

Ken Wilber

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The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature (London: Continuum, 2005).

Drawing on thinkers ranging from Plotinus and Aurobindo to Hegel and Piaget, and grounding his own thought in extensive meditation practices, Ken Wilber synthesizes modern science and traditional spirituality to provide a progressive understanding of cosmic, biotic, human, and divine evolution. In *Up From Eden: A Transpersonal View of Human Evolution* (1981), Wilber describes the three basic modes of human development: prepersonal, personal, and transpersonal. The prepersonal characterizes societies oriented by magical and mythical modes of consciousness. Personal consciousness emerges in a few elite persons thousands of years ago and eventually culminated in the mental-egoic consciousness of Enlightenment modernity. Unfortunately, mental-egoic or personal consciousness often (but not always) involves dissociation of ego-mind from body, emotions, nature, female, and God. Mental-egoic consciousness entails heightened death-anxiety, which people (especially men) have sought to assuage through Atman projects that seek to make the mortal ego immortal. The technological domination of nature may be understood in part as such an Atman project. Although alienated and dissociated both from nature and from God, mental-egoic consciousness may continue its evolutionary trajectory toward the centauric stage, which reintegrates mind/body while recognizing the perspectival and thus partial character of worldviews. In subsequent transpersonal stages, humankind would experience the divine presence in all phenomena, thereby generating compassion for all

sentient beings. According to Wilber, all phenomena are manifestations of the Divine, the Alpha and Omega of cosmic history.

Despite the drawbacks of mental-egoic consciousness, Wilber maintains that worldwide achievement of it and the institutions related to it (including constitutional democratic government, freedom of inquiry, sustainable economic development) would have a dramatic positive impact on humanity's treatment of nature. Rational-democratic societies do not make war on one another; moreover, they can alter their practices in ways that avoid environmental catastrophe, thereby making possible the continuing evolution of consciousness needed for long-term well being of Earth and humankind.

In *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality (SES)* (1995) and *A Brief History of Everything* (1996), lays the groundwork for "integral" thinking. De-emphasizing his earlier emphasis on death anxiety and Atman projects, Wilber now seeks to unite the perennial idea of the Great Chain of Being, as informed by spiritual, cultural, social, and natural scientific evolutionary concepts, with a four-fold set of distinctions allegedly capable of analyzing all phenomena. Drawing on the notion of holons developed by Smuts and Koestler, Wilber maintains that virtually all phenomena are wholes from one perspective and parts from another. A cell in an organism, for example, is a whole that includes parts, but is also a part of the organism. Emphasizing that holonic evolution generates emergent qualities, Wilber divides the Kosmos into four grand domains: physiosphere, biosphere, noosphere and theosphere. The physiosphere includes the non-biological features of the universe, including the stars and planets that arose in the billions of years following the Big Bang. The biosphere, the domain of life, depends upon the much older and much vaster physiosphere, but involves features that transcend the physiosphere.

Finally, the biosphere gives rise to the noosphere, which includes complex sentient life such as mammals and humans. Again, the noosphere both depends on physiosphere and biosphere, but also transcends them, by exhibiting emergent characteristics, including self-consciousness, language, and rationality. The theosphere, which both includes and transcends the other three domains, refers to dimensions of consciousness that include what is traditionally understood by God.

In a controversial move, Wilber argues that just as the biosphere contains the physiosphere in the sense of comprising all its basic features (although plainly not its material expanse), so too the noosphere contains the biosphere in the sense of comprising all its basic features (although not its biotic mass), while adding new ones. Affirming that neither biosphere nor noosphere were “destined” to emerge on Earth, Wilber joins proponents of the anthropic principle in arguing that the cosmos is ordered such that biosphere and noosphere would eventually emerge somewhere.

To this vision of cosmic evolution, Wilber adds his four-quadrant analysis. The four quadrants are: Upper Left (UL), individual as experience internally; Upper Right (UR), individual as experienced externally; Lower Left (LL), collective as experienced internally; Lower Right (LR), collective as experienced externally. Consider how the four quadrants may be used to analyze someone purchasing tickets for a figure skating competition. Seen from UL, the activity is the first-person experience of someone eager to witness athletic and artistic prowess; seen from LL, the person shares certain cultural views about sport, artistic expression, and so on; seen from the UR, the object of investigation is an organism whose constituent parts obey natural laws and whose behavior accords with predictable patterns; from LR, the individual’s actions are

interpreted in terms of social, political, and economic categories. In SES, Wilber reduces the four quadrants to the Big Three: UR/LR, LL, and UL, which correspond to the topics of Kant's critiques of pure reason, practical reason, and judgment. According to Kant, Weber, and Habermas, modernity's triumph was to differentiate among domains (for example, religion, politics, art) that are collapsed together in premodern societies. Although the Big Three originally distinguished three legitimate modes of inquiry and behavior (natural science, politics/morality, and personal experience and aesthetic expression), eventually the UR/LR quadrants (natural and social sciences) marginalized the UL and LL quadrants, which take into account domains that can be understood only from the inside.

Wilber argues that a constructive, integral postmodernity will restore legitimacy to all four quadrants. Instead of viewing sentience as an accidental feature of the cosmos, integral thinking adheres to Whiteheadian panpsychism, according to which all phenomena—even atoms—have at least some meager interiority. Greater interior complexity confers higher moral status on entities. Because a cow screams louder than a carrot, many people have fewer moral qualms about eating the latter than the former.

Although endorsing the valid ecological concerns of deep ecologists, Wilber criticizes them for holding “retro-romantic” views involving worship of nature, especially when that “nature” in fact involves the same reductionistic materialism and systems theory that forms what Wilber calls “industrial ontology.” Authentic nature worship, as described by nature mystics such as Emerson, involves discerning that material nature is but the lowest-level manifestation of Nature, understood as creative Spirit. A vigorous opponent of naïve yearning for premodern social formations, while simultaneously a

critic of heedless technological exploitation of nature, Wilber affirms the dignity of modernity while acknowledging the crucial contributions of premodern peoples. Although his views are at times sharply contested, he is widely admired for his ambitious effort to integrate nature, humankind, and Spirit in order to form a constructive postmodernism that re-enchants the world without inviting personal and social regression.

Further Reading

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