



Pathways
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The Eye of Spirit—An Integral Vision for World Gone Slightly Mad
By Ken Wilber

As many of you know, I am a committed, card-carrying Ken Wilber aficionado--and not just because he endorsed my book, either. (You guys are so cynical.) I have read *almost* all of his books, I've corresponded with him on a couple of occasions, and I've talked about his philosophical and theoretical approach to anyone who would listen for more than a decade.

Last year, for example, I reviewed two of his books in this column--*The Spectrum of Consciousness* and *A Brief History of Everything*. So far this year, I have taught a fifteen-week class on his life and work at the Center For Contemplative Christianity and have integrated his theories on the evolution of Spirit into a course in law and ethics that I teach at United States International University in San Diego.

So why am I such a devotee of this elusive iconoclast who never gives lectures or leads retreats, rarely grants interviews, and goes out of his way to discourage anyone from considering him a spiritual teacher? Simple. I'm hoping to *guilt* him into granting us an interview for *Pathways*.

Seriously, Ken Wilber is one of the most incredible thinkers and writers of our time. As Jack Crittenden has written, "The twenty-first century literally has three choices: Aristotle, Nietzsche, or Ken Wilber." And Tony Schwartz, author of *What Really Matters* (reviewed in *Pathways* Vol. 4, No. 6), has called Wilber "the most comprehensive philosophical thinker of our times."

Wilber does with aplomb what I have always wished I could do--integrate, integrate, integrate! Yes, I intuitively understand that *everyone* knows *something* about the Truth. Virtually every scientific paradigm, every serious philosophical system, and every authentic spiritual tradition has something valuable--even essential--to offer us in our quest to understand Spirit's unfolding in the manifest universe. Unfortunately, the scope of my (and most other writer's) knowledge and vision has always been too limited and my

epistemological methodology far too weak. Thankfully for all of us, Wilber suffers from neither of these limitations.

Ken Wilber has a singular ability to understand and absorb vast stores of seemingly contradictory information and to then synthesize this knowledge into a compelling spiritual perspective of near-epic proportions. And he is able to do this while avoiding the twin errors of monolithic universalism (which misses the trees for the forest) and incoherent pluralism (which misses the forest for the trees). As he says in his introduction to *The Eye of Spirit*, he has endeavored to create an approach to knowledge that is “a genuinely universal pluralism of commonality-in-difference.”

If a good theory is “one that accounts for all the known data in an elegant manner,” then Wilber’s theory of the spiritual evolution or unfolding of Kosmos is a *great* theory. He stands head and shoulders above those who would propose or try to defend a more theoretically exclusive or religiously sectarian viewpoint (which includes most of us, I’m afraid). He’s not a bad writer, either.

But wait. I came not to praise Caesar, but to review his latest book. It’s really good. Go buy it. And by one for your minister while you’re at it.

Alright, I’ll tell you a little bit about it first. *The Eye of Spirit* is essentially a collection of essays in which Wilber applies his theoretical perspective, or integral approach, to virtually every field of human knowledge. There are chapters on psychology, spirituality, anthropology, cultural studies, art and literary theory, ecology, feminism (I really loved this chapter!), and planetary transformation (he likes to think **BIG**).

Unlike many so-called integral theorists, Wilber doesn’t just summarize these various fields of knowledge and then rearrange their truth-claims using different jargon (like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic). Nor does he try to subsume other theoretical systems under the auspices of his preferred discipline, dismissing as irrelevant any approach that can’t be easily assimilated. Such reductionism is the work of lesser, more imperialistic minds.

Wilber’s integral approach is both penetrating and all-embracing. It literally revolutionizes how we think about thinking itself. His four-quadrant paradigm, which divides all knowledge into its subjective (internal), objective (factual), intersubjective (cultural), and interobjective (systemic) aspects, provides a

place for every current field of knowledge to stand complete, enabling each one to contribute its unique perspective to the grand integrity of the whole.

But believe me, this book is not as boring as I probably just made it sound. In fact, it is quite entertaining. In several chapters, Wilber responds to the numerous criticisms that have been hurled at him and his theories through the years by feminists, deep ecologists, empiricists, behaviorists, Gnostics, neopagans, premodernists, astrologers, and former mouseketeers. Reading his brilliant responses to these attacks is like watching a dharma-duel between a Zen master and a child. No, it's more like seeing a gunfight between Wyatt Earp and an unarmed man. It might be bloody, but you don't want to miss it.

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Each new book by Ken Wilber follows his own developmental schema whereby higher stages transcend and include what has gone before. *The Eye of Spirit* reflects on his previous work, updating his ideas where necessary, responding comprehensively and with devastating acumen to his critics, and applying his views to new areas such as art and literature. His starting point here is to ask if we can keep the conservative strength with its embrace of spirituality while jettisoning its cultural tyranny at the same time as keeping the liberal strength of individual freedom while rejecting its anti-soul polemic. To this end Wilber proposes an integral vision, where the word means 'integrative, inclusive, comprehensive, balances', applying it to various fields of human knowledge.

He begins by reiterating his theory of the four quadrants involving individual and collective, subjective and objective approaches before moving on to demonstrate the internal inconsistency of modern constructivism and relativism. This clears the ground for an all-quadrant all-level programme that honours the entire spectrum of consciousness. He sees the central claim of perennial philosophy that (his italics) '*men and women can grow and develop (or evolve) all the way up to Spirit itself*, therein to realize a 'supreme identity' with Godhead'. Spirit in this sense is defined, as in *A Brief History of Everything* as the summit of being, the highest rung on the ladder as well as the ladder itself: the goal of evolution and the ground of being. I find this definition profoundly satisfying as it embraces *both* the immanent and transcendent aspects of existence without violating either. What Wilber calls the Atman Project is the evolutionary path back to the Source and Ground. The error we make is in not realizing that Truth is

radically formless, spaceless and timeless: it cannot be exhaustively expressed in discursive thought and language, but can only be shown or experienced by the eye of contemplation.

I found his excursus into modern art and literary theory particularly illuminating. He shows how deconstruction inevitably leads to nihilism and how art is necessarily context-dependent. These contexts apply equally to the artist, the work of art and the connoisseur who tries to discern its meaning. He argues that art is thoroughly holonic 'in its nature, its locus, its structure, its meaning and its interpretation', and that each context will confer a different meaning on the artwork. Theories of art make the same partial error as in other fields by claiming that their partial view (e.g. unconscious intentionality) explains the whole. Wilber rightly condemns such inadequate formulations while proposing his own integral view that situates the positive elements of these theories in the widest context by means of what he calls 'orienting generalizations': no context is omitted, and each finds its place in the larger picture.

The next few chapters are technical in parts, and address various criticisms of his work as well as offering Wilber's own critique of other theorists. The main people involved here are Michael Washburn, Stan Grof, Carol Gilligan and Jenny Wade. Washburn's criticisms are made to look ill-informed, while Wilber's views on Stan Grof and Jenny Wade pinpoint fallacies in their approaches which he had in some instances committed himself at an earlier stage. Grof is shown to be using a dual definition of the word perinatal which he equates existential death-rebirth phenomena with the birth experience; this, according to Huston Smith, confuses chronological regression with ontological modes of being. Jenny Wade is taken to task for using Bohm's terminology of explicate and implicate orders to establish a two level hierarchy when the categories can arguably be used all the way up and down the Nest of Being. This leads on to a very interesting discussion about whether spirituality is to be understood as a separate line or stream of development, or else the higher stages or wave of different lines. Wilber proposes that both definitions are valid, provided that one is specific about one's usage.

A chapter on the effects of meditation as an accelerator of spiritual development is followed by an exposition of Wilber's integral theory of consciousness, recently the subject of an article in the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*. I was glad to see him engage with some of the leading scientific and philosophical theorists in the field. Much of the most interesting discussion takes place in the footnotes, especially with respect to the so-called 'hard problem' enunciated by David Chalmers about the relationship between brain

states and subjective experience. The impassable gulf referred to by Chalmers is another name for the subject-object dualism that is a hallmark of all manifestation and is unresolvable except at a higher, more all-inclusive state of consciousness: the discursive mind cannot resolve paradoxes that disappear only when a state of non-dual awareness is reached. This amounts to the necessity for researchers to investigate their own consciousness rather than write about that of other people!

All this is finely and allusively described in the last chapter, which expresses as much of the mystery as can be put into words. The separate self is 'at bottom, simply a sensation of seeking'. And what is the Search? 'Simply the final impulse which prevents the present realization of Spirit (because) the Great Search presumes the loss of God'. Thus the Great Search is the enemy of what is, a symptom of self-contraction. And the answer? Ever-present awareness: 'Spirit is not an object. Spirit cannot be grasped or reached or sought or seen: it is the ever-present Seer. To search for the Seer is to miss the point ... I am the eye of Spirit'. Enough words: should I recommend you to buy this book or practise the message? Maybe both!