



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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**Restoring Connectedness in the Kosmos: A Healing Tale of a Deeper Order**

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The Humanistic Psychologist, 23, Autumn 1995

**Ken Wilber's *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*—*The Spirit of Evolution***

Why are there essents [=existents] rather than nothing? That is the question.

-Martin Heidegger (*An Introduction to Metaphysics*)

It is flat-out strange that something--that anything--is happening at all. There was nothing, then a Big Bang, then here we all are. This is extremely weird... This book is... about a possible Deeper Order. It is about evolution, and about religion, and, in a sense, about everything in between.

-Ken Wilber (*Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*)

Consider a universe that accommodates interiority and exteriority, subjectivity and objectivity, in one seamless whole, privileging neither consciousness nor matter and defying reduction to any kind of foundational ontological categories. Such a universe embraces all phenomena equally and accords intrinsic value to everything from subatomic particles to Divine Spirit without leveling the qualities of things to sameness or removing all bases for judging their relative value. This is the universe described in *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*. Wilber's purpose is to articulate a vision that is more inclusive, more integrative than has hitherto been offered by philosophical and scientific disciplines. His critique of the systems sciences and the ecological movement--the two champions of holism in our time--finds these to fall short of the holistic vision they claim to embrace. A truly holistic paradigm excludes nothing and therefore claims no absolute foundations and no absolute limits. Wilber fondly quotes an old joke about a King who goes to a Wiseperson and asks how is it that the Earth doesn't fall down? The Wiseperson replies, "The Earth is resting on a lion." "On what, then, is the lion resting?" "The lion is resting on an elephant." "On what is the elephant resting?" "On a turtle." "On what is the..." "You can stop right there, your Majesty. It's turtles all the way down." When it comes to the beginnings or origins of things in this evolving universe, it's turtles all the way down. But likewise, in the farthest reaches of the evolution, it's turtles all the way up.

This volume covers a vast territory across virtually all of the major knowledge disciplines--systems theory, biological and physical sciences, psychology, philosophy, critical theory feminist theory, ecophilosophy, mathematics, chaos theory, catastrophe theory, to mention just a few. Wilber draws from the works of C. Taylor, E. Jantsch, J. Piaget, J. Gebser, J. Habermas, and many others. With the clarity and effectiveness of a superb synthesizer, he presents a birds eye view of just about everything that humans have ever sought to know and be in the four spheres of existence--the physical (physiosphere), biological (biosphere), mental or noetic (noosphere) and the Divine (theosphere). All of these spheres comprise "Kosmos". Wilber adopts this term from the Pythagoreans who had understood Kosmos as the all-inclusive unfoldment of matter, life, mind and spirit. By contrast, the modern "cosmos" has come to mean merely the

physical universe. Wilber's concern is with the evolution of Kosmos how evolution unfolds through matter, life, mind and Spirit.

The work reviewed here is the first of a planned three volume series. It sets forth the vision of an evolving universe as a paradigm for more extensive discussions in the forthcoming volumes. The scope and detail of the present volume are already quite impressive, if not daunting. Wilber has written a streamlined version as a companion or introduction to the present volume in a highly readable dialogue form, *A Brief History of Everything*. Even so, to quote Roger Walsh, "the books cover so many topics that no one person could probably hope to give informed critiques on all of them and doing so would demand another book" (p.5). In the following pages, I will simply present an overview of the central themes and discussions in *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*. These are certain to stir the reader's thinking and no doubt in time will be critiqued by specialists in the various fields from which Wilber draws.

### **Holons and Hierarchies**

The coherence and integrative power of Wilber's paradigm derives from a simple structural notion, "holon." The word was coined by Arthur Koestler to mean a "whole" that is simultaneously "part of" other wholes. We live in a world of holons, says Wilber. The whole/part structure of a holon constitutes the basic organizing principle, the one common feature of phenomena in all four spheres of the Kosmos from the most elementary and primitive to the most complex. A whole atom is a part of a whole molecule, which is a part of a whole cell, and so on. Similarly, a whole letter is a part of a whole word which is part of a whole sentence, and so on. Also, a meaning is whole in itself but part of a world view, which is part of a cultural context, which in turn is embedded in a larger context. The holonic structure is ubiquitous; there is nothing that is a whole without also being part of other, more extensive or more encompassing wholes, and vice versa, there is nothing that is just a part of something else without being a whole in and of itself. In other words, it is an unfolding, enfolded universe both upward and downward endlessly.

The whole/part structure of holons implies hierarchical order. Wilber's advocacy of hierarchies in his earlier writings has evoked much criticism from those who view

hierarchies as instruments of domination, oppression and marginalization. In the present volume, he once again replies to his critics whom he sees as attributing to him an understanding of hierarchy to which he does not subscribe. The discussion here is more extensive and detailed than in any of his previous works, and highly illuminating. He clarifies important distinctions often missed in the polemics regarding hierarchies, such as between holarchical (“healthy”) and dominator (“pathological”) hierarchies, and also between “hierarchies” and “heterarchies.” Wilber’s own understanding follows that of systems theories in which hierarchy is *holarchy* or simply the ranking of phenomena according to their holistic capacity. Holons at higher levels of the hierarchy have a greater embrace than holons at lower levels. Embrace is the capacity to organize and integrate--not assimilate or reduce--lower level holons. In hierarchical sequences the lower level holons (e.g. molecules) are necessary for the existence of the higher (e.g. cells); with the destruction of lower level holons all levels above are also destroyed. However, genuinely novel phenomena emerge out of the higher level organization (e.g. life out of the organization of molecules into cellular structures).

Not all whole/part relationships are hierarchical, of course. For example, a colony of single-celled organisms is a whole that has no complexity beyond being simply an aggregate or group. These types of wholes can only grow bigger, more extensive, but they do not grow in complexity or manifest new, emergent phenomena. Another example is a group of people who are simply drawn together as friends. These are flat wholes that only have “horizontal” extension but no “vertical” depth or complexity. They are examples of *heterarchy*, in which the whole-part relationships are of same-level complexity. The view that these are the only kind of whole-part relationships there are is called “flatland holism” by Wilber. Flatland holism denies that there are level distinctions in whole-part relationships, or that there are genuine hierarchies.

A hierarchical order in the sense of holarchy occurs whenever the whole is of greater complexity and has qualities not found in the parts. Holarchies are present in all spheres of the Kosmos, including the sphere of human consciousness, meanings and purposes. Hierarchical level distinctions are inescapable whenever value judgements are made. For example, Wilber points out, a hierarchical level distinction is implied in the very decision to accept or reject hierarchies. This is because one always opts for what one (rightly or

wrongly) regards as the position that has greater holistic capacity, that is, the position capable of accounting for a wider and more complex variety of concerns.

Holons possess the capacity for *self-transcendence* or self-transformation. Holons can and do sometimes move from lower to higher levels of organization spontaneously and unpredictably. Such spontaneous, self-organizing tendencies are present in all phenomena. Their recent discovery in physical phenomena has revealed a continuity between the “living” and “nonliving.” This discovery, for Wilber, is extremely significant in opening the way to healing the fractured sciences of the recent past. These sciences had assumed that only the living can evolve in the direction of increasing complexity and organization whereas the nonliving can only move in the opposite direction, toward disintegration and entropy. The “two arrows of time” had mandated separate laws for the living and the nonliving and an irreconcilable dualism between them.

Wilber sees the dualism of living vs. nonliving as being much deeper and pernicious than the dualism of mind and body. Indeed, it is only because the body had (with Descartes) been construed as a nonliving mechanism that the dualism between body and mind had seemed as deep as it did. (Significantly enough, we might parenthetically note, post-Cartesian phenomenology has sought to mitigate and transcend the mind-body dualism, not by reducing mind to nonliving brain, but by calling attention to the body as living and lived, as not just an object but an agency of experience.) But now there is significant scientific evidence for the self-transcending, self-transforming process in the physical and biological holons as well as in the psychological, social and cultural holons. In both, the actualization of this potential is spontaneous and largely unpredictable.

But holons do not only have the capacity for self-transcendence. They also have the capacity to move in the opposite direction, toward disintegration and self-dissolution. Because of these opposite tendencies, the hierarchies in all spheres of the Kosmos are fundamentally indeterminate.

Another pair of opposites is the holon’s capacity for agency and for *communion*. Agency has to do with the holon’s tendency to maintain and preserve its own integrity as a whole. This is the self-asserting and assimilative tendency evident everywhere in nature as in human affairs, in a plant’s reaching for light as in a bureaucracy’s tendency

to perpetuate itself. Communion refers to the self-accommodating, adaptive, joining tendency that allows the holon to be “part of” other things. The agency and communion are the yang and yin or “male” and “female” tendencies of holons, and it is, indeed, this far that Wilber traces the roots of gender and sexual issues. (He makes observations that are both insightful and provocative on these topics in the present volume, but he promises to offer a much fuller treatment of the gender issue in the forthcoming second volume.)

Having spelled out the characteristics of holons and the meaning of hierarchy, Wilber can now offer a more precise way of distinguishing his own from pathological hierarchies as well as from pathological heterarchies:

In pathological hierarchy, one holon assumes agentic dominance to the detriment of all. This holon does not assume it is both a whole and a part, it assumes it is the whole, period. On the other hand, in pathological heterarchy, individual holons lose their distinctive value and identity is a communal fusion and meltdown. This holon doesn't assume it is both a whole and a part, it assumes it is a part, period. It becomes only instrumental to some other use, it is merely a strand in the web, it has no intrinsic value.” (p. 23)

In their own way, each of these pathological orders is closed and stifling of its members. In contrast, a hierarchy that is a holarchy is an open order, permitting each holon to fully express itself. There are no wholes that are just wholes and no parts that are just parts. Further, unlike dominator hierarchies, holarchies manifest evolutionary movement toward higher levels of integration through the self-transcending capacity of holons.

### **Interiority and Exteriority**

Among the empirical sciences, systems theories recognize and deal with the higher level holons and their integrative, emergent qualities. As such, systems theories represent for Wilber a significant advance toward holism. But, as empirical sciences, they concern themselves only with what can be observed and measured, the exteriors, surfaces of things. Because they ignore interiority, the subjective side, he argues, systems approaches can tell only half of the story. He finds these approaches guilty of a subtle

form of reductionism that renders them incapable of addressing the phenomena of human concerns meanings, values and purposes.

What, then, is “interiority”? It is in essence the same as consciousness. But not consciousness understood as some kind of stuff or metaphysical substratum. Consciousness is not an object to be viewed (or described or understood), even though this is how a view external to it might try to grasp it. Rather, consciousness is the view itself--“the view from within,” as Wilber calls it. Conceivably, all holons, even subatomic particles, have interiority (as indeed some great thinkers such as Spinoza, Leibniz, Whitehead, Teilhard de Chardin and many others have maintained). The degree of depth, and of consciousness, varies: molecules have less depth and less consciousness than multicellular organisms, which have less depth and consciousness than the noospheric phenomena of human meaning and value. The notion that all things have interiority, that the universe is pervaded by consciousness, is central to Wilber’s vision, and he makes a case for it that appeals to both reason and intuition. Why insist on only ‘exteriors’ and ‘surfaces’ when doing so implies their opposite, interiors and depth? To consider the knowing of surfaces as the only mode of knowing worth exploring or developing is indeed superficial and one-sided, he argues. Of course, in our ordinary modes of being and awareness, we do not usually access the interiors of things and so have only their exterior surfaces available to us. But, Wilber’s point is, this says more about the nature and limitations of our ordinary consciousness and knowing than about the things such consciousness seeks to know. Unfortunately, the sciences and knowledge disciplines have taken their own limitations to reflect the true nature of things and have, via various kinds of reductionism, fractured the world to fit those limitations.

The fault lines of our fractured universe have created four mutually exclusive provinces according to whether individual holons (e.g. molecules, organisms, intrapsychic dynamics) or collective, group holons (e.g. thermodynamic equilibria, ecosystems, human societies) are studied and whether they are studied from the exterior viewpoint (e.g. empirical sciences) or the interior (e.g. humanities and human sciences such as philosophy, hermeneutics, cultural anthropology). From the exterior viewpoint of empirical and systems sciences, individuals and groups are described in the language of objectivity or in “it” language. From the interior viewpoint, the individual is described in

the language of subjectivity or in “I” language, and groups are described in the language of shared meanings, or “we” language. Wilber refers to the domains of knowledge and experience of these three as the “Big Three.” The integration of the “Big Three,” not the reduction of any of them to the other(s), is the central theme of Wilber’s and one that he believes is the foremost challenge for contemporary thought:

We will see that the great task of modernity and postmodernity, as theorists from Schelling to Hegel to Habermas to Taylor have pointed out, is not to replace atomism with holism (a simple and obvious task), but to integrate the Big Three (integrate the it of flatland holism with the depth of I and community of we)--a very difficult and altogether tricky task, but one made all the more urgent by the fractured and dualistic worldviews of both atomism and holism.

### **Human Evolution**

Wilber next traces human evolution from the magical-animistic beginnings through the mythological, mythic-rational, rational, centauric, and transpersonal stages. These stages are familiar from his earlier works, but they receive a greatly expanded treatment in the present volume with rich illustrations in terms of the significant issues and movements throughout Western history and cultures. Wilber pays special attention to the evolution of gender relations, relations with the environment, and the liberation movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Marxism, ecological, and feminist movements).

That there are stages of human evolution beyond what is manifest in the collective cultural consciousness of humankind at this time is a well-known and, to some, controversial, thesis of Wilber’s. In the present volume, he argues this thesis in much greater depth and detail than in any of his previous works. We can have glimpses of these higher stages and describe their qualities because, throughout history and across cultures, there have been individuals who have attained these higher stages (In the West, Wilber acknowledges such individuals as Plato, Plotinus, Meister Eckhart Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Schelling).

Development of consciousness at these higher levels becomes increasingly an inward journey. Many social activists and ecologically minded people fear that such an inward



turn inevitably leads to narcissism and narrow self-absorption. In other words, instead of evolution to higher consciousness, we might have a case of regression to more primitive stages. The problem here, as Wilber sees it, is a confusion and confounding of developmental and regressive phenomena that has a long history going back to Freud. Wilber argues for an inward turn that is not a regressive, pathological withdrawal but, on the contrary, a genuine developmental movement toward more encompassing awareness. Such an inward turn leads to increasing autonomy and de-centering of the egocentric subject. "It is precisely by becoming conscious of his subjectivity that the child rids himself of his egocentricity," Wilber quotes from Piaget. The self-transcendent capacity of holons manifests in the case of individual human consciousness as the capacity for self-awareness, further depths of interiority as well as width of perspective. By "further depths" Wilber means an increasing capacity of consciousness to render its own processes transparent to itself and thereby gain freedom from them. This allows a person to embrace concerns and perspectives beyond the narrowly ego-centric, or even family or nation-centric. Says Wilber, "The more one goes within, the more one goes beyond, and the more one can thus embrace a deeper identity with a wider perspective"(p. 257). Meditation and contemplative practices in the various spiritual traditions East and West are designed to facilitate the further development of consciousness. They offer, according to Wilber, the best antidotes to egocentrism and narcissism, as well as to anthropocentrism, sociocentrism, and geocentrism.

The stages beyond the rational-egoic, familiar from Wilber's earlier works, receive the most comprehensive treatment yet in the present volume. Every evolutionary advance, notes Wilber, brings with it both something positive and something negative. The distinctive achievement of the rational egoic mind, from Immanuel Kant on to postmodern constructivists and deconstructionists, according to Wilber, is the awareness that one has a perspective, that one's truths are conditional upon, and limited by, presuppositions. The positive in this is increased flexibility and globality of views and multicultural tolerance. The negative is that we haven't been able to heal the deep fractures of the past, and in the multiperspectival postmodern world these are becoming if anything more daunting, more exaggerated.

But aren't the ecophilosophers and feminists precisely calling for a greater connectedness with the environment and a greater sense of community? Indeed they are, and Wilber sees the wisdom of these movements as a genuine evolutionary emergent that has become manifest in our times. However, he sees a tragic flaw in them as well: their vision is not big enough, not wholistic enough, to include its own premise. This premise is that humans are capable of awareness and sensitivity that goes beyond their egoic needs, extending to a sense of universal fairness and equality and a concern for the welfare of their fellow humans, of nature and the entire globe. The ecophilosophers and many feminists appeal to this capacity for greater awareness and concern. But then the ecophilosophers tell people that they are nothing but "parts" whose purpose is to fit into the "whole" that is the web of biological life. In other words, they reduce humans to simply biological life (which of course they also are and could not survive without). Such a reductionism, Wilber maintains, has inspired a regressive, largely unrealistic and unfeasible search for premodern, pretechnological cultural models for how to "fit into" nature. Even if someone did come up with a feasible way for people to live in harmony and balance with nature, how would it be implemented? By dictatorial imposition or by democratic endorsement? The latter, of course, is the preferred way to most ecophilosophers. But then they should be advocating genuine consciousness-raising and facilitating the development of ecological wisdom in people rather than telling them that they are "merely" parts of nature. Wilber's point is that ecological wisdom requires much greater awareness and maturity than does the desire to merge with or fit into nature. So it is in the ecological movement's own interest to have their vision be deep enough, holistic enough to accommodate development beyond the technological consciousness that is alienated from body and nature.

A development that embraces body and nature without rejecting mind ushers in an integrated body-mind or *centauric* consciousness. The *centauric* operates with vision-logic, the next step in the evolution of mental capacities beyond formal logic. In describing vision-logic, Wilber draws extensively from the work of Jean Gebser. Vision-logic is a dialectical, nonlinear mode of consciousness that is capable of unifying opposites. It is aperspectival, capable of simultaneously holding and integrating a variety of perspectives without privileging any as ultimate or absolute. Thus it is capable of

operating with what to formal logic and rational thought appear irreconcilable contradictions and paradoxes. Vision-logic is transparent to itself, capable of becoming aware of its own context. More important, it is capable of seeing its own essential incompleteness, of realizing that there are contexts within contexts, infinitely. Finally, vision-logic moves from a multiplicity of ego-centric perspectives to an aperspectival, worldcentric view.

Wilber sees vision-logic as a mode of consciousness already manifested by many individuals though not yet applied in the curricula of our educational institutions. This mode of consciousness has the capacity to heal the fractured world view exposed by the rational-egoic mind. The solution to our postmodern chaos and proliferation of perspectives is thus not another perspective, not another “truth” to be accepted but a capacity of the human mind to be developed and made manifest.

Beyond the *centauric* vision-logic lie further, genuinely transpersonal modes of consciousness and living that include but are not limited by the egocentric and personal viewpoints of the lower levels. The *psychic*, characterized by the capacity to experience identity with all of nature, begins to experientially break down the walls of isolated ego that were already made transparent to vision-logic. The nature mysticism of such a consciousness (exemplified by Emerson) is no mere biocentric immersion but an emergence of a genuine “Eco-Noetic Self” or Spirit that “does not build up nature around us but puts forth nature through us” (p. 289). The *subtle* consciousness moves from identification with nature to an even deeper, interior marriage of a higher Self and higher Truth (God). Theresa of Avila exemplifies the subtle consciousness. In *causal* consciousness soul and God are both transcended in the prior, unmanifest Source of all. This is the supreme identity of Meister Eckhart’s Godhead, the Hindu Atman=Brahman, and also the Buddhist Shunyata or Emptiness. But beyond the causal there is still more. The *nondual* consciousness sees that the unmanifest source and the manifest Kosmos are not-two. “When one breaks through the causal absorption in pure unmanifest and unborn Spirit, the entire manifest world (or worlds) arises once again, but this time as a perfect expression of Spirit and as Spirit” (p. 308). The ascending movement to utterly transcend the world now reverses and utterly embraces the entire world. Wilber quotes Meister Eckhart: “Love God in all things equally. For God is equally near to all creatures. An

among all these creatures God does not love any one more than any other. God is all and is one. All things become nothing but God” (p. 309).

The ascent to the Unmanifest Source is manifest at all levels, in all spheres of the Kosmos, in every holon’s tendency toward self-transcendence. The descent to the world is likewise present in each holon’s capacity to embrace all holons of lesser capacity. Transcendence and embrace, two movements ubiquitous and ever present in the world, are for humans most intimately and directly manifested in and through consciousness.

This concludes Book One. Wilber has laid the groundwork for a paradigm of unparalleled scope, capable of accommodating a wholly nonreductionistic and nondualistic, yet amazingly coherent vision of evolution. In this vision, world and consciousness are not-two but, as he summarized in an interview (for Shambhala, Autumn 1994), “Spirit-in-action, God or Goddess in-the-making, where Spirit unfolds and enfolds itself at every stage of development, thus manifesting more of itself, and realizing more of itself, at every unfoldment” (p. 8).

### **Ascent and Descent**

How the two movements, Ascent and Descent, have fared in human history, especially in the West, is examined in Book Two. Wilber sees the two movements as fully developed and integrated in Plato and Plotinus. He notes that Plato is frequently portrayed as the Ascender par excellence who aspired to the transcendent realm of perfection of the Forms and the highest Good and saw much less value in the ordinary world of the senses. This, Wilber argues, is a distortion based on a partial reading of Plato. He quotes his sources convincingly (mainly *The Timaeus*) to show that Plato’s “Self-Sufficing Perfection is also, and at the same time, a Self-Emptying Fecundity” (p. 325). In other words, Plato is both an Ascender and a Descender who, after establishing the Ascent or “return to the One,” sets forth a genuine creation-centered spirituality, an effulgence and embrace of the “radiant splendor of the Many.” The two movements and their integration is a nondual stance is even more explicit in Plotinus, who is quoted at length. It is not necessary to go to Nonwestern sources for the nondual vision; the nondual vision is available and has been fully developed already in the very foundations of our Western intellectual and spiritual heritage.

Wilber summarizes the integration of Ascent and Descent in the classic statement: “The Way Up is the Way Down.” The meaning of this deceptively simple statement can be fully grasped only by those who have traveled the way all the way in both directions. Contrary to a common belief, argues Wilber, Plato and Plotinus’ visions are not primarily philosophical formulations or metaphysical speculations. Rather, they are articulations of direct phenomenological apprehensions that these men came upon by undertaking the experiential journey and going far enough to have at least glimpses of what they were talking about. The important implication here is that anybody who has developed the requisite levels of consciousness can replicate these apprehensions. Indeed, many individuals throughout history in the West as well as the East have done so, argues Wilber and supports his claim by extensive source material.

The Path of the Ascent as the path of the Good, or Wisdom. “Wisdom knows that behind the Many is One. Wisdom sees through the confusion of shifting shapes and passing forms to the Groundless Ground of all being” (p. 327). The Path of Descent is the Path of Compassion that sees the perfection of the “Good” expressed in the “Goodness” of all creation. “[If] wisdom sees that the Many is One, compassion knows that the One is the Many, that the One is expressed equally in every being and so each is to be treated with compassion and care, not in any condescending fashion, but rather because each being, exactly as it is, is a perfect manifestation of Spirit” (p. 327). Wilber invites us to picture the integration of the two paths as a great circle in which the descending path that embraces the manifold moves from the top of the circle to the bottom, and the ascending path aspiring to the unmanifest source moves from the bottom to the top.

This circle captures the essence of a holistic vision big enough to include everything. The potential for Ascent, for aspiration to ever greater unity is present not just in human consciousness but in the self-transcending capacity of every holon, whether of the physical, biological, or mental/conceptual sphere of the Kosmos. Similarly, the potential for Descent, for embracing diversity, is present in varying degrees and in varying qualitative manifestations in all holons. In this vision, Kosmos becomes transparent and connected down to the smallest and densest “material” particle. The aspiration that for human consciousness culminates in transformative wisdom is not fundamentally other

than the aspiration that brings the molecules into a whole that is a living cell. Same Ascent, though in qualitatively vastly different manifestations. Similarly, the embracing of diversity, manifesting in human consciousness as compassion, is not fundamentally different from the enfolding of the molecules and atoms by the living cell.

Ascent and Descent, then, are equally necessary, equally desirable. Ascent is *Eros*, aspiring to union or oneness at levels of ever greater complexity, depth, interiority (an aspiration that can continue infinitely beyond the human sexual encounter). Descent, is *Agape*, love that celebrates the diversity of phenomena, embracing their distinct identities and wholeness, recognizing each as an end in itself. *Eros* and *Agape* together constitute the evolutionary process that unfolds through phenomena even as it enfolds them at every level of complexity, in all spheres of the Kosmos. When no arbitrary cutoff points are imposed on this process, when the circle is unbroken, then indeed the way up is the way down. But picture the top portion of the circle being cut off. This leaves the ascending and descending halves truncated and separate from one another. When divorced from each other, the two Paths become unbalanced and extreme. Ascent becomes too other-worldly, even world-denying. This is *Eros* degenerating into Phobos, fear and contempt of anything that is alive with sensuousness and exuberant creativity. Similarly Descent when divorced from Ascent smothers all aspirations to higher levels of development and takes a regressive turn to nostalgia and sentimentality. This is *Agape* degenerating into Thanatos, stagnation, disintegration and death.

Wilber credits Freud with making the great discovery that human misery comes down to the disharmony and battle between the path of Ascent and the Path of Descent. But because of his truncated vision, Freud had no way to unite *Eros* and *Agape*, or to unite the Way up and the Way Down. Thus, he could find no solution to the fundamental discontent and neurosis of the human condition.

But the scene for the battle was set long before Freud. From the beginning, Ascent was the path chosen by the Church. However, the Church allowed free passage on this path only to God and Christ who, indeed, had already Ascended. So Ascent, while proclaimed as the only Path, was at the same time denied to humans. It became a pessimistic, introverted, world-contemptuous path that demanded withdrawal of attachment to all creatures, the body, the earth, and above all sexuality. For centuries,

Wilber notes, Western people have suffered from a peculiar spiritual hunger--the hunger from frustrated Ascent, from *spiritus interruptus*.

The Path of Descent, viewed by fear, suspicion and contempt by the Church was largely suppressed in both the individual and cultural consciousness during the Middle Ages. Renaissance marked a major shift in consciousness that unleashed the Path of Descent. Suddenly this Path, “bursting forth from its thousand year confinement, exploded on the scene with a creative fury that would, in the span of a mere few centuries, remake the entire Western world--and in the process substitute, more or less permanently, one broken God for the other” (p. 369).

The broken God of the Ascenders was an other worldly, unreachable God for the sake of Whom this world had to be denied. Renaissance called for embracing the world once again, accepting, trusting, taking interest in and celebrating what could be seen and felt. It was, indeed, a fresh, liberating message. But it threw away the baby of Ascent with the bathwater. The Descenders were contemptuous of the aspirations and values of the Ascenders, just as these had been of theirs. So, instead of seeking to free people from the shackles that had doomed them to spiritual hunger, the Descenders denied the hunger, and people began to live in an increasingly meaningless world. Beginning with Renaissance, Kosmos collapses into cosmos; the Descending Path becomes a Path already *Descended*. No longer Nature infused by Spirit, but just nature. From here on, that which is “given” to the senses is where things begin and also where they end. The Great Hierarchy is reduced to the great interlocking order that has no degrees of depth but only endless addition of sensory span. Sensory experience and sensuality (later narrowed to sexuality) was given a new value and came to be seen as the common motivator of all living beings, including humans. Living beings, increasingly homogenized, came to be seen as simply strands in the great interlocking system of nature, without intrinsic purpose or value, possessing only instrumental value according to their functional fit or adaptation. Thus the broken God of the Descenders became flatland empiricism and later, with systems approaches, flatland holism.

## **The Enlightenment Paradigm and Flatland Holism**

Flatland holism, or the great interlocking order, received its most powerful articulation in the Enlightenment paradigm's view of the universe as a perfect clockwork. All were subsumed in the great system of nature, and all worked according to its deterministic laws. But the very holism and perfection of this vision generated what Wilber calls the "extraordinary paradox of the Enlightenment paradigm": the holism of nature produced the atomism of the self. "[T]he rational-ego was left disengaged, dangling as its own 'autonomous' and 'self-defining' agency, with no way, in participatory terms, that the *subject* could actually fit into the interlocking world of *objects* it had so seamlessly described" (p. 430). Flatland holism, explains Wilber in a footnote, not only splits Ascent off from Descent, but on its own level (the only level it acknowledges) it splits a relatively autonomous agency from the networks of communion. Hence the central problem of modernity: human subjectivity and its relation to the world.

## **Ego and Eco**

The subject--isolated in its agency--and the object--participating in the interlocking order--became severed from one another in an irreconcilable dualism that set the stage for the next battle. This was the battle between the Ego camp, championing for the freedom and authenticity of human rationality, and the Eco camp calling for a return to the great web of life of which we are part. In this battle, Ascent vs. Descent was no longer the issue; the "Descended flatland world" was the battlefield where the contending camps met, and where they are still waging their war. But it is precisely that flatness of this truncated field that, according to Wilber, keeps the Ego and the Eco camps from finding a perspective large enough to encompass both, that keeps the battle going. "Without a genuine holarchy, the two partial views could not be superseded: they both claimed to encompass the other camp, but they both did so only through aggressive subtraction. They were in fact locked into a battle royale that, in so many ways, was the archbattle, and remains the archbattle, of modernity and postmodernity" (p. 433).

The Ego camps are represented by such thinkers as Descartes, Locke, Kant and Fichte. Even though Wilber does not discuss contemporary phenomenological thought, it



would appear that certainly Husserl belonged to these camps. In various ways, the Ego camps tend in the direction of Ascent. Theirs is a transcendental quest for the “Pure Self,” that represents the fulcrum of freedom, rationality and the capacity for knowledge. In modern science, the Ego quest for knowledge is evident in all kinds of quests for methodological purity. The Eco camps, represented by Spinoza, Rousseau and the Romantics down to various contemporary ecophilosophers, embrace the purely Descended world of nature. Theirs is a quest for immanent participation and communion. For the Eco camps, all problems are solved if we just shift from atomistic concepts to a holistic understanding of the great Web of Life.

Wilber credits both camps with a genuine intention to heal our fractured world and with liberating insights toward a greater, more holistic view. The Ego camps have given us the capacity for reflection and analysis (reason) that has expanded our viewpoint from a narrowly ego-centric survival orientation to an increasingly worldcentric appreciation of diversity of cultures and perspectives. The Eco camps, on the other hand have challenged us to move from distant, impartial, disinterested reflection to a participation with nature, “to join in the great currents of *communion* that nourish each and all, and not merely glorify one’s own self-generated, self-independent *agency*” (p. 446).

Wilber’s criticism of the Ego and Eco camps is sharp and belies his deep sympathy with both. For he sees both as striving for a holism that is universal in scope and rises above all kinds of chauvinism and cultural, religious and ethnic intolerance. Where he sees both as going wrong is in their rejection of each other and adoption of a self-limited, dualistic stance. Thus the Ego rationality sought to transcend without embracing, unify without regard to diversity, which led to distancing, alienation and repression, in short, to pathological hierarchy that dominates, marginalizes and degrades all alterity. The Eco, on the other hand, wished to embrace nature while rejecting reason. The Eco viewed reason as simply the instrument of egoic pride and arrogance and as only capable of separating and alienating us from nature. This led to a nostalgic, regressive search for the “way back to nature,” for a “Paradise Lost” where humans had once lived in harmony with nature (and Wilber notes that, a variety of such Paradises have been suggested by ecophilosophers, from Middle Ages to Classical Greece to horticultural societies to

hunting and gathering societies, and who champions for which Paradise depends on one's theoretical, political or gender preferences.)

### **Unpacking the Divine, Transforming the Human**

What is the solution? Or is there one? For Wilber, the solution, if there is one, is not a view or understanding that is “more correct” than either Ego or Eco. What is required is a transformation of consciousness that shifts the viewpoint from the exterior to the interior and on to a superior viewpoint (or perhaps “viewspace”) capable of embracing the entire Kosmos.

The profoundly transformative questions is not is the world wholistic or atomistic? The transformative questions is: who or what is aware of both holistic and atomistic concepts? (the move from the exterior to the interior) And then: having rested in the Witness of those concepts, a Witness that itself is neither holistic nor atomistic, see here the Witness dissolve in an Emptiness that embraces the entire Kosmos (the move from the interior to the superior). (p. 498)

The superior viewpoint has been with us throughout history, manifesting here and there in individual “I” consciousness both East and West but never yet as a communal “We” consciousness of any significant magnitude. Wilber credits the German Idealists, Hegel and especially Schelling, with a truly nondual vision that integrated Ego and Eco. Yet this great vision faded into oblivion with the passing of its progenitors. The legacy of the Idealists failed, says Wilber, because they had no meditative or contemplative practices, no methodology to reproduce in consciousness the transpersonal insights of their founders. The language of vision logic in which these insights were expressed was inadequate to the task and so they were reduced to mere metaphysics.

Wilber sees humanity as poised on the edge of a major evolutionary shift. On the other side of this shift lies integration, the capacity to fully embrace the Ego aspiration to radical freedom and the Eco quest for integral communion with all things. This is the transpersonal dawn of the *Homo universalis* capable of embracing the domains of the Big Three, the subjective (I), the communal (we), and the objective (it): “Every I will sing of the self, and every We will resonate with worship of the Divine, and every It will radiate the light of a Spirit happy to be seen, with dialogue the abode of the Gods and

perceptions the home of Grace, and gone the lonely loveless self, and god of its own perception, and gone the Godless destiny of time and separation” (p. 495).

Will this glorious vision become a reality? Will the transformation actually occur in time to save humanity and the globe? Perhaps it will. Then again, perhaps not. Prognostication is not Wilber’s concern, but the potentialities present and already actualizing are. There has been much discussion of the dark inclinations that drive humanity toward extinction in recent literature. Indeed, much of *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* up to this point has been devoted to uncovering and delineating the sources of fragmentation, alienation and destruction. But all along, it has been evident that Wilber’s purpose is to render salient the capabilities that lie within us to heal the fractures of the past and to embrace ever greater wholes in our lives: not just me but my community, not just my community or nation but all humanity, and not just humanity but all life on earth. The holarchical vision obviously has implications to environmental ethics, and Wilber plans to examine these in detail in volume 2. The present volume focuses on the development of consciousness, the awakening of humanity, to a sensitivity and awareness that embraces the entire living world. For Wilber, “global consciousness is not an objective belief that can be taught to anybody and everybody, but a subjective transformation in the interior structures that can hold the belief in the first place” (p. 515). Out of this transformed consciousness, ethical action will then arise spontaneously and uncoerced.

### **Conclusion**

Wilber has sounded a powerful call for us to awaken to the evolutionary process taking place within us, within the universe, not in some distant future but right now. This evolution is fundamentally open and creative, and therefore, at every turn, incomplete or uncertain. We live in systems within systems, contexts within contexts indefinitely, and the systems are constantly sliding and the contexts shifting. The vision of an open universe unfolding and enfolded upwards and downwards without end effectively removes all bases for certainty and completeness. For many people the postmodern quicksand world spells despair and a sense of being lost in the ever-shifting contexts that claim power of determination over meanings and values and render human lives pointless

and empty. The absolutizing of context is an unfortunate, even if unintended, legacy of much of postmodern thought. Wilber sees the emphasis on context as being appropriate, but it does not go deep enough; what needs to be realized is that contexts themselves are shifting, evolving, along with everything else. The evolution that we are all part of excludes nothing, not even the contexts that bound our understanding and awareness. Evolution is the journey of the universe toward self-awareness, now through human consciousness that is becoming increasingly aware of its own contexts.

This monumental work sets forth a view large enough, holistic enough, to include everything--even itself. Wilber's writing exemplifies vision-logic and can evoke in the reader a sense of transparency and connectedness with all things that manifests the very evolutionary shift he is talking about. Astonishing in its scholarly erudition, this volume is a landmark contribution to contemporary critique of science, culture, and spirituality. It's message, delivered with clarity and passion, will touch anyone concerned with the fate of humanity and the Earth.

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I would like to gratefully acknowledge Roger Walsh's "From the Big Bang to the Big Crunch: An Essay Review of the Evolutionary Synthesis Proposed in Ken Wilber's Books *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: Vol 1, The Spirit of Evolution* and *A guide to Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* (1995)." Draft #8. (An abbreviated version of it has been published

in *Jon's Institute of Noetic Sciences Review*, Summer 95, 16-41.) This draft was invaluable for the preparation of the present article.

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