

Ken Wilber's Critique of Ecological Spirituality

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After many noteworthy achievements, the environmental movement is being confronted by critics who challenge concepts whose validity used to be taken for granted by most environmentalists. First of all, and perhaps most startling, many ecological scientists no longer support the ecosystem model, to which environmentalists and friendly legislators have long appealed as the scientific basis for establishing environmental law and policy. Many ecologists now base their work on population dynamics, which assumes that large-scale natural processes are not functions of an overarching "system," but rather are the unintended effects of the decisions made by countless individual organisms seeking to maximize their fitness. In addition to denying that ecosystems exist, these ecologists add that natural processes--far from being characterized by stability, integrity, and balance--are characterized by chaos, constant flux, and relative unpredictability.¹ Indeed, disaster and violent change--such as hurricanes and forest fires--seem to be necessary factors in promoting healthy habitat. Important as these insights about environmental perturbations and population dynamics may be, caution must be exercised before accepting the contention that ecosystem thinking is scientifically impotent and irrelevant to contemporary thinking about ecological issues.

Such caution is warranted because, in view of these challenges to ecosystem ecology, some critics of environmentalism are now asking: If nature is subject to and even benefits from constant flux, should we not reconsider environmental policies that were designed to protect supposedly "fragile" ecosystems from human intervention? Isn't it even possible that human intervention into nature can have unintended consequences that are beneficial as well as harmful? Of course, many developers and industrialists raise such

questions primarily to justify their own plans to clear cut forests or to increase pollution levels. These days, however, the developers can at least claim to have science on their side, even though ecosystem scientists have scarcely thrown in the towel. Because of the enormous stakes involved in this shift away from ecosystem ecology, some environmentalists have been scrambling to find ways to rethink their own positions in light of that shift.²

A second challenge is directed at the presupposition that ecological problems are very serious and growing worse. A spate of recent books and articles have contested the gloom-and-doom projections that have characterized the environmental movement since the 1960s.³ Perhaps the Cold War's end, which lifted the "nuclear shadow" that had loomed over two generations, helps to explain a growing sense of optimism about environmental prospects, at least in some areas. Of course, some optimistic pronouncements are plainly part of a politically inspired anti-environmental backlash. Still, lay people without the time or expertise needed to assess the claims made by scientists representing environmental optimism, on the one hand, and environmental pessimism, on the other, face a difficult challenge when it comes to making a decision about the current environmental situation. For better or worse, many people are as skeptical about the claims of the Sierra Club as they are about the claims of Exxon.

These days, however, even well-known environmentalists such as Mark Sagoff argue we are not running out of raw materials, food, timber, or energy.⁴ As he notes, many environmentalists have simply not understood the extent to which market forces and human inventiveness either develop new ways of extracting/growing needed materials, or else find alternatives to materials that are becoming too expensive. Furthermore, far from requiring a decrease in wealth and material consumption, environmental well-being would seem to require an increase in such consumption on the part of underdeveloped countries. As wealth and consumption increase, in part because oppressive regimes are overthrown, human population growth wanes and the demand for environmental protection (including

preservation of animal habitat) waxes. These more optimistic assessments have the virtue of inspiring hope for the future. Nevertheless, many environmentalists insist that a future resulting from the combined consequences of economic globalization and human population growth will scarcely be benign.

In addition to the challenge to ecosystem ecology, and the challenge to pessimistic assessments of the environmental situation, yet a third conceptual challenge faces the environmental movement. This challenge, the subject of the present essay, is directed at those radical environmentalists, including some deep ecologists and ecofeminists, who believe that only a recovery of archaic and/or archetypal beliefs, including the sacredness of Gaia or Mother Earth, can forestall ecological catastrophe. In what follows, I will analyze these environmentalists in terms of the writings of Ken Wilber, one of the leading transpersonal thinkers. Wilber believes that today's ecological problems are in part symptoms of a spiritual crisis, but also holds that spiritually-oriented deep ecology (SDE) may not provide the understanding of spirit, humankind, and nature necessary for resolving global ecological problems. At first glance, the issue involved in this third challenge may seem less significant than the issues involved in the other two challenges. I agree with Wilber, however, that restoring a place for spirituality in the postmodern world is in fact a crucial ingredient in dealing with the serious personal, social, cultural, and political problems created by modernity. The question is: what kinds of spirituality are most appropriate at this moment?

Many spiritually-oriented deep ecologists (SDEs) explain the ecological crisis as the failure of modern people to revere the sacredness of nature.⁵ The West in particular is said to be governed by an arrogant anthropocentrism, subject-object or humanity-nature dualism, and a consumerist mentality, which act in concert to disclose nature as nothing but raw material for human ends. Some environmentalists maintain that a transformation of Christianity would help solve the ecological crisis, but many others contend that Christianity is anthropocentric and patriarchal, hence, profoundly implicated in Western "man's" attempt

to dominate nature.⁶ Many SDEs maintain that because modern ideals of “progress” have justified the destruction of nature as well as the domination of women, non-whites, and poor white males, Western “man” must abandon his anthropocentric pretensions and enter into a harmonious and respectful relationship with Gaia, understood sometimes as the interrelated whole of ecosystemic processes, and at other times as the all-inclusive and sacred Earth Mother. Ostensibly, because ancient peoples were more in tune with the sacred mysteries of Nature, revivifying archaic beliefs and practices might enable modern people to alter their dualistic-anthropocentric attitudes, restore contact with the divine forces of nature, and begin to behave in ways that promote ecological health, social harmony, and personal well-being.

Although not a major current in contemporary life, eco-paganism appeals to a number of people who have lost faith both in traditional religions and in the modern world view. There is no denying that modernity has created many problems, ranging from nuclear weapons and ecologically-destructive industries, to personal meaninglessness and social nihilism. Despite these drawbacks, modernity has also made important political, scientific, and economic gains for great numbers of people. My own experience with interpreting Heidegger’s thought and its relation to National Socialism has made me particularly sensitive to the dangers of anti-modernist philosophical and/or spiritual movements.⁷ Anti-modernist attitudes discernible in some eco-paganism have been criticized as reactionary by modernist ideologues, liberals and socialists alike, who recall that National Socialism was in part a neo-pagan revival and a radical “green” movement, which took dreadful steps to maintain the purity of German “blood and soil.” Moreover, Murray Bookchin has castigated deep ecologists, ecofeminists, and others for celebrating a mystical, neo-pagan spirituality, which in its American guise is largely ignorant of the green dimension of National Socialism.⁸ Bookchin acknowledges the positive achievements of modernity, even while criticizing it for tolerating hierarchical organizations that run counter to its own emancipatory agenda. Unfortunately, because he has no sympathy for genuine spiritual

concerns, included those correctly intuited by SDEs, neither Wilber nor I find his critique of eco-paganism satisfactory.

In my view, a critical appraisal of SDE must take seriously its spiritual dimension. First of all, such an appraisal would agree that there are serious (though, I would hope, not insurmountable) environmental problems, which arise in part because modern “man” is alienated from and exhibits an arrogant, ruthless attitude toward nature, corporeality, emotions, and the female. This appraisal would also hold that modernity’s interrelated ecological, social, cultural, economic, and political problems can be resolved by the further development of consciousness, although materialist modernity itself cannot adequately account for consciousness. Having acknowledged all this, the appraisal would express concern that the spiritual cosmology of some (by no means all) SDEs is misguided, incomplete, and potentially dangerous: misguided, because it tends to regard the Divine as wholly immanent in natural phenomena (the sacred “web of life”), thereby overlooking the transcendent aspect of the Divine; incomplete, because it fails to appreciate humankind’s role in the cosmic evolutionary process by which the Divine manifests itself as nature and then recovers itself by coming to consciousness through various creatures; and potentially dangerous, because at times it involves anti-modernist sentiments that fail to appreciate the positive political and material accomplishments of modernity.

Ken Wilber’s cosmology seeks to preserve the achievements of modernity, while simultaneously criticizing its undeniable shortcomings; moreover, he acknowledges the genuine spiritual thirst and ecological concerns of SDEs, while emphasizing the need for a more adequate understanding of “spirit.” Perhaps the most striking (and controversial) aspect of Wilber’s critique of SDE is his claim that it exhibits a one-dimensional, “flatland” ontology that has much in common with the modernity of which radical environmentalism is otherwise so critical. Wilber’s criticism of SDEs “retro-romanticism” is sometimes quite caustic. Although I myself prefer that he would use a kinder, gentler rhetoric, he maintains that his cutting remarks are motivated by his concern that some SDEs

inadvertently impede environmentalism. They do so, in his view, by promoting views which are so problematic and politically suspect, that mainstream thinkers and actors can readily dismiss both that modernity has serious spiritual shortcomings, and that such shortcomings play a role in generating ecological problems.

Here, I should like immediately to emphasize that there are SDEs who agree that the Divine involves both an immanent and a transcendent dimension. Some of these SDEs, including deep ecologists and ecofeminists, as well as thinkers from outside these traditions, have important insights that need to be widely understood. Instead of dismissing most SDEs as naive and dangerous, as Wilber often does, I believe that a more respectful dialogue is called for. Despite the overall importance of his spiritual cosmology, Wilber's critical analysis of spiritually-oriented deep ecology is marred by a tendency to depict it with a broad brush that blurs valid distinctions among various instances of deep ecology, ecofeminism, neo-paganism, and so on.

Wilber's own version of eco-spirituality acknowledges the inherent worth of all beings, emphasizes humankind's dependence on the well-being of the biosphere, and insists that conscious awareness places humankind higher on the cosmic "holarchy" than other (known) beings. Influenced by thinkers such as Plotinus, Schelling, and Aurobindo, Wilber maintains that humankind is one aspect of the evolutionary processes by which spirit returns to self-consciousness after having emptied itself into matter-energy at the Big Bang. In his view, the solution to modernity's inadequate conception of the relation among spirit, nature, and humankind lies not in returning to pre-modern social relations and religious beliefs, but rather in moving ahead to a mode of awareness that reintegrates what modernity has dissociated.

The following examination of Wilber's critique of and alternative to eco-paganism will restrict itself to two interrelated issues. First, I present Wilber's contention--one that challenges the orthodoxy of many environmentalists--that even though humankind is dependent on the biosphere (or Gaia), in an important sense humankind is not included in

the biosphere. That is, human consciousness cannot be understood solely in terms of the physical and biological phenomena that preceded it and on which it continues to depend. Seeking to renovate the neo-Platonic “great chain of being,” which he now calls the “great holarchy of being,” he maintains that reverence for nature involves acknowledging genuine differences among holonic levels, rather than ignoring them as part of an impulse to “return” to an undifferentiated unity with nature. Second, Wilber argues that much of radical environmentalism exhibits its own version of modernity’s one-dimensional ontology, despite radical ecology’s critique of other aspects of modernity. According to Wilber, the modern effort to conquer nature and the environmentalist effort to reconnect with it are misguided efforts to deal with the central problem of modernity: the lack of a place for subjectivity in a cosmos understood solely in terms of physical processes.

In Up From Eden (1981), Wilber maintains that death denial and dissociation play central roles in modern man’s efforts to control nature. In more recent works, however, including Sex, Ecology, Spirituality (SES) and A Brief History of Everything (BHE), he gives greater emphasis to a different condition that gives rise to ecological problems.⁹ In my reading, Wilber believes that the human subject, having lost its place in the cosmos, desperately tries to reassert its importance by developing technological agency. According to Wilber, SDEs may rebuke the striving for such agency, but their own yearning for contact with nature can be understood as yet another way of coping with the same perceived loss of a place for human subjectivity in the modern cosmos. Let us begin our examination of Wilber’s critique of eco-paganism by considering his challenge to a staple presupposition of many environmentalist, namely, that humanity is included within the biosphere.

Holonic Hierarchy

In SES, Wilber offers a cosmology that seeks to rehabilitate the concept of hierarchy, which many environmentalists criticize for justifying not only the domination of one class of humans by another, but also the exploitation of nature by various human

groups. Some SDEs portray the biosphere as the sacred whole that gives birth to us and sustains us, thereby meriting our reverence and care. Even if there were a cosmic hierarchy, humans would by no means be at the top. As an alternative to hierarchical models, many environmentalists use the model of the interdependent “web of life,” of which all species are threads.¹⁰ Discounting the adequacy of the web of life model, Wilber promotes instead the idea of a “holonic” cosmic hierarchy. A holon (Arthur Koestler’s term) includes within itself features of things that are less complex than it, and is in turn included within things that have features that are more complex than it. Janus-faced, holons both include and are included.

Some environmentalists, seeking both to replace atomism with holism and to overcome anthropocentric hierarchalism, overlook the holonic model, which includes both individual holons and social holons. Instead, following systems theory, such environmentalists interpret individual organisms as temporary phenomena arising out of the larger organic whole, the biosphere, or Gaia. In Wilber’s view, holistic approaches typically do not adequately appreciate the difference between a social holon (for example, a human society) and a compound individual holon (for example, an individual person living in that society). If the social holon is considered more comprehensive and important than the individual holon, one can justify sacrificing the well-being of the individual for the sake of the well-being of the whole. In modern political terms, this approach is known as fascism (though state socialism has often behaved in much the same way). Because some radical ecologists suggest that ecosystem are more important than individuals (human or otherwise), modernist critics often label radical environmentalists and SDEs as ecofascists.¹¹

Systems theory has much to contribute to understanding organic-ecological processes, as Wilber shows by calling on the insightful work of Erich Jantsch, who himself develops a hierarchical model. According to Wilber, Jantsch--following Lynn Margulis and James Lovelock--interprets Gaia as “the social holon composed primarily of the individual

holons of prokaryotes.” (SES, 85) In addition to mediating atmospheric exchanges, the prokaryotes “form a global and interconnected network [or system] with all other prokaryotes--the overall Gaia system.” (SES,86) Because this system arose more than a billion years ago, it has enormous breadth, such that all life since then (including human life) depends on it. Far from standing at the top of Earth’s holonic hierarchy, however, as many SDEs suggest, the ecosystem emerges early on as a social holon constituted by the relationship of simple organisms. Despite its remarkable breadth, however, the Gaia network in and of itself does not have much depth when compared to the individual organisms and social structures that have evolved since then. To explain what he means by “depth,” Wilber reminds us that a complex holon “includes” or “embraces” the less complex holons that compose it. For example, a molecule contains atoms, but is itself contained by organelles. An organelle is more complex than any molecule and thus stands higher in the holonic hierarchy. But the organelle is itself included in something still higher, the cell, which appears very early in organic evolution and is thus less complex than many of the compound organisms that will arise later. In this sense, the organelle is deeper than the cells that compose it, even though the organelle depends on cells for its very existence.

In going on to make the seemingly controversial claim that the biosphere is itself included in or embraced by more complex individual holons, such as plants and animals, Wilber finds himself on the side of many ecological scientists, who have challenged the once-predominant ecosystem view, according to which individual organisms are “included” in (and thus are holonically lower than) the overarching ecosystem.¹² Wilber insists that the “noosphere,” i.e., human consciousness, far from being included “in” the biosphere, contains it, as well as the holonic levels achieved by other complex organisms.

Obviously, humans depend for survival on a functioning biosphere, and clearly do not physically “contain” it. Wilber insists, however, that as highly complex humans include all the levels of complexity achieved by atoms and molecules, not to mention one-celled organisms, plants, and animals, which themselves already contain (and are thus

holonically higher, in the sense of more comprehensive) than the biosphere. The totality of atoms, molecules, cells, and organisms are far greater in sheer number, mass, expanse, or “span” than human beings, but the noosphere has a deeper and more comprehensive cosmic “embrace” than these other holons. Indeed, according to Wilber, one fully enlightened human being can “contain” the entire cosmos, in the sense of including and manifesting all its possible holonic levels. Although sympathetic regarding the motives of those environmentalists calling for ecological holism (SES, 90), Wilber maintains that such holism is usually confused. A holonic analysis reveals that holons with the greatest sheer numbers are the simplest (e.g., atoms). As things become more complex, there are fewer of them in comparison with the lower level holons. There are fewer multi-celled organisms than cells, for example. The sheer span of the biosphere is vaster than any organism, including humankind, but is less complex than and thus holonically lower than an organism. By putting the biosphere at the top of the terrestrial holonic hierarchy, ecological holists fail to consider that the span of higher holons becomes ever smaller, not larger. What stands at the top should be comparatively smaller, especially in comparison with something as vast as the biosphere.

Wilber acknowledges that the higher depends on the lower for its existence. If the lower is destroyed, the higher perishes, but not the other way around. For example, if one destroys the cells in an organism, the organism cannot survive, but in many cases cells can survive the destruction of the organism. The cells are part of the organism, which cannot survive without them. Many eco-holists, with the aim of tempering human arrogance, maintain that humans are merely part of the biosphere, just as cells are part of the organism. Wilber asserts, however, that it is just the other way around.

As we have seen, if the noosphere were really a part of the biosphere, then if we destroyed the noosphere the biosphere would disappear, and that is clearly not the case. an atom is genuinely a part of a molecule, and thus if we destroy the atoms we also destroy the

molecule: the whole needs its part. Just so, if the noosphere were really a part of the biosphere, then destroying the noosphere [i.e., humankind] would eliminate the biosphere, and yet it is just the other way around: destroy the biosphere, and the noosphere is gone, precisely because the biosphere is part of the noosphere, and not vice versa. (SES, 90; my emphasis)

Instead, humankind includes within itself, but also transcends all the stages already achieved by material-organic evolution. Many environmentalists, whether spiritually oriented or not, complain that humans commit hubris by portraying themselves as special, rather than simply as one strand in the biospheric web. Wilber contends, however, that this view makes a category mistake, by failing to see that human consciousness is an emergent property that is more complex anything achieved hitherto in terrestrial evolution (at least, so far as we know). Even though such consciousness has co-evolved with other forms of life, human consciousness arguably exhibits a degree of intricacy, self-reflectiveness, and capacity for moral judgment, that distinguishes humanity from other life forms. The mythic lore of traditional societies often acknowledges the strangeness of human life, whose self-consciousness and mortality-awareness distinguishes humans from (most) animals, but also makes humans capable of evil acts unknown in the animal realm. Whereas many traditions describe the emergence of self-consciousness as a kind of fall from a relatively pristine condition, in Up From Eden Wilber maintains that this fall was a fall “upward,” the beginning of the evolution of consciousness that manifests itself in human history.

Some ancient traditions maintain that the fully awakened human being amounts to the “microcosm” that contains or adequately mirrors the entire cosmos (“macrocosm”), but many SDEs dismiss such traditions as anthropocentric and ecologically misinformed. Yet when Bill Devall and George Sessions praise the “perennial philosophy” as a source for the deep ecology perspective, they do not seem to recognize that this philosophy is consistent with Wilber’s holonic hierarchy.¹³ Likewise, the phrase “self-realization for all

beings!” which Arne Naess promotes as the crucial maxim for his own approach to deep ecology, owes much both to Spinozism and to Advaita Vedanta, which involve hierarchical cosmologies, according to which humans are endowed with a very high level mode of “selfhood.” In my reading of Wilber, he would agree with deep ecology’s laudable goal of encouraging self-realization for all beings, although he would insist that the notion of self-realization must acknowledge holonic hierarchy, as does the “perennial philosophy.” The perennial philosophy, including Wilber’s version of it, in no way justifies heedless destruction or abuse of non-human life forms; indeed, a self-realized person would exhibit universal compassion and respect for all beings.

Like Heidegger, Wilber defines humankind as the site through which entities can manifest themselves and thus “be,” in a way that they cannot “be” for creatures lacking the transcendental consciousness that defines humankind. Saying this does not deny that other creatures have their own modes of awareness, each of which contributes in its own way to the extraordinarily complexity of a conscious cosmos, as has recently been suggested both by David Abrams and by Stan Grof.¹⁴ Unlike Heidegger, however, who renounced cosmological and cosmogenic narratives, Wilber develops a story of divine emanation and return, involution and evolution, even while acknowledging the limitations of all such narratives. The story of what Wilber calls “Spirit” has something in common with neo-Platonism, neo-Hegelianism, Vajrayana Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta, and aspects of contemporary cosmology. Like Aristotle and Whitehead, Wilber describes Spirit as the cosmic “lure” or Eros that draws entities toward ever more complex and conscious modes of manifestation, that is, toward the actualization of the potential of Spirit that emptied itself into matter-energy at the moment of the Big Bang. Spirit is not only fully present in each level of creation, but is also active in the unfolding of new levels that give increasingly adequate expression to Spirit. Humankind plays a leading (but by no means the only!) role in this actualization process at this point in time and space, but human consciousness in its current modern modes will be superseded by more integrative modes. Moreover, conscious

beings in other eras and other solar systems may already have evolved far beyond humankind's current mode of personal awareness. Though emphasizing the uniqueness of human existence, Wilber does not assert that only humans have inherent value or that all other beings are valuable solely as raw material for human ends. All beings contain the same ground value; all are authentic manifestations of Spirit. But Spirit manifests itself in many different ways, some of which are more comprehensive than others. Hence, Wilber's "holonic hierarchy" acknowledge the inherent worth of all beings, on the one hand, while acknowledging the legitimate differences among kinds of beings, on the other. For him, animals deserve more consideration than plants, because cows do scream louder than carrots. Cows and other animals have more developed sentience than plants, and humans have the most refined kind of sentience yet discovered.

SDEs may protest that Wilber simply reinstates anthropocentrism in more subtle terms, but he insists that only by taking seriously humankind's distinctness can today's mistreatment of the biosphere be curbed. Such mistreatment occurs within a social context that has been constituted and defined by the communicative agency of human beings. Only by transforming this social context, for example, by ending political oppression and militarism, and by educating people about the dire consequences of ecological misbehavior, can people begin altering such behavior. In Wilber's view, these alterations occur more readily in political democracies than in authoritarian regimes, as can be seen by how much worse environmental conditions were in the former Soviet Union and its satellite states than they were in Western Europe and the United States during the 1980s. For Wilber, the greatest revolution in our own day would be the worldwide consolidation of rational-egoic consciousness along with the institutions needed to sustain it, including democratic politics and such universal human rights as personal freedom, education, health care, and basic material necessities. Such a global transformation would rid the world of the authoritarianism, despotism, and militarism that are responsible for so many environmental problems.

In this regard, at least some neo-pagan SDEs would agree with Wilber. Gus diZerega, for instance, a political philosopher and Wiccan priest, prefers democratic governments not least because they do not go to war with one another.¹⁵ Other environmentally destructive practices, including those carried out by multinational corporations, would have to be contested by a democratic world citizenry, which would have a better chance of revealing and countering such practices, than would people living under authoritarian regimes. In addition to globally consolidating democratic practices, what is needed in today's materialistic world is a new cosmology that takes into account modern science, even while simultaneously providing a place for subjectivity, interiority, soul, or spirit.

Beyond Flatland Ontology

Wilber argues that SDEs and modernists alike have more in common than either group might think, because members of both groups adhere to what Wilber calls modernity's one-dimensional or "flatland" ontology that has no place for subjectivity, interiority, soul, or spirit. Many environmentalists adhere to some version of ecosystem theory, which describes biospheric systems in terms of enormously complex and interconnected energy flows. For some SDEs, ecosystem theory in particular and systems theory in general overcomes the one-dimensional and reductionist ontology of scientific modernity, and thereby enables people once again to discern nature's sacred dimension. Wilber argues, however, that systems theory does not overcome scientific reductionism, because systems theory fails adequately to distinguish among the three most basic levels of the holonic hierarchy: the It, the Personal, and the Spiritual. Systems theory does an excellent job at the It level, the material level that lacks conscious agency and the capacity for dialogue, but cannot adequately address either the Personal level, which involves such agency, or the Spiritual level, which is simultaneously immanent in the It and the Personal, while transcending both of them. Although SDEs seek to end the domination of nature by appealing to systems theory, more than a few environmentalists have complained that

ecosystem theory itself--despite the scientific ammunition it has contributed to the environmental movement--is not only a variation of the abstract, quantitative scientific reductionism that has gone hand in glove with industrialism, but is also responsible for displacing earlier scientific views of the natural world (including those which spoke of natural "communities") that are arguably more congenial with efforts to resacralize nature.

Just as many SDEs resist the notion of transcendent spirituality because it has been used to justify the domination of nature, so many moderns resist the same notion because it discourages such domination, insofar as other-worldly people pay insufficient attention to finding ways to improve life on earth through mastering natural processes. Neither SDEs nor modernists are able adequately to account for their own subjectivity and interiority in terms of the principles of reductionist science. But if SDEs seek to recover and to legitimate such subjectivity by reenchanted nature and becoming aligned with it, modernists seek to demonstrate the reality of human agency (if not full-blown subjectivity) by dominating nature through the use of rationality, science, technology, and industry. By dominating nature, "man" convinces himself that he has a certain dignity, power, and agency unknown in nature.

Wilber places the environmentalist vs. modernist debate within the context of the long-standing battle between Ascenders and Descenders, "the central and defining conflict in the Western mind." (BHE, 258) For the Ascenders, including St. Augustine, God was transcendental, incorporeal, not of this world. Tending toward asceticism and monasticism, Ascenders sought to rise above the corrupt and manifold material plane in order to unite with the eternal One. For the Descenders, in contrast, God was not the One but the Many. Worshipping the incredibly diverse, visible, sensible, sensual God/Goddess, Descenders "delighted in a creation-centered spirituality that saw each sunrise, each moonrise, as the visible blessing of the Divine." (BHE, 258) Sometimes SDEs try to portray Enlightenment moderns as continuing the Ascent tradition, insofar as moderns emphasize Reason. Wilber

maintains, however, that in fact the Age of Reason represents the triumph of the Descent tradition in the West:

Salvation in the modern world--whether offered by politics, or science, or revivals of earth religion, or Marxism, or industrialization, or retribalism, or sexuality, or horticultural revivals, or scientific materialism, or earth goddess embrace, or ecophilosophies, you name it--salvation can be found only on earth, only in the phenomena, only in manifestations, only in the world of Form, only in pure immanence, only in the Descended grid. There is no higher truth, no Ascending current, nothing transcendental whatsoever. In fact, anything “higher” or “transcendental” is now the Devil... And all of modernity and postmodernity moves fundamentally and almost entirely within this Descended grid, the grid of flatland. (BHE, 260)

Partly out of disappointment in Christian dogmatism and oppression, modern humankind turned away from seeking an otherworldly heaven and sought to erect a paradise on Earth. Although the death of the otherworldly God helped to liberate humanity from the chains of religious dogmatism and political despotism, on the one hand, and freed humankind to address previously intractable material and political problems, on the other, the this-worldly turn (Descent) had untoward consequences, not least of which was the meaninglessness that follows when the cosmos and humankind are viewed through the monological lens of mechanistic materialism. Many twentieth century philosophers have protested against reducing humans to the status of complex mechanisms. Modern science can study humans as objective phenomena, but can neither explain nor fully acknowledge their personal, interpersonal, interior, and spiritual dimensions, since these cannot be made the object of material inquiry.

Wilber depicts the mood of modernity as irony, “the bitter aftertaste of a world that cannot tell the truth about the substantive depth of the Kosmos....” (BHE, 275) Writing

more than sixty years earlier, Martin Heidegger concluded that the mood of modernity is twofold: boredom and horror. Moderns are bored because the one-dimensional ontology of mechanistic materialism has emptied humans and things of their substance; instead of being endowed with a transcendent dimension that allows things to manifest themselves and thus “be,” humans have become clever animals competing for power and security. Moderns are horrified because they surmise the utter meaninglessness of existing in such an ontologically poverty-stricken world.¹⁶ What Wilber calls the mood of irony may be how moderns have learned to transmute the grimmer mood of horror.

Like Heidegger, Wilber contends that the monological vision of mechanistic materialism, according to which to be means to be an object that can be understood by natural science, amounts to an industrial ontology. “It is industrialization that holds flatland in place, that holds the objective world of simple location as the primary reality, that colonizes and dominates the interiors and reduces them to instrumental strands in the great web of observable surfaces. That ‘nature alone is real’--that is the voice of the industrial grid.” (BHE, 273-274). According to Wilber, “The religion of Gaia, the worship of nature, is simply one of the main forms of industrial religion, of industrial spirituality, and in perpetuates the industrial paradigm.” (BHE, 275)

Obviously, SDEs would be shocked to hear that their reverence for sacred Earth unwittingly helps to maintain the grip of the industrial ontology that is responsible for violating the Earth! Wilber insists, however, that because SDEs (including eco-romantics) failed to integrate the transcendent dimension, they perpetuate in their own way the monological Descent tradition. Eco-romantics “think transcendence is destroying Gaia, whereas transcendence is the only way fragments can be joined and integrated and thereby saved.” (BHE, 277) For Wilber, transcendence is made otherworldly by Ascenders who fear nature, body, and emotions, but genuine transcendence is always integrated with immanence in the non-dual embrace described in Mahayana Buddhism’s dictum that Samsara is not other than Nirvana.

Because Wilber so sharply criticizes their views, SDEs may conclude that he is just another modernist with no interest in the natural world, but in fact he expresses deep concern about current mistreatment of the biosphere; indeed, he does not seem to share the ecological optimism that I mentioned at the outset. He writes that “The planet, indeed, is headed for disaster, and it is now possible, for the first time in human history, that owing entirely to manmade circumstances, not one of us will survive to tell the tale. If the Earth is indeed our body and blood, then in destroying it we are committing a slow and gruesome suicide.” (SES, 4) Moreover, he sympathizes with SDEs who yearn for spiritual union in a world threatened, fractured, and made meaningless by the relentless industrialism of modernity. There are two reasons, unfortunately, why otherwise well-intended SDEs actually reinforce the very industrialism that they despise.

First, by conceiving of the sacred in nature as wholly immanent, as the blessed interconnectivity of the world-system, SDEs accept modernity’s Descent orientation, which basically lopped off the upper reaches of the great holarchy of being. Unintentionally, then, some branches of radical ecology participate in the process of portraying the cosmos in an ontologically one-dimensional manner. Well-meaning efforts to re-enchant the world by neo-pagan ideas and practices cannot fully restore what modernity has eliminated, namely, the interior dimension of personhood, soul, and spirit. Second, by calling for the return of various kinds of neo-pagan nature worship, some people may fall prey to what Wilber calls the “pre/trans fallacy.”¹⁷ It is a fallacy to confuse a) surrendering personal-egoic consciousness by regressing to a more primitive, pre-conscious state with b) transcending egoic consciousness by moving toward an authentically transpersonal state. Wilber acknowledges that to achieve egoic integration, as well as to encourage the development of “vision-logic”--the final stage before the emergence of genuinely transpersonal awareness-- , individuals may need to explore and to integrate repressed forms of consciousness. He disagrees, however, with the claim that recovering archaic tribal consciousness and engaging

in a number of New Paradigm practices will contribute to achieving genuinely transpersonal consciousness.

For Wilber, the spiritual vacuum of modernity can be overcome in part by demonstrating that the positive achievements of modernity constitute an important stage in the evolutionary development of Spirit-in-the-world. Balancing criticism of modernity's ecologically-destructive practices and of the industrial ontology that gave rise to them, with acknowledgment of the authentic contributions of modernity to the emancipation of humankind from material want and political oppression, Wilber seeks to persuade moderns to take seriously the need for a post-industrial ontology that restores depth to the cosmos by reintegrating what has been dissociated, i.e., the interior, subjective domains. Following Habermas, Wilber emphasizes that modernity's great achievement was differentiating three domains: 1) consciousness, subjectivity, self, and self-expression (including art), whose mode of truth involves truthfulness and sincerity 2) ethics, morality, worldview, culture, intersubjective meaning, whose mode of truth involves justice; 3) science, technology, objective nature, whose mode of truth involves correct propositions. (BHE, 123)

Differentiating the "Big Three" created the social-cognitive space necessary for democratic politics and new art forms, for liberation movements of all varieties, ranging from the anti-slavery movement to feminism, and for modern science. In such a differentiated world-space, the individual could develop his or her own views, take part in democratic political movements, and express himself/herself artistically to some extent without being constrained by social-cultural powers, including mythologically-based religions and regimes that had previously limited individual freedom of decision and expression. In the domain of morality and politics, worldcentric views that promoted rights for all people supplanted moral doctrines based on racial or tribal exclusivity. Distinguishing between the biological domain (studied by science) and the subjective and social-cultural domains (enacted by persons and institutions), moderns denied that some people were biologically "fit" to be slaves, or that women were "naturally" unsuited for public life. Finally, science could

explore the natural universe without the constraints imposed by ecclesiastic authority. Such exploration gave rise to the enormous advances in medicine, agriculture, industry, communication, and transportation.

Unfortunately, as Wilber points out, modernity did not adequately integrate the Big Three that it had differentiated. Since the modes of knowledge in the personal-artistic and cultural-moral domains are relatively more difficult to achieve in comparison with empirical scientific knowledge, and since scientific knowledge brought such important material gains, scientific modes of knowledge marginalized the other two kinds. Natural science could not even notice, much less study, selfhood, interiority, culture, and morality, since empirical inquiry is suited for material phenomena, not for personal and social phenomena. Far from representing nature as a sum of disconnected atoms, as some environmentalists have complained, modern science represented nature as “a perfectly harmonious and interrelated system, a great-it-system, and knowledge consisted in patiently and empirically mapping this it-system.” (BHE, 128) Modern science unified the cosmos in terms of the “great ‘web of life’ conception, a great interlocking order of beings, each mutually interwoven with all others.” (BHE, 129) As noted earlier, when SDEs claim that humanity must learn to live within the great “web of life,” they are repeating an eighteenth century idea that is crucial to the industrial ontology of which environmentalists are otherwise so critical.

Although their solution may be misguided, at least SDEs have taken seriously the problem of the split between humanity and nature, a split that for many moderns became an effort for the rational mind to dominate nature. The rational ego sought to disenchant nature, not only in order to eliminate any lingering concerns about violating Mother Nature, but also in order to achieve modernity’s ideal of rational and moral objectivity. So long as one’s reasoning processes are influenced by biological factors (e.g., emotions), so long as one’s moral judgment is tainted by personal, familial, tribal, or racial factors, one is not truly rational, impartial, and thus fully human. Following Kant’s lead, the modern ego sought to transcend the domain of particularity and corporeality, in order to attain the perfection of

universality and impartiality. But this quest for transcendence had two major problems. First, it was inevitably short-circuited by the fact that moderns could not really admit to a domain transcending the material plane; hence, the ego was left in a kind of transcendental limbo that was made increasingly untenable by the relentlessly reductive processes of scientific materialism. To make up for its own conceptual erasure, the modern ego engages in extraordinary, nature-dominating agency. To demonstrate its own existence, in other words, the ego set out to subjugate the material domain, i.e., the only domain that supposedly exists. Heidegger wrote that moderns man's striving for world-domination shows that he had become an animal seeking power and security, but so far as I can tell, Wilber holds a quite different view: the striving for world-domination represents, at least in part, an effort at self-assertion on the part of persons who intuit their own (interior and interpersonal) reality, but who cannot find any adequate conceptual expression for it. Hence, when Marx said that the point of philosophy is not to reflect on the world, but rather to change it, he sought in part to re-emphasize the power of human agency in a world that was increasingly mechanized and devoid of subjectivity. A century later, Michel Foucault spoke of "the disappearance of man" in connection with the dramatic eclipse of subjectivity in the modern scientific world.

The second problem with the modern quest for transcendence was that the justifiable differentiation between mind and body ended up in unjustifiable dissociation:

The rational ego wanted to rise above nature and its own bodily impulses, so as to achieve a more universal compassion found nowhere in nature, but it often simply repressed these natural impulses instead: repressed its own biosphere; repressed its own life juices; repressed its own vital roots. The Ego tended to repress both external nature and its own internal nature (the id). And this repression, no doubt, would have something to do with the emergence of a Sigmund Freud, sent exactly at

this time (and never before this time) to doctor the dissociations of modernity. (BHE, 284)

The romantic reaction against rational modernity's humanity-nature split, and against the repression that follows from it, was justified, for something serious was amiss. Nevertheless, efforts made romantics and SDEs to overcome this split went astray, according to Wilber, because they had two different conceptions of nature. The first conception was the modernist view that nature is the all-encompassing, interrelated whole, the great life-stream or web-of-life. Supposedly, modernity had lost touch with this web-of-life, despite the fact that everything is completely enclosed and flows within it. In positing that culture has deviated from or split off from nature, however, the romantics posited a second conception of nature: a nature from which humankind can deviate. Wilber asks: “[W]hat is the relation of this Nature with a capital N that embraces everything, versus this nature that is different from culture because it is getting ruined by culture?” (BHE, 287) Romanticism foundered because it could not reconcile these conflicting views of nature. Great romantics, such as Schelling, sought to reconcile this conflict by saying that “Nature with a big N is Spirit, because all-embracing Spirit does indeed transcend and include both culture and nature.” (BHE, 287) Most Romantics, however, were so committed to the Descent path, that

they simply identified Nature with nature. They identified Spirit with sensory nature. And here they went up in smoke, a spectacularly narcissistic, egocentric, flamboyant explosion--because the closer you get to nature, the more egocentric you become. And in search of Nature, the Romantics headed back to nature, and disappeared into a black hole of their own selfhood, while claiming to speak for the ultimately Divine--divine egoism, it sadly turned out. (BHE, 287)

If Wilber is right, the “back to nature” dimension of SDE is a reprise of this failed romantic effort to overcome the humanity-nature split. “[I]nstead of moving forward in

evolution to the emergence of a Nature or Spirit (or World Soul) that would indeed unify the differentiated mind and nature, [SDEs] simply recommend ‘back to nature’.” (BHE, 288) Such a view invites psychological and social regression for the following reason: if nature/biosphere is the “fundamental reality” (Goddess/Gaia), that which deviates from nature threatens nature. If nature “is the ultimately Real, then culture must be the original Crime.” (BHE, 288) The goal, then, must be to dismantle culture, in order to achieve a lost paradise involving unconscious unity with pristine nature. Repression is to be cured by regression, as some Earth First!ers have indicated in their call for a return to the Pleistocene age. (BHE, 291) Such a yearning for primal unity with divine nature is tempting, but potentially disastrous.¹⁸

Wilber says that misguided eco-sentimentalism will never halt ecologically destructive industrial processes. What is needed instead is the achievement of “mutual understanding and mutual agreement based upon a worldcentric moral perspective concerning the global commons.” But such an achievement requires “interior growth and transcendence,” not surrender to the beauties of this or that ecosystem. (BHE, 311) To escape ecological destruction, then, a genuinely postmodern humanity must overcome its fear and loathing of transcendence, since such transcendence alone can integrate what modernity has dissociated in the process of generating industrial ontology.

Critical Appraisal

Although largely in agreement with Wilber’s insightful ideas about holonic hierarchy, cosmic evolution, and the complex relation of modernity and eco-paganism, I do have some reservations about his views.¹⁹ For one thing, he has more confidence in his grand narrative than I do, especially in an age that is so skeptical of them. Alternative narratives, some of which are quite appealing, offer different interpretations of the past and present, and different visions of the future. For another thing, Wilber doesn’t always acknowledge nuanced differences among radical environmentalists and SDEs, although he promises to do so in a forthcoming book. Of course, to cover such a vast amount of

territory, he must neglect certain distinctions, some of which matter more than others. Nevertheless, I have sympathy for some SDEs who demand that Wilber provide specific examples of texts which or of authors who equate spiritually-oriented deep ecology as involving little more than seeking undifferentiated union with nature.

Critics have also charged that Wilber does not understand the importance of recovering insights from archaic and pagan spirituality. Jürgen W. Kremer has argued that Wilber virtually ignores indigenous people, their cultures, and religious beliefs. By failing to take seriously the possibility that such people have something important to say to contemporary humanity, Wilber supposedly continues the error made by many other white Eurocentric thinkers, who justified colonialism on the basis of the notion that Western culture is at the cutting edge of human evolution. From this evolutionary perspective, indigenous people may merit protection, but are of little world-historical importance, since they are on the fringes of evolutionary-historical processes that are closely involved with the real developments taking place globally. According to Kremer, failing to integrate the insights of indigenous people represents “the shadow of evolutionary thinking.”²⁰ Despite asserting that his thought springs from a kind of “vision-logic” that integrates perspectives that to others seem incompatible, then, Wilber’s work allegedly remains unintegrated, since it leaves out the experience of so many cultures, including those with ideas of spirituality that would seem irreconcilable with what he regards as spirituality consistent with the emergence of a new level of consciousness: vision-logic, the capacity to adopt various perspectives regarding many different issues.

Certainly Wilber is influenced by Western thought, especially the idea of evolutionary progress, but he is also heavily informed by Asian religion and philosophy. Indeed, he could scarcely have developed his particular reading of Western thought and history apart from his study of many varieties of Buddhism, Vedanta, and other non-Western traditions. He has been particularly inspired by Sri Aurobindo’s effort to integrate the Western evolutionary perspective with the Eastern spiritual perspective, but Wilber has

also attempted to interpret the Hellenistic thinker, Plotinus, as anticipating many of Aurobindo's insights. Of course, one could argue that Aurobindo himself, living in colonized India, was infected with Eurocentric ideas, but he was also a staunch Indian nationalist. If Aurobindo was influenced by Western ideas, Plotinus was apparently influenced by Eastern thought. In the future, I suspect, using terms such as "Eurocentric" will become increasingly uninformative, since a global culture is emerging in which individuals will inevitably be shaped by many different perspectives. In view of Europe's important achievements, moreover, one should scarcely wonder that European values and practices have such a planetary influence. These influences would have spread, albeit more slowly, even without Europe's unfortunate colonial history, which helps to explain suspicion about Eurocentrism on the part of many Third World and Euro-American critics of modernity.

Perhaps it would be advisable for Wilber to engage more often the practices and ideas of indigenous people, some of whom may have spiritual views that are at least partly in agreement with his own. Despite insisting that "we all want to honor and acknowledge the many great accomplishments of past cultures the world over, and attempt to retain and incorporate as much of their wisdom as we can" (BHE, 50--my emphasis), Wilber is concerned that some efforts to recover insights from archaic religions invite regression to less differentiated psychological and social states. In reply, Gus diZerega argues that if such efforts are carried out responsibly, something important can come out of them.²¹ Of course, one problem in this debate is that our understanding of archaic religions is limited. The beliefs and practices of contemporary indigenous peoples are not equivalent to the outlook of tribal societies even from several centuries ago. Hence, in attempting to "recover" ancient spiritual pathways, well-intended people may go astray, especially if they conjure up a "spirituality" that is virtually entirely immanentistic, for in so doing they would be repeating in different guise the mistake made by radically this-worldly moderns.

Insofar as many SDEs join modernity in denying the transcendent dimension, they risk excluding important aspects of spirituality. It is difficult to name either a tribal or a world religious tradition that does not make reference to a hidden domain, or to an invisible generative matrix. Virtually all spiritual traditions take for granted realms that transcend the material plane, even if those realms are somehow "intra-cosmic." Hence, SDEs who propose a totally physio-biological, web-of-life ontology as the basis for their spiritual path are not in a position to say that their path is somehow aligned with traditional paths, and certainly not with the perennial wisdom. In fact, a number of adherents to eco-paganism freely acknowledge there are ontological realms, including those in which the Goddess dwells, that transcend the material plane, even though such realms are somehow related to the material plane. In her informative book, Nature Religion in America, Catherine L. Albanese maintains that today's neo-pagan Goddess "functions at the center of an immanentist transcendentalism that puts earth--as earth--squarely in the camp of heaven."²² Although the Goddess is "of the earth, immanent in all that exists," She "is as transcendental as Emersonian idealism had been. Magic happens through human imagination: mind, in other words, creates the Goddess's world."²³ The Goddess expresses the Transcendentalists' ambiguity: "Pushed one way, she celebrates the reality, the concreteness of matter. [...] Pushed another way, though, she tell us that matter is only a form of spirit, that it can be shifted and changed by spirit."²⁴ Albanese also quotes the noted Wiccan priestess, Starhawk, as saying that "The flesh, the material world, are not sundered from the Goddess, they are the manifestation of the divine. Union with the Goddess comes through embracing the material world."²⁵ Further, in an essay on her experience with shamanism, for example, Gloria Feman Orenstein, writes:

It is arrogant of Westerners to think that if we have not identified something with our modern instruments, it does not exist. This also negates the powers and intelligence of native people. By our arrogance, by our insistence on labeling those whose wisdom was acquired without

Western technology as “primitive,” we open ourselves to great dangers from elements and entities of other dimensions that we have chosen to ignore. In this way we have trivialized the spirit world and attributed all agency in human affairs to humans alone.²⁶

Later on, warning against dualism, she writes: “We must remember that in Shamanism, spirit resides in matter, and all that exists is sacred. We must also resist thinking in hierarchies, privileging the spirit world and its entities over the material world and its inhabitants.”²⁷ Although sharing Wilber’s aversion to Ascent-oriented otherworldliness, she doubts that a holarchy which acknowledges that spirit is more complex than matter can avoid being a dominator hierarchy. By saying that spirit resides in matter, she hopes to avoid otherworldliness. Wilber maintains, however, that matter is embraced by spirit. No belittling of matter is meant by speaking of such an embrace. In Wilber’s view, then, despite her references to entities from “other dimensions,” Orenstein’s exploration of shamanism fail to appreciate sufficiently the depth dimension of the cosmos.²⁸ Though he would agree with aspects of Orenstein’s critique of modern materialism, Wilber’s concerns about the possibility of regression leads him to be suspicious of many such efforts aimed at recovering archaic spirituality. Critics like diZerega, however, maintain that Wilber has such deep reservations about and even hostility toward the material world, that he overemphasizes the transcendent dimension. To resolve these complex issues, serious dialogue between Wilber and his critics is needed.

A careful reader will see that Wilber has considerable sympathy for many of the claims made by radical environmentalists and by people exploring nature-oriented religions. He understands that some people need to explore previously repressed areas in order to become better integrated. Conceivably, he might even regard some of current interest in shamanism as a potentially promising development, provided that those practices are explored in the right spirit, i.e., with the goal of moving forward by first looping back, and in

a way that does not require the sacrifice of critical forms of consciousness. Arguably, Wilber's real concern with contemporary interest in nature religions is not so much that it will invite psychological or social regression, but rather that it will invite ridicule of all efforts to resolve serious ecological problems by reintegrating the spiritual dimension in the postmodern age. Most Americans, for example, are either too attached to traditional religions, or are too far down the road of secular modernity to take seriously shamanism, neo-paganism, Earth-based religiosity, and SDE. If the educated public concludes that contemporary Wiccans and SDE constitute the "spiritual" approach to addressing ecological problems, that public may conclude that spirituality has nothing to recommend itself in this regard.

From Wilber's viewpoint, however, and from mine as well, this would be a very unfortunate development. His evolutionary approach to spirituality could gain a far more sympathetic hearing from many contemporary people, than does the approach offered by some--though again, by no means all--SDEs. By praising the achievements of modernity, while also maintaining that the ecological crisis is a symptom of modern humanity's loss of spiritual awareness, Wilber wants to create a context in which moderns can think seriously about spiritual matters, even if they have abandoned traditional religious formations, partly because they do so often seem otherworldly. Wilber does not conceive of the transcendent in an otherworldly way, or in a manner that devalues any aspect of the material world. otherworldly attitude on his part. This is why in SES he so emphasized Plotinus's attack on the world-despising Gnostics. Moreover, like Mahayana Buddhists, Wilber affirms that samsara is nirvana, that the world of suffering is the perfect world, seen with the awakened mind.

Secular moderns abandoned traditional religions in part because they seemed insufficiently interested in improving material circumstances. Wilber, however, embraces Enlightenment modernity's revolutionary proposal to transform the human condition by ending hunger, curing disease, resisting despotism, encouraging knowledge, and

renouncing dogmatism. In this way, he aligns himself not only with modernity, but also with the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic proclamation that humankind must do God's work on earth, not only by overcoming social injustice and oppression, but also by resisting the wanton destruction of Creation. He believes that by demonstrating that his perennial philosophical conception of spirit is compatible both with social justice and with environmental issues, some moderns will become interested in his related idea that modernity's emancipatory impulse is a crucial stage in the evolutionary development of spirituality. Modernity's promise is to end dogmatism by differentiating among human realms, including natural science, religion, morality, and personal judgment. Modernity's agony is that its initial differentiation failed, insofar as the methods and truth claims of natural science marginalized the methods and truth claims of the other realms. As a result, a new version of dogmatism emerged. In his most recent book, The Marriage of Sense and Soul, Wilber criticizes this collapse of differentiation, while arguing that spiritual practices reliably generate experiences that confirm the truth claims made by religious traditions, including claims that there are domains that transcend the material domain studied by natural science.²⁹

Secular moderns are perhaps less likely to become interested in the intertwinement of spirituality, social justice, and environmentalism, if SDEs are allowed to define that intertwinement. SDEs often reinforce the conviction among many moderns that modernity's positive achievements--scientific, political, economic--are currently threatened by irrational forces, which call for a return to benighted religious beliefs and premodern social formations. Many modernists and postmodernists whom Wilber hopes to reach are already incapable of embracing the Christianity and Judaism of their elders, in part because those religions contain mythological dimensions that cannot be reconciled with contemporary modes of thought. For many moderns/postmoderns, embracing a revitalized neo-paganism is simply out of the question.

Nature-oriented religiosity and SDE have a relatively small following, but they receives enough press coverage to convince some moderns not even to pick up Wilber's Sex, Ecology, Spirituality, since they assume that it involves neo-paganism. Indeed, it is often stocked in the "Metaphysics," "Occult," and "New Age" sections of bookstores. Wilber is so critical of "eco-romanticism," then, partly because he regards it as involving an inadequate understanding of spirituality, and partly because he is concerned that it prevents his own voice from being heard by the people who need to hear it. In his view, SDE and New Age spirituality alike may promise a genuine transformation of consciousness, but deliver more effective modes of translation within the existing mode of consciousness. That is to say, "they do not offer effective means to utterly dismantle the self, but merely ways for the self to think differently."³⁰ Even worse, allegedly transformational movements may encourage the regression of consciousness to premodern stages. At times, to the consternation of critics and supporters alike, Wilber's rhetoric regarding SDEs is harsh, although at other times his rhetoric is more encouraging and compassionate. He explains his rhetorical strategy is necessary to tell the truth about the aim of all spirituality, namely, to discover "my Master is my Self, and that Self is the Kosmos at large, and the Kosmos is my Soul."³¹

Using the skillful means at his disposal, he attempts to foster a mode of spirituality that is consistent with the best of contemporary science, that is guided by the notion of biological, cultural, and personal evolution, that includes what is valid about Descent-oriented SDEs and Ascent oriented Christian monotheists, and that seeks to reconcile Ascent and Descent in nonduality. Given the remarkably ambitious character of this effort, one can expect Wilber to make mistakes. In my view, however, his effort deserves critical appropriation by all who are concerned about healing the biosphere by transforming human consciousness and culture.

¹ See Donald Worster, "The Ecology of Order and Chaos," in Susan J. Armstrong and Richard G. Botzler, eds., Environmental Ethics (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 39-43.

See my essay, "The Postmodern Challenge to Environmentalism," Terra Nova, 1, No. 2 (Spring, 1996), 131-140.

² See J. Baird Callicott, "Do Deconstructive Ecology and Sociobiology Undermine Leopold's Land Ethic?" Environmental Ethics, 18, No. 4 (Winter, 1996), 353-372.

³ For example, see Gregg Easterbrook, A Moment on the Earth: The Coming Age of Environmental Optimism (New York: Viking Press, 1995) (though some environmentalists have criticized it for containing many inaccuracies); Ronald Bailey, ed., The True State of the Planet (New York: The Free Press, 1995); Green Delusions: An Environmentalist Critique of Radical Environmentalism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992); Julian Simon, ed., The State of Humanity (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell/Cato Institute, 1995).

⁴ See Mark Sagoff, "Do We Consume Too Much?" Atlantic Monthly, 279, No. 3 (June, 1997), 80-97. See the rebuttal, "No Middle Way on the Environment," by Paul R. Ehrlich, Gretchen C. Daily, Scott C. Daily, Norman Myers, and James Salzman, in Atlantic Monthly, 280, No. 6 (December, 1997), 98-104, and also Sagoff's counter-rebuttal in The Atlantic Monthly (March, 1998), 8-9.

⁵ The literature by and about SDEs is large and growing, though of uneven quality. A sampling of the better literature includes Carol J. Adams, ed., Ecofeminism and the Sacred (New York: Continuum, 1994); Allan Hunt Badiner, ed., Dharma Gaia (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1990); Charlene Spretnak, States of Grace (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991); Roger S. Gottlieb, ed., This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment (New York: Routledge, 1996); and Shirley Nicholson and Brenda Rosen, Gaia's Hidden Life (Wheaton, Illinois: Quest Books, 1992).

⁶ Whenever I use the term "man," I have in mind the class of patriarchal males who have typically exercised social control in Western history.

⁷ See Michael E. Zimmerman, Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, Art (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University

of California Press, 1994); and “Ecofascism: A Threat to American Environmentalism?” in Roger S. Gottlieb, The Ecological Community (New York: Routledge, 1997, 229-254.

⁸ See Murray Bookchin, The Philosophy of Social Ecology (Montréal and New York: Black Rose Books, 1990).

⁹ Ken Wilber, Up From Eden: A Transpersonal View of Human Evolution (Boston: Shambhala, 1981); Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1995); and A Brief History of Everything (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1996).

¹⁰ See Fritjof Capra, The Web of Life (Anchor Books, 1996).

¹¹ On this topic, see my essay, “Ecofascism,” op cit., which discusses the ecofascist tendencies of one of J. Baird Callicott’s early writings.

¹² See Worster, op cit.

¹³ Bill Devall and George Sessions, Deep Ecology (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1985), 80-81.

¹⁴ David Abrams, The Spell of the Sensuous (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996); Stan Grof, The Cosmic Game (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998).

¹⁵ See Gus diZerega, “Democracies and Peace,” The Review of Politics, 57 (1995), 279-308.

¹⁶ See Martin Heidegger, Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Hermann, Gesamtausgabe 29-30 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1983); Michael E. Zimmerman, “Ontical Craving versus Ontological Desire,” From Phenomenology to Thought, Errancy, and Desire, Babette E. Babich, ed. (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1995).

¹⁷ Ken Wilber, “The Pre/Trans Fallacy,” in Eye to Eye: The Search for the New Paradigm (Boston: Shambhala, 1996), 198-243.

¹⁸ In Masculinities (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 134-137, R.W. Connell describes an instance of apparent psychological regression

in the case of Bill Lindeman, a young man heavily involved in Australian counterculturalism and radical environmentalism. Adopting a philosophy emphasizing “undifferentiated wholeness,” Lindeman came to experience a passive-receptive attitude toward nature and a “wonderfully clear, pure feeling” of communion with it. When speaking of his efforts to change his new philosophy, however, Lindeman’s language became unstructured “with ideas, events and commentary tumbling out together.” Connell comments that “If one follows Julia Kristeva’s arguments that separation from the mother and the advent of Oedipal castration awareness are connected with a particular phase in language, where subject and object are separated and propositions or judgements arise (the ‘thetic’ phase), Peter’s shift in speech would make sense as the sign of an attempt to undo Oedipal masculinity.” Peter’s effort to reconstruct his masculinity by developing “an open, non-assertive self risks having no self at all; it courts annihilation.” Wilber would argue that Peter Lindeman’s effort to dissociate himself from masculine personhood and to embrace an unmediated union with nature, achieved not a transpersonal mode of consciousness but a prepersonal one.

¹⁹ See my essay, “A Transpersonal Diagnosis of the Ecological Crisis,” Ken Wilber and the Future of Transpersonal Inquiry: A Spectrum of Views, Part I, Donald Rothberg and Sean M. Kelly, eds., ReVision, 18, No. 4 (Spring, 1996), 38-48.

²⁰ Jürgen W. Kremer, “The Shadow of Evolutionary Thinking,” ReVision, Ken Wilber and the Future of Transpersonal Inquiry, Part II, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Summer, 1996), 41-48.

²¹ Gus diZerega, “A Critique of Ken Wilber’s Account of Deep Ecology and Nature Religions,” The Trumpeter, 13, No. 2 (Spring, 1996), 52-71.

²² Catherine L. Albanese, Nature Religions in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 178.

²³ *Ibid.*, 179. My emphasis.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Ibid., 181.

²⁶ Gloria Feman Orenstein, "Toward an Ecofeminist Ethic of Shamanism and the Sacred," in Ecofeminism and the Sacred, ed., Carol J. Adams (New York: Continuum, 1993), 172-190; citation is from 180. My emphasis.

²⁷ Ibid., 189.

²⁸ Wilber would probably say that what Orenstein calls "spirit" refers to the psychic or perhaps subtle domain. He asserts that entities encountered in such experiences "actually exist. They have real referents. But these referents do not exist in the sensorimotor worldspace [or in rational or existential worldspace].... Rather, they exist in the subtle worldspace, and evidence for them can be plentifully found there." (BHE,212)

²⁹ Ken Wilber, The Marriage of Sense and Soul (New York: Random House, 1998).

³⁰ Ken Wilber, "A Spirituality that Transforms," What Is Enlightenment?, No. 12 (Fall/Winter, 1997), 23-32. Citation is from 29.

³¹ Ibid., 32.