



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](#)

* * *

The Spirit of Evolution

by Roger Walsh

An overview of Ken Wilber's book *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution* (Shambhala, 1995). Roger Walsh (MD) is a Professor of Psychiatry, Philosophy and Anthropology, Department of Psychiatry & Human Behavior, University of California College of Medicine, Irvine.

Scientific disciplines have been suffering from an embarrassment of riches. As data accumulate and disciplines fragment into subdisciplines, the search for some comprehensive synthesis seems both more appealing and more hopeless. Take psychology for example. From its humble beginnings at the end of the nineteenth century it has now exploded into a cacophony of competing schools and therapies. The cries and handwringing over the need for synthesis have grown increasingly distraught.

Consequently it is not surprising in that the appearance of a book in 1977, *The Spectrum of Consciousness*,¹ which seemed to offer just such a synthesis, was greeted with great excitement--even though written by a young unknown author, Ken Wilber, who was not formally trained as a psychologist. Indeed, in some ways *Spectrum* did more than had been hoped for because it offered a synthesis of not only Western psychologies but Eastern ones as well.

Other equally encompassing books by Wilber soon followed, such as *The Atman Project*.² Here, Wilber integrated diverse developmental theories, again of both East and West, into a unified view that traced development from infancy into normal adulthood and then into post conventional stages “beyond normality” described by diverse contemplative disciplines. In *Up from Eden*³ he used his developmental model as a framework to attempt to map the evolution of human cognition and consciousness. Other works on sociology, religion, philosophy and physics⁴ soon followed. By 1987, Wilber had created an interdisciplinary collection of rare scope and integrative power.

Then followed a painful silence of more than five years. These were hardly uneventful years for Wilber. Ten days after their marriage, his wife Treya discovered a breast cancer and the next five years were devoted to helping her manage the disease and eventually to die. A further two years were devoted to mourning and to writing a moving book *Grace and Grit*⁵ chronicling her life and death. Now Wilber has burst out with another major work, by far his largest to date, and what he describes as his first “mature work”.

The story of the book’s origins is amusing. In 1991 Wilber published a brief article on gender differences which evoked a critical letter from one woman. Wilber, in turn, began writing a letter to the editor in response. That opened the floodgates and the years of dammed up thinking poured out. Four years later, after reading more than 300 books on feminism, 300 on ecology, and more than another 400 on various topics such as anthropology, evolution and philosophy, Wilber offers *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution*, a massive 800-page work which is volume one of a planned three volume series. Heaven help us if Wilber ever starts to write an article.

The aim of the book is to trace evolution--physical, biological and human--and to set it within the context of the perennial philosophy: the common core of wisdom at the heart of the great religious traditions.

The scope of the work is extraordinary. Only a handful of thinkers, such as Aurobindo in the East and Hegel in the West, have assembled such vast evolutionary visions. Yet Wilber's view is unique in grounding that vision in contemporary research in fields such as cosmology, biology, anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and ecology.

This vast scope and scholarship comes at a certain cost. To say the least, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* is daunting to mere mortals. In addition, its scope makes it difficult to grasp and retain the gestalt. This is not because the book is obtuse or badly written. On the contrary, considering the profusion, and novelty, of the ideas, the writing is remarkably smooth and lucid. Rather, the problem is that the sheer number of novel ideas means that those early in the book tend to be pushed out of memory.

The major purpose of this article is therefore to offer an overview that may give a sense of the gestalt or vision and thereby provide a framework allowing easier and more retentive reading. Consequently this is more an overview than a detailed critical review.

The book covers so many topics that probably no one person could hope to give informed critiques on all of them. I suspect that this book will be the topic of specialized critiques by disciplinary experts for several decades. What follows, then, is the central thread, shorn of numerous intriguing offshoots.

Our Fractured Worldview

Wilber begins by drawing attention to our ecological crises. Ecological movements usually assume that these crises reflect a disastrously fractured worldview; a worldview often damned as dualistic, mechanistic, atomistic, anthropocentric, patriarchal and pathologically hierarchical; a worldview that fragments humans from nature, mind from body, and spirit from everything. Consequently, movements such as deep ecology and ecofeminism advocate a new worldview which is said to be more holistic, integrative and relational.

Wilber explores the nineteenth century scientific origins of this fractured worldview when the "two arrows of time" were first recognized. Paradoxically it was discovered that

according to the second law of thermodynamics the physical universe seemed to be running down toward increasing entropy, whereas the discovery of evolution showed that life appeared to be moving toward greater complexity and differentiation (negentropy). The physiosphere and the biosphere, the physical sciences and biological sciences, therefore seemed irrevocably divorced and although there were a variety of theoretical attempts at integration--for example, materialistic reductionism, phenomenism, epiphenomenism--none were wholly satisfactory.

Only in the late twentieth century did science finally offer a firm basis for reunification when it was discovered that matter has a potential for producing greater order and complexity. For example, as the Nobel laureate chemist Ilya Prigogine discovered, certain biochemical systems called “dissipative structures” can grow in chemical complexity, in apparent defiance of entropy and the second law of thermodynamics. This defiance is thought to provide a possible basis for the origin of life.

From this reunification, in part, were born the various system sciences of complexity such as general systems theory, cybernetics, nonequilibrium thermodynamic systems theory, and evolutionary systems theory. Some of these, such as evolutionary systems theory, specifically claim that similar patterns of process and evolution can be identified across the physical, biological, and noetic spheres. The key point is that there is now significant scientific evidence for a self-organizing, self-transcending process in matter, life and mind.

Before he can proceed with developing his theory, Wilber needs to rehabilitate the concept of hierarchy, a concept central to his theory and that of many other evolutionary researchers. Hierarchy has become somewhat of a dirty word in some circles and critics claim that all hierarchy necessitates ranking or dominating that oppresses, marginalizes or destroys. It is not uncommon to hear that we need to do away with all hierarchies. However, as Wilber points out, this is not only impossible but an example of what philosophers call performative contradiction since the preference for nonhierarchies over hierarchies is itself a hierarchical value judgement. Qualitative distinctions are an inevitable part of human experience.

Moreover, systems sciences argue that hierarchy is essential for integration, wholeness and systems functioning. Understood in this context, hierarchy is simply a ranking of phenomena according to their holistic capacity. As such it does not necessarily entail value hierarchies, domination or oppression.⁶

Having rehabilitated the concept of hierarchy, or holarchy as he prefers to call it (adopting Arthur Koestler's term), Wilber next turns to the common principles and processes that hold for systems and phenomena across the three great realms: physical, biological and mental. For Wilber the fundamental category is the holon, a term introduced by Koestler, which implies that every entity and phenomenon in the universe it neither merely a whole nor a part but both simultaneously.

Using the concepts of hierarchy and holons, Wilber is able to clarify the nature of various hierarchies and their misuse. For example, most popular general systems theories of ecology and ecofeminism are based on some version of a holarchy of being, a kind of web of life. Humans are usually inserted into this web as one strand in or part of the biosphere or Gaia. At first glance this move seems very neat, organic and egalitarian.

However, in what is perhaps the most intellectually challenging part of the book, Wilber demonstrates that things are not quite this simple. Hierarchically ordered structures and emergents (properties or capacities that emerge *de novo* at certain levels of hierarchy) cannot be interpreted simply in terms of, nor considered as parts of, lower order phenomena. For example, when atoms of hydrogen and oxygen combine, the result is a molecule of water with novel emergent properties, such as wetness. These emergent properties are totally unpredictable from the properties of its constituent atoms and cannot be described in terms of atoms--and, of course, the water molecule is not *contained* within its atoms.

So too life, or the biosphere, is not simply contained in, reducible to, or explicable simply in terms of, the physiosphere: the realm of pure matter. Life has emergent properties not found in the properties of its chemical constituents. Life, in other words, has properties and capacities that seem to defy description in terms of the movements of the mere molecules. Likewise, the noosphere (the realm of sentient life) emerges from and is not simply *in* the biosphere. That is, the noosphere is not a component of the larger whole called biosphere but is an emergent that in some sense transcends it. Ontologically,

the noosphere thus cannot be reduced to, or considered merely as, a strand of the biosphere. And humans are compound individuals comprised of all three “spheres” or levels; we cannot be regarded simply as strands of the biosphere which comprises only the physical and biological levels.

This is a difficult but important argument which can only be sketched briefly here. It appears to resolve a number of puzzles that have plagued ecological thinking such as how one can accord greater value to some forms of life, including humans, than others while simultaneously honoring all life. Wilber argues at length that this perspective is not antiecollogical, as it might appear at first glance. Rather, he insists that it naturally results in an enhanced concern for life and the environment which are now recognized as parts of one’s own compound individuality.

The Four Quadrants

The schemes and hierarchies considered so far all deal exclusively with exteriors since general systems theories try to be empirical. Hence they almost entirely overlook interiority or subjectivity. Systems theories are essentially theories of surfaces or exteriors.

To understand interiors--subjectivity, experience and consciousness--requires another approach, namely empathy, introspection and interpretation. In short, systems theories have given us a very valuable but very partial view of systems and evolution. This in itself is not bad. However, major troubles ensue when systems scientists claim, as all too many of them do, to be mapping, or at least capable of mapping, *all* domains of reality.

Wilber wants to expand this view. He argues that comprehensive approaches need to include objective studies not only of the external behavior of individual holons but also of social or group holons and, in addition, the interior or subjectivity of both individuals and groups. He therefore introduces what he calls “the four quadrants” model, with individual and social holons in the upper and lower halves respectively, and exterior and interior in the right and left halves respectively. (See figure next page.)

Reductionism can seem reasonable since all holons do in fact have both left- and right-hand quadrants and empirical data can be so obvious. However no quadrant is wholly reducible to another and both gross and subtle reductionism can be destructive. This can be insidious in the case of systems theorists, for example, because these people

believe that they are truly embracing all reality in a holistic manner and seem quite unaware of just how much, and how much of value, is often missing from their worldview.

At this stage Wilber has laid the conceptual groundwork for tracing development and evolution, especially human evolution, across all four quadrants. This he proceeds to do.

Human Evolution

Wilber uses the maps devised by cognitive developmental psychologists, such as Jean Piaget, to trace the psychological development of individuals--which he ties to social and cultural evolution from early hominids up to present society. Wilber argues that through history there has been an evolution of both individual cognitive and cultural unfolding. Each evolutionary and historical epoch has been associated with a specific stage of individual cognitive development together with correlative socially shared worldviews and moralities.

The general idea is that cultural evolution and individual development go hand in hand. Societies tend to foster individual development up to their normal level and hinder development beyond it and there is a relatively close correlation between an individual's expectable psychological development and a culture's "developmental center of gravity".

Wilber pays particular attention to the evolution of gender relations and the human relationship to the environment at each historical stage. In particular he points out, drawing on a significant body of feminist research, that, contrary to popular assumptions, the historical inequality of women cannot be attributed solely to male domination and oppression. Rather it is also attributable in part to biological factors such as differential strength, to economic-productive factors such as types of tools and modes of food acquisition, and to developmental stages and worldviews in which equality was not a salient feature or moral imperative. This allows him to view the emergence of liberation movements as a partial reflection of the emergence of rationality (and liberation from mere biological determinants of evolution), and to interpret the previous gender inequalities as a function of more than merely the male malevolence and female "sheepness" implied by some feminists.

It also allows him to draw some chilling conclusions about the possible nonegalitarian and gender divisive effects of new information technologies which are currently so male

dominated. I had simply assumed that women's liberation was a largely irreversible evolutionary dynamic. Wilber, however, points to the power of a culture's techno-economic base in determining its social hierarchy, and argues that there is no guarantee that future technologies will necessarily foster equality, a concern which seems to have been largely overlooked by feminists.

Transpersonal Development

Piaget's "formal operational" stage of individual cognitive development and the rational worldview are the highest individual and cultural levels that are widely recognized by conventional mainstream science. However, Wilber goes on to point to evidence for the existence of higher stages and potentials latent in each of us. The first of these he calls "vision-logic", which is a kind of network logic able to envision multiple relationships among individual concepts simultaneously. Of course Wilber is not alone here; several developmental researchers--such as Bruner, Flavell, Arieti and Gebser--have suggested a similar stage. Wilber is unique, however, in recognizing a similar stage in the developmental maps offered by contemplatives such as Plotinus and the great Indian philosopher-sage Aurobindo.

Beyond vision-logic, for Wilber, lie a further four major stages which he calls *psychic*, *subtle*, *causal* and *nondual*. These are transpersonal stages inasmuch as the self sense now begins to expand beyond the personal--what Alan Watts so picturesquely called "the skin encapsulated ego"--to encompass aspects, or even the whole, of humankind, life, the internal and external universe, and consciousness itself.

Wilber associates his psychic, subtle, causal and nondual stages with four types of mysticism: nature, deity, formless and nondual, and suggests as exemplars of each of these Ralph Waldo Emerson, St. Teresa, Meister Eckhart and Ramana Maharshi.

"Psychic" seems an unfortunate choice of term, being loaded with so much semantic baggage. However, as Wilber uses it, it has nothing to do with ESP or other psi phenomena. Rather, it refers to an initial transpersonal stage at which experience is still largely somatically based, such as in the experiences of kundalini energy or of the divinity of nature.

By the time the subtle levels have emerged, experience is more interior and concerned with subtle experiences of light and sound (shabd and nad yoga) or archetypal imagery,

for example, the shaman's power animals, the Hindu's Ishta Deva, the Christian contemplative's sacred figures. At the causal level all form and experiences drop away leaving only pure consciousness, such as the Buddhist's nirvana, the Vedantin's nirvikalpa samadhi, the Gnostic's abyss. Finally, at the nondual culmination, phenomena reappear but are immediately and spontaneously recognized as projections, expressions, or manifestations of consciousness and as none other than consciousness. This is the Hindu's sahajsamadhi and Zen's "form is emptiness".

Thus far, Wilber has traced evolution from early humanoids to postmodernism, and individual development from infancy to the nondual, and has correlated these with the developmental/evolutionary profiles of a host of related phenomena such as worldviews, morality, identity, gender relations and ecological relations, among others. Clearly it seems time to finish the book and have a beer. Not so! For Wilber this is only part one of the book and only half the picture: namely the ascending half or "the path of ascent". In part two he traces another movement, "the path of descent". And it is the divorce of these two that Wilber claims to be one of the most fundamental of all Western dualisms.

Ascent and Descent

For Wilber, the two Western exemplars of philosopher-sages who have integrated the paths of ascent and descent are Plato and Plotinus. Plato, for example, maps out a path of ascent toward "the Good" in *The Republic* and *The Symposium*. From this perspective the Platonic Good is a direct mystical experience of the causal realm--beyond qualities and manifestations, and therefore transrational and transverbal--beside which the physical world is merely a cave of shadows. This is a classical description, perhaps *the* classical Western description, of ascent to the causal level. And this ascent and escape from the world became the archetypal Western goal.

Many critics assume Plato was only an ascender. However, a more careful reading reveals that Plato maps out both the paths of ascent and of descent. Having ascended to the Good he then reverses course. The world is now seen as an expression or an embodiment of the transcendent and indeed at its consummation: "a visible sensible God". The Self-sufficing perfection of the Good is also a Self-projecting, Self-emptying fecundity. The Good is therefore not only the summit and goal of life but also the source and ground of the world, with which it is co-essential. And the source is made "more

complete” by manifestation. Plato therefore integrates ascent and descent in the classic nondual stance found in both East and West which Wilber summarizes as:

Flee the many, find the One

Embrace the Many as the One

In the East, disentangling oneself from the world and realizing the One is equated with wisdom. Subsequently descending and returning to embrace the Many is equated with compassion, and the integration of ascent and descent is “the union of wisdom and compassion”.

From this nondual perspective, the world and the flesh are not evil or degraded. However, becoming entranced by them, that is, becoming entrapped in maya, illusion--what psychologist Charles Tart calls the consensus trance--and thereby losing awareness of the transcendental domains and our unity with them is disastrous. Once lost, the challenge is to regain this awareness through a discipline of “recollection” that opens “the eye of the soul” (Plato), “the eye of the heart” (Sufism) or “the eye of Tao” (Taoism). The goal is an illusion-shattering wisdom that recognizes our true transcendental nature and is variously known as Hinduism’s jnana, Buddhism’s prajna, Islam’s marifah and sometimes as Christian gnosis.

The Platonic integration of ascent and descent was continued by Plotinus, in whom, according to St. Augustine, “Plato lived again”. He created a vast synthetic vision drawing on diverse traditions and grounded in his own mystical experience. His was the first comprehensive version of the great chain of being, a view that sees the cosmos as a vast hierarchy of existence extending from the physical through various subtle mental realms to the realm of pure consciousness or spirit.

As Wilber makes clear, what is crucial is that the systems of Plato and Plotinus, and similar Eastern philosopher-sages such as Aurobindo, are not primarily philosophies or metaphysics. Rather they are descriptions of direct replicable, phenomenological apprehensions arising in people who have developed to requisite stages. However all too often they have been interpreted as “mere metaphysics”.

For Plato, Plotinus, and Aurobindo, during developmental ascent each stage subsumes or envelops lower stages. The process of ascent, according to Plato, is driven by eros, the drive to find greater and greater unions. Complementarily, for Plotinus, at

each stage of ascent the lower has to be embraced so that eros is balanced with agape (love and concern for the lover). The vision of a multidimensional kosmos, as the Greeks originally called it, interwoven by ascending and descending currents of love, would be a central theme of all subsequent neo-Platonic schools and would exert a profound influence on thought up to and beyond the Enlightenment.

But according to Wilber both eros and agape can go astray when they are not integrated in the individual, ideally by direct experience of the causal One.

Wilber suggests that the great Sigmund Freud represents a paradigmatic example of this divorce of eros and agape. Freud himself finally postulated two drives--eros and thanatos--and suggested that the aim of eros is “to establish unity.” For Freud much human misery results from the battle or conflict between the powers of ascent and descent. But Freud did not carry ascent to its transpersonal conclusions in union with the One. In fact he denigrated and pathologized such attempts as neurotic immaturities, thus confusing transpersonal progression with prepersonal regression, a confusion that Wilber calls the “pre/trans fallacy”. Hence he gave us a truncated vision of human possibilities and his prognosis for humankind was eternal conflict.

The misunderstanding or even pathologizing of development beyond conventional levels to transpersonal stages is tragically typical of the West. In much of the East, causal and nondual realization were recognized and acknowledged as the summit of psychological-spiritual development. Sages such as Nagarjuna and Shankara elaborated these realizations into highly sophisticated philosophies of madhyamika Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta respectively, which co-existed and harmonized with mythological interpretations. Individuals could thus draw inspiration from either philosophy or mythology or both according to their interests, capacities and development. However in the West, mythic-level Christianity became institutionalized and dominant as “The Church” which declared its own mythic-level interpretations alone as true, and higher transrational interpretations as blasphemous.

This is a specific example of the general principle that stages higher than one’s own tend to be misunderstood, pathologized and viewed as threatening. Wilber focuses on Christianity, but similar confusion and ambivalence toward mysticism seem characteristic of other traditions which fix final authority in a historical text and are therefore

embarrassed by breakthroughs of new mystical insights. Thus Judaism has largely downplayed its mystical dimensions for centuries while there has long been tension between conventional Islam and its mystical wing of Sufism.

There are now growing efforts to revitalize contemplative practices and wisdom in each of these traditions. However, this revitalization comes at the end of a millennium in which the possibility of awakening was effectively blocked in the West and to this day mysticism remains widely misunderstood in Western culture.

Of course, the drive to transcendence could not be completely overwhelmed. Periodically there arose spectacular individuals--St. Augustine, Meister Eckhart, Dame Julian, St. Teresa, the Rhineland mystics and more--in whom transcendence triumphed over institutional barriers and who thereby faced themselves and the Church with the difficult and dangerous task of reconciling conventional mythology with transconventional realization. However, despite the profound insights of such mystics, the power of conventional myth (for example, Church dogma) largely reigned supreme until the rise of modernity and the empirical scientific outlook during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Ego and Eco Perspectives

For Wilber modernity is marked by two major trends which represent the good news and the bad news of this period. The good news, from the viewpoint of modernity, is the superseding of myths by rationality and the demand for empirical evidence. The bad news is that ascent was equated with the mythic and the cry of “no more myths” became effectively “no more ascent”.

With the denial of the possibility of the developmental ascent, attention turned downward to the world; instead of an infinite above, there was now a horizontal infinite ahead. The universe was no longer seen as a great multidimensional holarchy of being. Rather it became an “ontological flatland” or great interlocking order, to be investigated by merely empirical (right hand) approaches only. This overlooking of the left-hand internal quadrants and reducing phenomena to their right-hand external dimensions alone constitutes what Wilber calls subtle reductionism. (See figure above). With the left-hand quadrants gone, so too are the grounding and validity of subjective phenomena such as

values, meaning and purpose. The result is a barren meaningless flatland that has also been described as a “dedivinized”, “disqualified” or “disenchanted” world.

This worldview presented philosophers with a problem, the so-called central problem of modernity: namely the nature of human subjectivity and its relation to the world. The rational ego might say it was merely a strand in the great web of life, but that reduced the subjective to the empirical--reduced the left- to the right-hand quadrants. Now the question of the good life was whether to seek either autonomous agency of the rational ego generating its own morals and aspirations separate from the brute drives of nature, or on the other hand to seek communion with the natural world by connecting and communing with nature including its vital, sensual and sexual elements. This tension Wilber refers to as the conflict between the ego camp and the eco camp.

Immanuel Kant is the exemplar of the ego camp. For him the rational ego, the moral subject, is free only to the degree he or she disengages from the pulls of egocentric desire and of lower social forces, and becomes effectively autonomous. Thus arose the subjective part of the enlightenment paradigm, the so-called self-defining subject, the autonomous ego, disengaged self, philosophy of the subject, or self-sufficient subjectivity.

The problem with the cruder forms of the ego camp was their over-emphasis on the right-hand empirical representation of knowledge which focuses on surfaces, ignores interiority, and avoids dimensions of meaning, value and purpose.

The eco camp on the other hand felt, quite reasonably, that this paradigm of knowledge left the subject split from and alien, monochromatic world. The eco camp therefore argued for a return to nature so that the “living sources” of human existence could be recontacted and renewed. Consequently the appropriate mode of knowing was held to be not disinterested thought but powerful feeling, and the best means of expression and enhancing participation with nature were felt to be poetry and art.

The problem for the eco camp was just how to insert the self back into the stream of life without losing the benefits of reason. This proved particularly problematic since these thinkers tended to confuse differentiation and dissociation. Thus the developmental and evolutionary differentiation of the prerational fusion of self and world was seen not as a

necessary development phase allowing subsequent higher order integration--but rather as a pathological process leading to paradise lost.

As with all things, both the ego and eco projects eventually faltered under the weight of their own limitations. The rational ego camp sought freedom from egocentric motives, natural impulses and conventional social domination. However, in doing so it often alienated, repressed and dissociated other goods including transpersonal experiences and the prepersonal domain of *élan vital*, body and sensuality.

The eco camp, however, sought freedom from excessive objectivity, autonomy and instrumentality. However, it ended up overvaluing emotional, irrational impulses and effectively saw nature as the source of sentiment rather than as the embodiment of Spirit as had Plato and Plotinus.

The Spirit of Evolution

The ego-eco conflict, expressed as absolute subject and absolute object, was a major intellectual project around the beginning of the nineteenth century. For Wilber, the resolution of this conflict was provided by the philosophy of Friedrich Schelling. For Schelling, the Enlightenment had differentiated mind and nature, but had largely forgotten the transcendental ground of both. Thus for Schelling, nature is objective Spirit, mind subjective Spirit. These two can be seen as totally unrelated, as the ego and eco camps had tended to do, but these two “apparent absolutes” are synthesized in the third great movement of Spirit.

According to both Schelling and Hegel, Spirit goes through three major phases. It first emanates or manifests as objective evolving nature. It then awakens to itself in subjective mind, and finally recovers its original identity in nondual awareness in which subject and object, mind and nature are unified. These idealists seem to have managed genuine glimpses of the nondual and some of its manifestations and implications. But the German idealism of Schelling and Hegel barely outlived its founders. Shortly after their deaths it was dismissed on logical and philosophical grounds as “mere metaphysics”.

However, Wilber suggests that its failure may lie more in practical than in purely philosophical causes. He emphasizes the enormous difference between obtaining spontaneous glimpses and securing sustained vision or even obtaining significant glimpses at will. Many contemplative traditions speak of two distinct tasks: first, of

obtaining an initial, transient breakthrough glimpse--a “peek” experience--and second of being able to reproduce this glimpse at will and even stabilize it as an enduring vision. The challenge is to make a spontaneous experience a voluntary experience, to extend a peek experience into a plateau experience, or as the religious scholar Huston Smith put it so eloquently “to transform flashes of illumination into abiding light”.

This transformation requires a rigorous, authentic contemplative discipline and the German idealists had none. Consequently they were unable to offer a means by which other explorers could reproduce their insights which were thus largely unfalsifiable. By contrast, Asian idealists such as Shankara and Yogacara Buddhists offered both an art of transcendence by which practitioners could glimpse and then stabilize an experience of the nondual, and idealistic philosophies that have endured over centuries to articulate the insights that emerge.

Darwinian theory also exerted a chilling effect on the German idealist vision of evolution. Natural selection allowed science to deny any sort of eros or transcendent/emergent drive in nature. More recently this denial has been called into question because it is now apparent that although Darwinian natural selection may account for microevolution, it cannot account for macroevolution: the great evolutionary leaps and breakthroughs such as the production of eyes or functional wings.

In addition, the mind stretching investigations of the Big Bang are now pushing knowledge back to the absolute temporal limit dictated by Planck’s constant, which is the first 10^{43} rd of a second. These findings indicate that the laws of physics were operative from the earliest conceivable instant. Materialistic explanations have a very hard time accounting for this, so the Big Bang has changed many reflective people into philosophical idealists. In light of all this, it is therefore not surprising that Wilber regards the creation of an adequate idealism as one of the essential challenges for the contemporary West.

The net result of these cosmological and evolutionary discoveries is that many philosophers of science now acknowledge some sort of self-transcendent drive in evolution. One of the major effects of Darwinian theory was thus not that it discovered a mechanism of macroevolution--it did not--but rather that for so long it obscured the

recognition that an authentic evolutionary theory must acknowledge some self-transcendent drive akin to eros in the cosmos.

Wilber suggests that this self-transcendent drive is beginning to move increasing numbers of people beyond the conventional developmental level of rationality into transrational, transpersonal stages. He argues that the evolution of this process can be facilitated or hindered by the degree of sensitivity with which these intuitions of transpersonal stages are unpacked. All interiority and subjectivity must be interpreted, and the quality of this interpretation is vitally important to the birth of successive depths of that interiority. The types of error to which this unpacking and interpretation are prone can be categorized according to which of the four quadrants they emphasize or overemphasize.

Many people intuit higher stage experiences in purely upper left-hand quadrant (individual, subjective) terms. This interpretation focuses on subjective phenomena such as the “higher self”, “pure awareness”, omitting the lower left-hand and both right-hand quadrants--namely the cultural and social, and all objective manifestations. This effectively omits from consideration appropriate types of community activity and service demanded by higher stages and the appropriate techno-economic infrastructures necessary for supporting them.

A particularly unfortunate result can be the assumption that higher stage realizations free one from concern with the world. By contrast, deeper insights and understanding make clear that higher development necessarily entails embracing and serving the world which is no longer seen as separate from one’s Self. The challenge therefore is not just to contact the higher self but to see it “embraced in culture, embodied in nature, and embedded in social institutions”.

On the other hand, others interpret their higher stage intuitions primarily in objective terms, describing spirit as the sum total of all phenomena or the great web. This right-handed systems interpretation results in a descended flatland worldview that tends to ignore the left-hand quadrants of “I” and “we” dimensions. Consequently, while this view urges the embrace of all life, it usually does not understand the degree of inner transformation essential for this embrace, let alone the transformations required for union with the Good and the recognition of the world as “a living sensible God”. An

unfortunate result is a descendent worldview that confuses Spirit with the sum total of shadows in the cave.

Thus for Ken Wilber, further individual development, cultural integration, ecological preservation and recognition of our true nature require appreciation of the possibility of development to transpersonal stages, a practice to realize them, and use all four quadrant to express them. Only by such a comprehensive vision, he says, can the spirit of evolution reach its fulfillment in us and through us. Though it will doubtless be amended and refined, Wilber's vision seems a major contribution to this process.

Notes & References

1. K. Wilber, *The Spectrum of Consciousness* (Quest, 1977).
2. K. Wilber, *The Atman Project* (Quest, 1980).
3. K. Wilber, *Up From Eden: A Transpersonal View of Human Evolution* (Doubleday, 1981).
4. K. Wilber, *A Sociable God* (McGraw-Hill, 1983). K. Wilber, *Eye to Eye: The Quest for the New Paradigm* (Anchor Doubleday, 1983); K. Wilber, *Quantum Questions: Mystical Writings of the World's Great Physicists* (Shambhala, 1984); D. Anthony, B. Ecker & K. Wilber (eds.), *Spiritual Choices* (Paragon House, 1987); K. Wilber, J. Engler, & D. Brown (eds.), *Transformations of Consciousness* (Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1986).
5. K. Wilber, *Grace and Grit* (Shambhala, 1991).
6. For another excellent discussion of contemporary criticisms of hierarchies and possible responses see D. Rothberg, "Philosophical Foundations of Transpersonal Psychology: An Introduction to Some Basic Issues", *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 18(1986):1-34.

1
2
3
4
5
6