



STATEMENT DN-267

## **BOOK REVIEW**

### **A SUMMARY CRITIQUE: A Brief History of Everything**

**by Ken Wilber**

Some people love to heap accolades on Ken Wilber. Indeed, Jean Houston has called him "the Einstein of consciousness." Meanwhile, author Michael Murphy says this book is "a work of unparalleled scope and integrative vision." Since Wilber published *The Spectrum of Consciousness* in 1977, he has been hailed as a brilliant pioneer in the quest to understand the nature of consciousness. Many New Age enthusiasts view Wilber as their premier apologist (although Wilber now shuns the "New Age" label).

*A Brief History of Everything*, steeped in extensive research, is still a condensed and simplified version of Wilber's massive *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* (Shambhala, 1995). It is written in dialogue format and aims to be conversational. Nevertheless, the writing is often verbose.

Wilber is well known in New Age or "new paradigm" circles for his contributions to transpersonal theorizing — an approach that attempts to integrate insights from both mysticism and traditional psychology. In this book he incorporates a vast amount of material from psychology, anthropology, religion, science, philosophy, history, and other disciplines in order to present a comprehensive world view. Wilber's goal is to explain the basic nature of reality as it unfolds from the Big Bang to the present day. He's not afraid to criticize and even insult many views often associated with New Age thinking, such as deep ecology, aspects of Jungian thought, and goddess feminism. Yet he cannot assimilate a biblical understanding of God, the universe, and humanity into his sweeping perspective. In fact, he pays little attention to Christian theism.

Wilber's world view is a variation of pantheistic monism — all is Spirit and all is one (or nondual). His breed of pantheism is evolutionary or emanational, so it is no wonder that he speaks highly of the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, who claimed that the World Spirit (or *Geist*) is manifested through successive eras in novel ways.<sup>1</sup> For Wilber, Spirit is revealed in specific evolutionary patterns across a broad spectrum of phenomena, both in history and within individuals.

Wilber believes that although Spirit is entirely present at every stage of evolution, it is progressively manifested in human culture so that each stage of cultural evolution reveals something new worth conserving. All stages of human development — whether magical, mythical, rational, or postmodern — include the truths and values of earlier stages while transcending them as well. The "whole point of evolution," he says, is to go "beyond what went before. It is always struggling to establish new limits, and then struggling just as hard to break them, to transcend them, to move beyond them into more encompassing and integrative and holistic modes" (p.6). But, each evolutionary stage is also limited in its expression of Spirit.

Wilber is especially concerned to overcome the narrow vision of what he calls "Flatland" — a one-dimensional view of life that ignores higher levels of spiritual reality. Flatland perspectives turn up in New Age circles when people glorify Gaia, the earth goddess, at the expense of transcending her limitations through a deeper awareness of spiritual states beyond the material.

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Wilber also warns of the disaster of modernism. While modernism gave us a sense of universal human rights that opposes slavery, the subjection of women, and so on, it also tended to fixate only on what can be scientifically quantified. Wilber repeatedly attacks this modernist view because it reduces reality to the merely material and leaves no room for subjective experience, values, or mystical awareness.

Wilber's antimaterialism is especially evident when he takes neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory to task because it attempts to explain the tremendous complexity and diversity of nature on the basis of physical substances randomly evolving by chance. Wilber exclaims that "absolutely nobody believes" the "glib, neo-Darwinian explanation of *natural selection*" anymore (22). He argues that natural selection cannot account for changes such as the transformation of forelegs to wings, although it will favor animals with wings once the wings are fully formed. "Random mutations cannot even begin to explain this. The vast majority of mutations are lethal anyway," and we cannot imagine hundreds of nonlethal mutations providing positive changes in organisms (23).

Despite its theoretical and evidential weaknesses, neo-Darwinism still holds many enthralled, such as scientist Richard Dawkins and philosopher Daniel Dennett. Wilber has overstated his case. Nevertheless, he rightly observes that mindless matter cannot adequately explain life as we know it. Christians agree, but must disagree with how he accounts for the diversity of life.

Wilber says that evolution is a "*self-transcending* process" that includes far more than mere matter. For Wilber, the ultimate reality is the Kosmos, not just the cosmos. Kosmos refers to "the patterned nature or process of all domains of existence, from matter to mind to God, and not merely the *physical* universe" (19). Kosmos is the manner in which Spirit manifests itself through certain invariant stages. This understanding of Spirit has little in common with the God of biblical revelation, which he rejects as anthropomorphic and unenlightened (27).

Christians know God as the personal Creator of the universe and of life itself. An intelligent, designing, and creating Agent is required to explain adequately the existence of the cosmos and life in all its forms.<sup>2</sup> Wilber believes that the Big Bang brought everything into existence from nothing, yet rejects the teachings of "religious creationists" who find in this evidence for the biblical deity. Instead he views the source of the Kosmos as "Emptiness," which is "unbounded and unqualifiable" (27; see also 133). Wilber takes the mystical experience of Emptiness to be the highest state of consciousness. In this state, the subject-object relationship drops out and one realizes that he or she is one with the nondual reality. At several points, Wilber claims the nature of this state is both the ground and goal of evolution (43, 104, 120, 339).

An impersonal, amoral, and nondual Emptiness, however, cannot explain "the history of everything." Fundamental weaknesses appear when one considers the problem of the one and the many (how unity and diversity are understood as components of reality), the problem of personality, the problem of good and evil, the problem of communication, and the problem of salvation (how we can find spiritual liberation).

Wilber insists that the final reality is nondual — an all-encompassing and absolute oneness (see 226-32). Yet this nonduality supposedly integrates and transcends all the lower realms of being — including the idea that God is an independent personal being. Tapping into this ever-present state of nonduality, "You are not in the Kosmos, the Kosmos is in you, and you are purest Emptiness. The entire universe is a transparent shimmering of the Divine" (229). However, Wilber claims that this absolute, nondual Emptiness is one with all the manifested forms of the physical universe (the many). Nonduality is the absolute reality, and the manifestations of everyday life, which involve subject-object relationships, are relative realities (231-32).

But Wilber cannot have it both ways. If nonduality/oneness is the absolute, ultimate, and comprehensive reality, this logically excludes any of the dualisms we find in our everyday experience. There cannot be *many* people, rocks, trees, or birds if the supreme reality is *one* without duality; they would have to be dismissed as illusions. If nonduality is the comprehensive reality, as Wilber claims, this destroys all duality; formlessness is incompatible with form. Nevertheless, Wilber illogically asserts that both dual and nondual states are somehow real.

The Christian has no such problem with the relationship of the one to the many. God is a unity in diversity — one God in three persons.<sup>3</sup> God's creation is one *uni*-verse, but it consists of a great diversity of objects, events, and relationships. Neither God nor His creation will dissolve into a faceless oneness.

Wilber's god is not a being who creates, knows, plans, loves, judges, and feels. These activities require the distinction of subject and object and a personal agent who engages in them. Wilber's Spirit is beyond personality. Nevertheless, Wilber, undaunted by contradiction, often smuggles in personal language concerning the impersonal

Spirit. He speaks of seeing our original "face" and hearing the "whispers" of Spirit (120, 339). These references are blatant anthropomorphisms, since Spirit is impersonal all the way down. The impersonal has no face and can utter nothing. One cannot have a personal relationship with Emptiness. If all is one, there can be no relationships, for a relationship involves at least two entities. Wilber says that "the twoness of experience is the fundamental lie, the primordial untruthfulness" (233). If so, Spirit cannot be "compassionate" as Wilber claims (338), since his god is not a separate moral agent who acts in love. Wilber's use of personal language for the impersonal absolute is a classic case of what Francis Schaeffer called "semantic mysticism" — terms that have no philosophical application within a world view are invoked for a deceptive emotional effect.<sup>4</sup>

Wilber asserts, "The radical secret of the supreme identity is that there is only God" (305). When the Spirit recognizes itself "there is no one anywhere to watch it, or even sing its praises" (247). Christians, quite to the contrary, worship and enjoy their Creator and Redeemer; Wilber embraces only Emptiness.

The problem of good and evil also plagues Wilber. Since Spirit is nondual, it is beyond ethical categories. Meaningful moral distinctions require an objective difference between the dualities of good and evil. Wilber is in two minds about this (which is not good for a nondualist). He is happy that evolution has taken us beyond human sacrifice, slavery, and the subjection of women, all of which he rejects as wrong. He also views the KKK and Nazism as evil and admits there are "pathological states [of consciousness] of what can only be Kosmic terror, Kosmic evil, Kosmic horror" (211). However, he speaks positively of the mystical practices of Tantric yoga that "don't abandon defiled states" but rather "enter them with enthusiasm, and play with them" because "there is only God" (239). He quickly adds that these practices occur within ethical frameworks! Yet the possibility of an ethical framework demands an ethical reality that allows for differentiation between good and evil. Nonduality is not up to the job. Wilber asserts morality without any theological foundation for it. There is an irresolvable tension between his God-given conscience and his defective world view.

Elton Trueblood observed that evil is a philosophical *problem* for Christian theism; yet evil is a philosophical *disaster* for pantheism.<sup>5</sup> The pantheist must either say that evil is illusory because nondualism dissolves moral distinctions or claim that God is both good and evil, in which case God would not be a being of supreme and perfect value. Wilber is trapped within this theological prison.

He is also incarcerated in the silence of unknowing. Wilber affirms that the ultimate reality is "unqualifiable" (137, 225). If so, then no one can logically affirm anything about it. What cannot be described cannot serve as an explanation for anything. Nevertheless, Wilber *does* qualify the Emptiness by saying it is the ground and goal of evolution, the source of all historical manifestations, the highest state of consciousness, and so forth. This is contradictory; he should remain silent (along with Emptiness). The Christian, on the other hand, is not abandoned to a speechless prison. God has spoken; we must listen. Emptiness, however, is mute.

Lastly, Wilber cannot escape the problem of salvation. Although everybody is already one with the nondual divine, most people are somehow ignorant of their identity and so become narcissistic and selfish (333). Therefore, we must meditate to attain ever higher levels of consciousness (217-18) until we reach the nondual, which is, paradoxically, already our state of being. Christians avoid these hopeless paradoxes by admitting their moral failings before a holy God and by calling out to God for forgiveness and new life through the atoning death of Jesus Christ and the cosmic victory of His resurrection from the dead.

In his "brief history of everything" Wilber mentions Christ only a few times in passing (101, 132, 197-98). When he does refer to Jesus, he subverts the biblical teachings about Him. Thus Wilber's attempt to explain everything ends up ultimately explaining nothing, because he has excluded the one who has supremacy over all things (Col. 1:18) and who is "the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6). The premier modern apologist for pantheistic monism has sadly built his house on the sand.

—Reviewed by Douglas Groothuis

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Unlike Wilber, Hegel might better be classified as a panentheist (all is in God) than as a strict pantheist (all is God).

<sup>2</sup>For a good critique of evolutionary theories, see Philip Johnson, *Darwin on Trial*, 2d ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993). On this, see J. P. Moreland, ed., *The Creation Hypothesis* (Downers Grove, IL:

InterVarsity Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup>This is not a logical contradiction, since Christianity does not claim that three equals one.

<sup>4</sup>See Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 55-62.

<sup>5</sup>See D. Elton Trueblood, *A Place to Stand* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 67-68; see also David Clark and Norman Geisler, *Apologetics in the New Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1990), 203-22.