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Developmental and Evolutionary Synthesis in the Recent Writings of Ken Wilber

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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 that the appearance of the book *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, which seemed to offer just such a synthesis—even though written by a young unknown author, Ken Wilber (1977), who was not even formally trained as a psychologist—was greeted with such excitement. 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 soon followed. In *The Atman Project*, Wilber (1980) integrated diverse developmental theories, again of both East and West, into a unified view that traced development from infancy into normal adulthood and then beyond into the postconventional stages "beyond normality" described by diverse contemplative disciplines. In *Up from Eden* (1981), 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 physics soon followed so that by 1987 he had created an interdisciplinary collection of rare scope and integrative power (Wilber 1981, 1983, 1984, 1991; Wilber, Engler, and Brown 1986; Anthony, Ecker, and Wilber 1987).[1]

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* (1991), 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."

Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution (1995) is a massive, eight-hundred-page work which is volume I of a planned three-volume series. For those daunted by the size (and weight) of this volume, Wilber also offers a briefer (a mere three hundred pages), simpler version, *A Brief History of Everything* (1996), written in dialogue form.

The aim of these two books 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. Human evolution—of brain and mind, society and culture—is traced from early hominids to today and related to phenomena such as the evolution of gender relationships, human relationship to the earth, technology, philosophy, religion, and more.

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 not only providing a far-reaching vision but also in grounding that vision in contemporary research in fields such as cosmology, biology, anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and ecology.

Its vast scope and scholarship come 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. In a three-month-long, interdisciplinary graduate seminar that I led at the University of California, all of us found that

the book's scope, together with the sheer richness and profusion of ideas, made it hard to grasp the whole vision in a single reading.

The reason is not that 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. While the simpler *Brief History* is less problematic, the number of ideas it contains is still impressive.

The major purpose of this article is, therefore, to offer an overview that may give a sense of the whole gestalt or vision and thereby provide a framework allowing easier and more retentive reading. Consequently, this is more of an overview than a detailed critical review. The books cover so many topics that probably no one person could hope to give informed critiques on all of them, and doing so would demand another book. I suspect that these books will be the topic of specialized critiques by disciplinary experts for several decades. What follows, then, is the central thread, shorn of numerous intriguing byways, arguments, and in the case of *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, 240 pages of detailed footnotes, many of them mini-essays on topics ranging from cosmology to postmodernism.

Our Fractured World View

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

Wilber explores the nineteenth-century scientific origins of this fractured world view 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, none was 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 apparent 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, chaos 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 something of a dirty word in some circles, and some critics claim that all hierarchy necessitates ranking or dominating that oppresses, marginalizes, or destroys. It is not uncommon to hear the cry that we need to do away with all hierarchies. However, as Wilber points out, this cry conflates different types of hierarchies—for example, value hierarchies and ontological hierarchies, pathological and healthy—and is an example of what philosophers call a "performative contradiction" since the preference for nonhierarchies over hierarchies is itself a hierarchical value judgment. Indeed, we cannot dispense with hierarchies; they are inherent in nature and 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 systems context, hierarchy is simply a ranking of phenomena according to their holistic capacity. As such, it does not necessarily entail value hierarchies, and domination and oppression can be seen as pathological expressions rather than inherent components of hierarchy. For another excellent discussion of contemporary criticisms of hierarchies and possible responses, see Donald Rothberg (1986).

Having rehabilitated the concept of hierarchy, or *holarchy*, as he prefers to call it, 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 that implies that every entity and phenomenon in the universe is neither merely a whole nor a part, but both simultaneously.

Using the concepts of hierarchy and holon, 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 the biosphere or Gaia. At first glance this move seems very neat, organic, and egalitarian. Humans are now intimately linked to, and on a more or less equal footing with, all other forms of life.

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 largely unpredictable from the properties of its constituent atoms and cannot be described in terms of atoms. Likewise, the water molecule is not contained in its atoms (the water molecule and the properties of order of its constituent atoms are not part of 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). The biosphere is of a different ontological order, and life has properties and capacities that seem to defy description simply in terms of the movements of molecules. Likewise, the noosphere (the realm of sentient life) is not simply *in* the biosphere. That is, the noosphere is not an ontological component of the larger whole called biosphere but is an emergent. Rather, parts of the physiosphere and biosphere are actually components of sentient life and ontologically the noosphere thus cannot be reduced to, or considered merely as, a strand of the biosphere. Thus, contrary to popular assumptions (based primarily on relative size), aspects of the biosphere constitute *part* (the physical and biological levels but not the mental level) of the human. Humans are therefore compound individuals composed of all three levels and cannot be regarded simply as strands of the biosphere, which comprises only the physical and biological levels.

This is a difficult but important argument that can only be sketched briefly here. The key is to shift from thinking spatially (e.g., the biosphere fits into the larger space of the physiosphere) to thinking ontologically (aspects of the physiosphere constitute a component or part of the ontologically richer biosphere). This perspective appears to resolve a number of puzzles that have plagued ecological thinking, such as how one can simultaneously accord greater value to some forms of life, including humans, than to others while simultaneously honoring all life. Wilber argues at length that this perspective is not antiecological, 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.

Interiority

The schemes and hierarchies considered so far all deal exclusively with exteriors since general systems theories try to be empirically based. Hence, they almost entirely overlook interiority or subjectivity. In addition, since systems theories are empirical, the general principles they derive from all types of systems do indeed hold across the range of systems, including physical, biological, and psychological, as all of these have physical components. However, the price of this inclusiveness is that they necessarily cover only the lowest-common-denominator properties. Higher order biological and noetic systems, while following lower order physical principles, also follow additional principles, and no physical laws can account for the likes of art, language, and love. Thus 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 to be at least capable of mapping, *all* domains of reality.

The Four Quadrants

Wilber wants to expand this view. He argues that comprehensive approaches need to include not only objective studies of the external behavior of individual holons, but also studies 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 (figure 1).

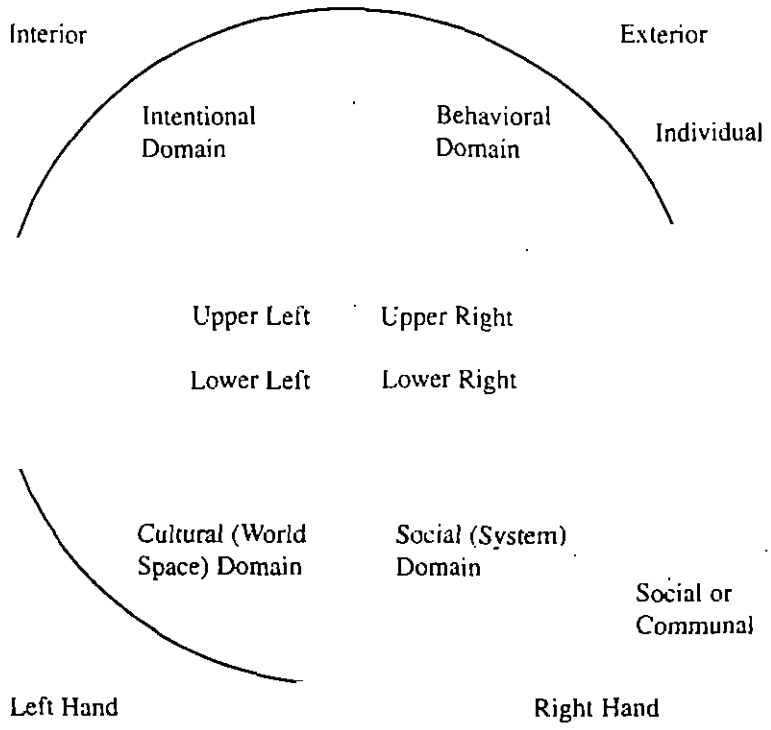
Right-hand disciplines or paths study neutral surfaces or observable behavior. Traditionally, they use empirical, objective epistemologies and objective "it" language, make propositional truth claims, and employ the validity criterion of truth (the match between map and territory). In the right-hand quadrants there are two camps: the atomists in the upper right quadrant, who study individuals, and the wholists in the lower right quadrant, who study larger systems.

The left-hand approach or path studies interiors that cannot be seen empirically (except indirectly, where some of their components may be embedded in material expressions such as art). Rather, this interiority requires interpretation of meaning in "I" and "we" language that is dialogical, experiential, and subjective (or intersubjective). Research here necessarily involves dialogue as opposed to the monological (one-way) experimental observation of exteriors of the right-hand path. For the upper left-hand quadrant of individuals, the validity criterion here is not truth but, following the work of German social philosopher Jürgen Habermas, sincerity. In the lower left-hand social-cultural quadrant, the question is one of cultural fit, and the validity criterion is not truth or sincerity but appropriateness, justness, intersubjective mesh, and/or mutual understanding.

Wilber argues that both left- and right-

> Wilber regards the creation of an adequate idealism as one of the essential challenges for the contemporary West.

Figure 1. The Four Quadrants.



hand approaches are valuable and essential for balance and completeness because each holon has these four dimensions. When, as has all too often been the case, the right-hand approach is used exclusively, the result is ignorance, polarity, and reductionism, which are all the worse because their incompleteness usually goes unrecognized. All four quadrants are then reduced to the two right-hand quadrants, a process that Wilber calls *subtle reductionism*. Some theorists—for example, the Epicureans and atomists—go even further by attempting to explain all phenomena and higher order structures purely in terms of upper right-hand quadrant atomic/molecular components. This atomic reductionism Wilber calls *gross reductionism*.

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 some 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 world view.

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. This individual development 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 world views 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." For example, drawing on both his own earlier work and the research of Jürgen Habermas, Wilber correlates a magic-animistic world view with an average individual cognitive development at Piaget's preoperational level, a mythological world view with concrete operational, and a rational world view with individual development centered around Piaget's highest or formal operational stage. This is of course a controversial claim, and in extensive footnotes Wilber attempts to counter potential criticisms. These criticisms come from cultural relativists (who claim that we cannot make valid cross-cultural evaluative comparisons because to do so means privileging one culture's value system over another's) and critics of certain forms of the "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" thesis (which claims that individual development follows or recapitulates species evolution) (Winkelman 1990, 1993).

Wilber pays particular attention to the evolution of gender relations and the human relationship to the environment at each historical stage. Drawing on a significant body of feminist research, he particularly points out 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 world views 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 to interpret the previous gender inequalities as a function of more than merely the male malevolence and female timidity 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 that 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 technoeconomic base in determining its social hierarchy and argues that there is no guarantee that future technologies, such as computers and the Internet, will necessarily foster equality, a concern which seems to have been largely overlooked by feminists.

Transpersonal Development

The formal operational stage of individual cognitive development and the rational world view 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*, 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.

Before describing these stages in detail, Wilber handles common objections that have been raised about the value and validity of transpersonal experiences. For example, it has been claimed that since transpersonal states are private and interior they cannot be publicly validated and therefore cannot be researched. However, Wilber points out that this is no more true for transpersonal research than for any and all nonempirical endeavors, ranging from mathematics, literature, and linguistics to psychoanalysis and historical interpretation. No one has seen, nor will they ever empirically see, the square root of minus one, but that does not stop it from being a valuable, in fact invaluable, tool for mathematics.

For Wilber then, transpersonal experiences are simply the higher developmental stages of the upper left-hand quadrant. These involve interior experiences known by direct acquaintance that can be objectively described but only adequately comprehended by a community of people at the same developmental depth, capable of interpreting at that same depth. At any developmental stage, higher stages and their worlds are effectively invisible or at least partly incomprehensible. This is effectively a restatement—now couched in developmental terms—of the principle of *adequatio*, which states that we only see or appreciate those aspects of reality to which we are adequate. As Aldous Huxley (1945, viii) summarized the problem in *The Perennial Philosophy*, "knowledge is a function of being. When there is a change in the being of the knower, there is a corresponding change in the nature and amount of knowing." Talmudic wisdom puts it succinctly: "We do not see things as they are but as we are."

For Wilber, validity claims for transpersonal experiences, states, and stages are in essence no different from those in other realms. In any realm, testing knowledge claims involves three steps: injunction, observation, and confirmation. One is first given an injunction by those familiar with the phenomenon as to how to create the conditions in which to observe it; one then observes, and then tests one's observation against the observations of adequately developed and trained individuals. Contemplative paths designed to induce transpersonal experiences and stages possess all these three strands of valid knowledge accumulation and therefore are open to the falsifiability criteria of all genuine knowledge. That is, they set out the injunctions to practice this discipline; then you can carefully observe your own experience, and finally test your observations against those of people at similar or more advanced stages.

Having handled these objections, Wilber then goes on to describe the psychic, subtle, causal, and nondual stages. These he associates with four types of mysticism: nature, deity, formless, and nondual and suggests as exemplars of each of these Emerson, St. Teresa, Meister Eckhart, and Ramana Maharshi.

Psychic seems an unfortunate choice of terms, 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 *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 Vedantist's *nirvakalpa 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 *sahaj-samadhi* and Zen Buddhist's "form is emptiness."

Needless to say, these advanced contemplative experiences can be very hard for most of us to conceive. To my mind the best metaphor for *sahaj-samadhi* is lucid dreaming, dreaming in which we know that we are dreaming. Such lucidity has been described by yogis for millennia, denied by psychologists for decades, but now is well validated by laboratory studies. Here what initially appeared to be an objective, solid, independent world impinging on a physical body on which one's life depends is recognized as a subjective, dependent projection of mind. And with that recognition the dreamer becomes lucid, the apparent victim of experience becomes it creator, and the suffering and anxiety that seemed so overwhelming are recognized as illusory. Such is said to be the mind-boggling central recognition of

both lucid dreaming and awakening to the nondual.

Thus far Wilber has traced evolution from early hominids 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 world views, 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 philosophers-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 that 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 called the union of wisdom and compassion.

From this nondual perspective, creation, 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 that is variously known as Hinduism's *jnana*, Buddhism's *prajna*, Islam's *ma'rifah*, 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 gradated 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. All too often, however, they have been interpreted as "mere metaphysics."

For Plato, Plotinus, and Aurobindo, during developmental ascent each stage subsumes or envelops lower stages. In so doing, development retraces in reverse order the stages of involution or manifestation by which the Great Chain of Being was said to be created. In the words of Heraclitus, "The way up is the way down, and the way down is the way up."

For Plato, the process of ascent 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 lower). This 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. Then *eros* can degenerate into *phobos*: aversion to, alienation from, and repression of lower levels of the Great Chain of Being and especially the world, the body, and sensuality.

Likewise *agape*—the pull to descent and embrace of the lower levels of the Great Chain—when divorced from and unbalanced by *eros*, can become *thanatos*. This is the flight from or denial of the higher levels and is manifested as developmental arrest, regression, and denial. One example of this might be what the psychologist Abraham Maslow called the *Jonah complex*: fear of our potential and greatness.

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 conclusion 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 Wil-

ber calls the *pre/trans fallacy*. Hence, Freud gave us a truncated vision of human possibilities, and his prognosis for humankind was eternal conflict.

This 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 Vendanta, respectively, which coexisted and harmonized with mythological interpretations. Individuals could thus draw inspiration from either philosophy or mythology or both according to their interests, capacities, and development. In the West, however, 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. Mythic Christianity, therefore, tended to condemn the higher stage expressions of rationalism (science and its demands for empiricism and evidence); psychic nature mysticism (because this made God seem too this-worldly); subtle level mysticism (which brought God and soul too close); and causal identity with the divine (which was enough to make one end up on a funeral pyre).

Of course Jesus himself had met a similar fate for his own causal realization that "The Father and I are one." But Jesus' own causal realization was interpreted by conventional theology not as a natural developmental potential available to us all, but rather as proof of his utterly unique nature and of divine intercession by God. Jesus himself was thus ontologically divorced from the rest of humanity as *the* Son of God—not only human but God and man—and the church would spend hundreds of years, split into dozens of sects, and snuff out thousands of lives arguing over his nature and his precise mix of God and man.

But no matter what formula finally won the day, Wilber points out that the net effect on spiritual development and evolution in the West was catastrophic. The possibility of causal realization for the rest of us was dismissed, liberation in this world was denied, and the whole realm of mysticism became ambivalent and at times downright embarrassing for the church. Of course the church was not alone in this embarrassment.

Wilber focuses on Christianity, but similar confusion and ambivalence toward mysticism seem characteristic of other traditions that 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, and there has long been tension between conventional Islam and its mystical wing of Sufism.

Fortunately, there are now growing efforts to revitalize contemplative practices and wisdom in each of these traditions. Unfortunately, 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, 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.

One of the earliest of these spiritual geniuses was St. Augustine who was an inheritor of the neo-Platonic tradition. For Augustine, self and God could be known through introspection. All can be doubted except one's immediate awareness, or soul as Augustine identified it, and this awareness is similar to Plato's "Spectator" and Plotinus's "ever-present wakefulness." Augustine found that in his immediate awareness there was no subject/object split and primal awareness was not separate from God; rather God was the ground of that awareness. This awareness was the source of Augustine's famous exclamation that "He who knows himself knows God," a claim repeated two centuries later by Mohammed. As Wilber points out, this realization is very similar to that of several Eastern traditions, and hence he describes it as a Western form of Vedanta, the great Indian tradition whose central realization was that "Atman (individual consciousness) and Brahman (universal consciousness or God) are one."

The daunting problem for Augustine, as for subsequent causal realizers, was how to accommodate his realization to the body of literal-concrete myths he had inherited and to which, as a good church man, he held allegiance. Of course the general problem was not new and represented the recurring dialectic of philosopher-sage versus mythology, a dialectic which extended back to ancient Greece. In Greece, the sages had either dismissed myth, which could prove lethal as Socrates discovered, or attempted to reinterpret it rationally as did Plato.

This problem and its attempted solution for Christianity were exemplified in the life of Origen, who lived in the third century and who has been described as the church's greatest theologian. Origen's solution was the allegorical method by which myth could be both negated and preserved. Thus for Origen, myth—which in this case meant much of the Old Testament—was to be interpreted on three levels: literally as historical fact; ethically for behavioral guidelines; and allegorically for mystical, spiritual, or transpersonal interpretations. This effectively allowed rational and transrational use of myth. Unfortunately, this reinterpretation did not sit well with the conventional church, as Origen discovered to his dismay, and myth largely reigned supreme until the rise of modernity.

Modernity

For Wilber, modernity is marked by two major trends that represent the good news and the bad news of this period. The good news of modernity is the supersession of myths by rationality and the demand for empirical evidence. The

bad news is that ascent was conflated with the mythic and the cry of "No more myths!" became effectively, "No more ascent!"

With the denial of the possibility of 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 empirical (right-hand) approaches only. This overlooking of left-hand internal quadrants and reducing of phenomena to their right-hand external dimensions alone constitutes what Wilber calls subtle reductionism. 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.

With empirical approaches and dimensions dominant, quality was now measured in terms of quantitative fit with the system or with "God's will." Substitute "Gaia" for "God's will" and one has the "new paradigm" of many contemporary ecophilosophers.

This world view 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, 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 it disengages from the pulls of egocentric desire and of lower social forces and is 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 overemphasis on the right-hand, empirical representation of knowledge that focuses on surfaces, ignores interiority, and avoids dimensions of meaning, value, and purpose. Thus, there emerged around the eighteenth century attempts to study and know the subject in objective "it" language terms. For the philosophers Habermas and Foucault, these objectifying "sciences of man" are pseudosciences that do not just study the objective dimensions of humankind but reduce humans to only these dimensions.

The eco camp, on the other hand, felt, quite reasonably, that this representational reflection paradigm of knowledge left the subject split from an 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 powerful feeling rather than disinterested thought, 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 humans 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 developmental differentiation phase allowing subsequent higher order integration, but rather as a pathological process (dissociation) leading to paradise lost.

Eco camp thinkers believed that something had gone terribly wrong historically. They therefore saw culture primarily as a distortion and eulogized earlier times and lifestyles. Medieval ages and classical Greece were early objects of veneration, but the same general principle of historical wistfulness continues to the present day. Today's ecofeminists tend to eulogize horticultural societies whereas what Wilber calls "ecomasculinists" may reach further back to the prehorticultural Eden of hunting-gathering tribal cultures.

Yet an unblinking look discloses an embarrassing number of facts that suggest that these times and tribes may have been considerably less than paradisiacal. Consider only that the inability to devastate the environment does not necessarily imply profound ecological wisdom, that slavery was taken for granted, and that the average life span was probably around thirty years, and the power of the rose-colored glasses through which these societies have been viewed seems quite impressive.

As with all things, both ego and eco projects eventually faltered under the weight of their own limitations (what Hegel called "contradictions" and Schelling described as "checking forces"). 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 "elan vital," body, and sensuality.

The eco camp, on the other hand, 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 ego-eco conflict was most clearly expressed philosophically in the contrasting views of Fichte and Spinoza. Fichte eloquently described the pure ego or infinite subject, a description similar in many ways to that of the Atman of Vedanta. From this view, autonomy, freedom, and Spirit were to be found in the absolute subject.

The eco camp, conversely, drew on somewhat dubious interpretations of Spinoza. Spirit was seen as the total objective system of the world into which ego was inserted. This too was an attempt to introduce Spirit but now found by radicalizing eco. An enormous amount of thought and effort went into the attempted integration of absolute subject and absolute object, of Fichte

and Spinoza. It was a major intellectual project around the beginning of the nineteenth century and, for Wilber, the solution was provided by Schelling.

The Spirit of Evolution

Schelling began by reacting to the Enlightenment notion that rationality alone is the acme of ascent. For him, the Enlightenment had differentiated mind and nature but had largely forgotten the transcendental ground of both. The scientific reflection paradigm of mind mirroring nature cleaved nature as object from reflecting self and subject, which also made humans objects to themselves.

For Schelling, this dissociation could not be healed by regression to childhood or to the immediacy of feeling but only by progression beyond reason to discover both mind and nature as different movements of one spirit manifesting in successive stages of evolutionary unfolding. As Hegel would put it, Spirit is not one apart from Many, but the very process of the One expressing itself in successive unfoldings as and through the Many.

Thus, for Schelling and Hegel, the absolute is both the alpha and the omega of development, both source and summit, and present in the evolutionary process as both *telos* and *eros*. Nature is now seen as "slumbering spirit" and all life as manifestation of Divine Life. With the emergence of mind, Spirit becomes self-conscious. 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 which is the trancendence of both and the radical union as "one absoluteness." This is the identity of subject and object, Spirit knowing itself as Spirit, and a glimpse of the nondual.

Thus, for both Schelling and Hegel, Spirit goes through three major phases. It first effluxes 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. Similar evolutionary stages—prepersonal, personal, and transpersonal—can be found in the East, most notably in Aurobindo.

It was Schelling who first conceived the very influential concept of alienation. For him, this meant Spirit losing itself in manifestation. This loss was the central source of human suffering and the overcoming of this was the purpose of evolution.

But German idealism 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.

These idealists seem to have managed genuine glimpses of the nondual and some of its manifestations and implications. However, there is an 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 peak 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 idealists had none. Consequently, they were unable to offer a means by which other explorers could reproduce their insights, which were thus largely unfalsifiable and dismissed as "mere metaphysics." By contrast, Asian idealists such as Shankara and Yogancara Buddhists offered both an art of transcendence by which practitioners could glimpse and then stabilize an experience of the nondual, as well as idealistic philosophies that have endured over centuries to articulate the insights that emerge.

Darwinian theory also exerted a chilling effect on the 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 can account for microevolution, it has a much more difficult time accounting for macroevolution: the great evolutionary leaps and breakthroughs such as the production of functional wings.

In addition, the mind-boggling 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} 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.[2] 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 quad-

rant (individual, subjective) terms only. This interpretation focuses on subjective phenomena such as the "higher self," "pure awareness," etc., omitting the We and It (the right- and lower left-hand) quadrants, namely the social, cultural, and 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 that 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 "it" terms, describing spirit as the sum total of all phenomena or the great web. This right-hand interpretation results in a descended flatland world view that tends to ignore the left-hand quadrants of the I and We dimensions. Consequently, while advocates of this view urge the embrace of all life, they usually do 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 descended world view 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 the use of all four quadrants 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 to be a major contribution to this process of evolution.

NOTES

1. For a collection of Wilber's articles, see R. Walsh and F. Vaughan (1993). For a review of his writings, see R. Walsh and F. Vaughan (1994).

2. For a summary of the major intellectual challenges of our time, see Wilber's article "Paths Beyond Ego in the Coming Decades" (Walsh and Vaughan 1993).

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