting to reach the ‘divine’
world (for the Ascenders liberation is only possible in the ‘other’ spiritual world, a world that completely transcends this world; the ‘imminent’ aspect is completely lost). In this case Eros is transformed into Phobos - fear of the material, the world, sexuality and the feminine). On the other side of the coin there are the Descenders who worship the material world and seek their salvation within it while denying the existence of the underlying principle of life and the spiritual (in this case Agape has become Thanatos). It is remarkable how fanatical Christianity has been in its rejection of every great human Realization, thereby cutting itself off historically from world mythology and the great wisdom tradition. However, in cutting themselves off from the source, the Ascenders, who dominated the scene for 1000 years (5000 - 1,500 AD), effectively prepared the way for the triumph of the Descenders who became dominant after the Enlightenment.

Yet modern, materialistic-scientific philosophy has actually become a mirror image of what it opposes: it has degenerated into scientism and does not recognize the spiritual as having any reality. It approaches reality from the point of view of a single quadrant with a methodology that is only suited to the study of material objects and circumstances. This has created the Prozac society - a society in which psychic, moral and ethical problems are all tackled with chemicals and where literally everything - animals included - is reduced to a product, while nature is approached purely instrumentally from the point of view of the needs of the industrial economy.

Wilber’s project finally introduces a new synthesis in which the reality of spiritual experience can also be approached ‘rationally’ with the right scientific instruments, a synthesis which can reinstate a much-needed infusion of Spirit into the deadened and soulless world of matter so that it can be experienced in its full reality.

In this synthesis Wilber makes absolutely no concessions to any pre-rational thinking. He also opposes many modern holistic theories and movements since many of the current holistic approaches, both those that derive from the ‘New Age’ as well as those that derive from systems theory, are examples of subtle reductionism.

Thus Wilber is anything but fashionable. He makes no concessions to trendy thinking. He treads on the delicate toes of institutional religion (as far as Wilber is concerned, atheistic rationalism which also
frequently reverts to pre-rational elements is more spiritual than the magical-mythical religions) as well as opposing new age thinking that also frequently reverts to pre-rational elements.

The various ecological schools which have ostracized the spiritual and thus also commit the crime of subtle reductionism and virtually all schools feminism that eulogize the past (such as the ecofeminists who want to revert to an agrarian matriarchal society or the ecomasculinists who want to go back even further) also come in for criticism. In the second volume of his magnum opus which is expected to be published in the near future, Wilber enters into a dialogue with these movements. His method is always to identify the ‘progressive’ elements of a theory or movement as well as the ‘regressive’ pre-rational elements.

- The Spirit of Post-Modernity

In the third volume of the trilogy, The Spirit of Post-Modernity, Wilber explores postmodern thinking, the work of DeLeuze, Foucault, Derrida and others, up to and including the ‘postanalytical poststructuralists’. Which other modern philosopher is not only able to draw on extensive knowledge of both Western and Eastern movements but also on personal experience of meditative techniques? (Wilber is easily able to enter the Samadhi phase of meditative development and has been an active practitioner of the Tibetan tradition for twenty years.)

Predictably enough, Wilber has come up with his own, and in my opinion convincing, interpretation of postmodernism. According to Wilber the pre-rational (magical and mythical) structures were characterized by syncretism, an indifferential fusion of the different elements of the phenomenological quadrants (see above). In mythical thinking the subjective world (the world of the Interior-Individual ‘I’ and the Interior-Collective ‘we’) and the objective world (the individual and collective ‘exterior’ aspect) are regarded as a single unit. For example, as far as the Church was concerned, Galileo not only had evil intentions (objective science), he was also a heretic (the world of the ‘I’) and thus a danger to the state. The mythical thinking that was predominant in that era regarded all of this as a single issue. It was modernity that separated these different aspects: dividing the church from the state and deciding that it was up to the individual - now considered to be a free subject of the state - to determine his or her own morality. By the same token, science came up with
the notion of a separate subject who was able to examine the world in a detached and objective manner. Thus
the cultural of modernity is one of differentiation.

What, then, is the role of postmodernism? On the one hand its role is to show that the observer of a certain
reality is also subject to the network of realities (the puncturing of the myth of objectivity) and to account for
the role and influence of the subject (this is essentially what Foucault and Derrida have done: analysing the
subject as being an entity exposed to an endless series of fields of meaning). This of course is a further
refinement of the objective knowledge of oneself and reality.

The other role of postmodernity is to arrive at a higher integration within a higher unity (Wilber calls this
‘planetary vision-logic’). The great problem of modernism is, for example, the dissociation of the biosphere
by the ‘noosphere’, which has led amongst other things to an ecological crisis of catastrophic proportions. We
are witnessing a collective reductionism of the nature that surrounds us, a collective neurosis that can lead us
straight to Thanatos. Wilber describes this as the shadow side of modernity, the drama of the Enlightenment.
However, this task of postmodernism can never be completed by those who are ‘only’ philosophers or ‘only’
scientists. It can only be completed by the ‘practitioners’ who have already realized vision-logic in
themselves.

Ultimately this is also the reason why Ken Wilber is relatively unknown. It is a symptom of incomprehension.
In the same way that the people who thought in mythical terms were unable to understand the arguments of
Reason because it did not fit within their scheme of thought - it was ‘cognitively dissonant’ in that it belonged
to a higher phase of reality that they could not yet ‘see’, rationalists are unable to ‘see’ Wilber’s arguments,
or certainly large parts of the material he presents as proof based on billions of man hours of meditative
experience and the wisdom literature of all cultural traditions. As long as the rationalists refuse to follow the
scientific injunction to explore the inner world by means of experiments and inter-subjective tests within a
community of practitioners, the work that Ken Wilber is doing will continue to be a mystery. Naturally the
hope is that there is now a substantial minority (according to the Value & Lifestyles study carried out by the
Stanford Research Institute, one-third of the population of North America can already be characterized as
‘cultural creatives’, i.e. practitioners of ‘vision-logic’ forms of reasoning; another third consists of modernists
and the remaining third of mythological movements, i.e. religious fundamentalism) who are mentally
prepared for vision-logic and within that minority another substantial minority of practitioners of meditative techniques. For this group of people Ken Wilber’s work is very important. Nevertheless, in view of the fact that Wilber’s work is substantiated with irrefutable rational arguments and reasoning based on experience, and also because it is culturally so stimulating I would like to recommend it - also to the hardened postmodern ‘rationalists’ who read *Andere Sinema* [a Belgian magazine] because it will introduce them to the inner essence of an important school of thought.

Translation: Rachel Horner