

Review: DW258

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE

NOTHING MUCH ABOUT EVERYTHING

a book review of
A Theory of Everything:
An Integral Vision for Business, Politics, Science, and Spirituality
by Ken Wilber
(Shambhala, 2000)

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In the last two decades or so, the prolific Ken Wilber has been one of the most articulate, popular, and wide-ranging of the transpersonal or new paradigm theorists. These are non-Christian thinkers who champion a nondualistic (i.e., monistic and pantheistic) worldview and attempt to relate it intellectually and practically to various disciplines, such as psychology, philosophy, medicine, and politics.

After a long literary dry period (due to his wife's illness and eventual death in 1989), Wilber produced the massive *Sex, Ecology, and Spirituality* in 1995, which is summarized in his shorter work, *A Brief History of Everything* (1996).¹ Since then he has been producing several volumes a year, most of which have received considerable attention and adulation. The cover of Wilber's *The Marriage of Sense and Soul* (1998) is decorated with this praise from Al Gore: "One of my new favorites." Best-selling New Age author Deepak Chopra says on the back cover of *A Theory of Everything*: "I read Ken Wilber every day so I can be inspired by the most extraordinary mind of our times." His main publisher, Shambhala, is releasing all of his writings in hardback as the *Collected Works of Ken Wilber*, an honor usually reserved for major intellectuals.

Wilber claims his ideas are catching on in many areas. He says that he and several colleagues concerned with "integral politics" have "been involved with advisors to Bill Clinton, Al Gore, Tony Blair, George W. Bush, and Jeb Bush, among others" (p. 83). He and other thinkers have recently formed the Integral Institute, which he announces has "branches of integral medicine, integral psychology, integral spirituality, integral business, integral ecology, integral education, integral art, and integral politics, with more branches in the planning (media, diplomacy, law)" (107). Apparently, Wilber and friends (including long-time New Age luminaries such as Michael Murphy and George Leonard) believe their vision is applicable to just about every area of life and that the evolutionary moment is ripe for its implementation.

As a student of new religious movements, I have followed Wilber's career with interest. One reason is that the skilled Christian apologist should be able to critique non-Christian worldviews as expressed by their brightest proponents. Although I take Wilber's worldview to be both unbiblical and illogical, he is intellectually miles ahead of most of what is written in the New Age or New Spirituality literature. Wilber has long disavowed the term "New Age." He takes typical New Age thought to be shallow, pretentious, and unworthy of him. Wilber's version of pantheistic monism (a term he does not use, but which fits) is quite complex and nuanced. He does not refer to channeled material; he rejects the idea of "creating your own reality"; he has some harsh words for Gaia, Green, and goddess enthusiasts; and he does not think we are on the brink of a New Age of peace, light, and love. While he intimates that he has

been spiritually transformed through meditation, he makes no specific claims about having mystical experiences, although he lapses into poetic mystical language at several points in the book (e.g., xiii, 141).

His current bestseller, *A Theory of Everything*, attempts to summarize and synthesize much of what Wilber has argued at more length in previous volumes. It thus serves as an introduction to this “integral vision” of, well, “everything” — in 142 pages of text and 39 pages of endnotes, many of which are essays. (Despite all the endnotes, Wilber sometimes fails to give any references for direct quotes and also gives only very general documentation for some references.) He appears to think he has reached the point of intellectual recognition and achievement where he can write a book about his other books. This book ends up being a running advertisement for those other books.

Wilber first presents his view of the Kosmos (not cosmos), which he takes from the Greek word for universe. This is “the patterned Whole of all existence, including the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual realms. Ultimate reality was not merely the cosmos, or the physical dimension, but the Kosmos, or the physical and emotional and mental and spiritual dimensions altogether” (xi). Wilber then describes a common mindset that opposes his integral vision called “boomeritus,” which is narcissistic and rebellious against all (even legitimate) authority. He then applies his theory to the areas of science, religion, politics, medicine, business, education, and spirituality. He concludes with a mystical flourish in the chapter “One Taste,” which promises spiritual liberation for those who engage in “integral transformative practice.”

Wilber attempts to integrate and synthesize a vast amount of material from a wealth of disciplines. He is fascinated by hierarchies of development, whether found in developmental psychology, spiritual traditions, or historical periods. He believes that a plethora of theorists have uncovered stages or waves of “the evolution of consciousness” — a term used by a welter of New Age writers. He calls this fundamental hierarchical reality of the Kosmos “the amazing spiral” (also the title of chapter one). He also uses terms such as “the Great Chain of Being” and “the River of Life.” Reality is composed of an indefinitely ascending and descending order of parts/ wholes that Wilber calls “holons”: “A whole atom makes part of a molecule; a whole molecule makes part of a whole cell; a whole cell is part of a whole organism” (40). Wilber claims this holarchy extends infinitely in both directions: there is no smallest holon and no largest holon. This holarchy involves *both* the spiritual *and* physical aspects of the Kosmos.

While it is true that physicists keep finding (or at least positing) smaller and smaller entities and astronomers have yet to exhaust the resources of the astronomical cosmos with their high-powered telescopes, it makes little philosophical sense to claim that the physical universe has no upper or lower limit. Any line is, in principle, infinitely divisible mathematically; but this does not mean that any physical object can be divided into smaller units, *ad infinitum*. If so, any and every object would face the challenge of jumping out of a bottomless pit (the infinite regress problem). Without some fundamental building blocks, nothing gets built.

The idea that the universe is infinite in extension — there is no largest holon — fares no better. As Christian philosopher J. P. Moreland puts it, “The most widely accepted current understanding of the universe is one which views it as finite and not infinite.”² Wilber neatly avoids this topic. Furthermore, the Big Bang cosmology tells us that the universe had an absolute beginning; therefore, it is not infinite in time. If the universe had an absolute beginning, then it makes good sense to claim that this beginning was caused by an agent (or First Cause) outside the universe. This conclusion cuts against the grain of Wilber’s worldview, which leaves no room for a creation or a personal Creator. Even if the concept of a holon has some application to the created world — whole atoms do make up parts of molecules, and so forth — the concept cannot be applied coherently to reality in its entirety.

The human soul is not divisible into, or constructed from, smaller parts, and it does not itself make up part of the ultimate reality, God Himself, who is separate from His creation. Wilber fails to recognize the fundamental difference between the universe and the Being who created it. The universe is made up of contingent things — things that are caused, sustained, and determined by things outside of themselves. The creation, however, cannot cause, sustain, or determine itself as a whole. There cannot be an infinite

causal regress of contingent beings. This would be like an infinitely long line of falling dominos with no first domino pushed over; but if no one pushed the first domino, the line of following dominos would never get started. Similarly, without a First Cause the universe never gets started.

The Creator, however, does not require an outside cause since He is not a contingent being. God, by definition, is not the kind of being that requires an origin. God exists as a Necessary Being (as philosophers put it) in the sense that He is not caused, sustained, or determined by anything outside of Himself.³ On Mars Hill Paul therefore proclaimed, “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else” (Acts 17:24–25).

Wilber’s fundamental notion of a Kosmos of holons is, thus, philosophically and theologically troublesome, but this is only the tip of the iceberg. Wilber believes that the Kosmos unfolds according to various stages or waves or memes (contagious ideas) of existence, which he classifies in various fairly complex terms, using several charts. Wilber simply asserts (without argumentation) that the highest state of awareness or “the uppermost realm is the non-dual ground of all the other realms, so that ultimate spirit suffers no final dualisms. However, as spirit steps down into creation, it gives rise to various dualisms that, although unavoidable in the manifest realm, can be healed and wholed in the ultimate or non-dual realization of spirit itself” (64). Simply put, reality is arranged hierarchically. At the lowest levels, people view the world dualistically — you and me, good and evil, body and soul, and so on; but the enlightened one realizes that the ultimate spiritual reality — beyond and above the “manifest realm” — is nondual or utterly one. This is pantheistic monism.

Wilber attempts to honor and integrate all the lower levels of awareness evident throughout history and in the world today. He believes that all the levels of development contribute to higher stages of realization and are all even “true”:

An integral synthesis, to be truly integral, must finally say that all of the major world views are basically true (even though partial). It is not that the higher levels are giving more accurate views, and the lower levels are giving falsity, superstition, or primitive nonsense. There must be a sense in which even “childish” magic and Santa Claus myths are truth. For those world views are simply the way the world looks at that level, or from that wave, and all of the waves are crucial ingredients of the Kosmos. (111)

This statement, while apparently metaphysically inclusive (the “big tent” view), is a philosophical tissue of confusions. Wilber claims that monotheism represents a lower and more “narrow” sense of religion than does nondualism. He asserts that we need to “distinguish between a horizontal or translative spirituality (which seeks to give meaning and solace to the separate self and thus fortify the ego) and vertical or transformative spirituality (which seeks to transcend the separate self in a state of nondual unity consciousness that is beyond ego). Let us simply call those ‘narrow religion’ and ‘broad religion’” (73–74).

Clearly, Wilber states that belief in and worship of a Creator beyond our finite (but real) egos is false because there is no such Creator and our finite selves are not creations of God. Ultimately, there is no such entity as the Christian God, for Wilber. In another passage, Wilber argues that “deep spirituality [which seeks to transcend the self] is disclosing TRUTHS about the Kosmos, and is not merely a series of subjective emotional states” (76). Wilber cannot have it both ways. He cannot claim that monotheism in general (and Christianity in particular) is “true” when he has denied the objective existence of a Creator and the reality of finite selves. Belief in Santa Claus and the Christian God are both false according to Wilber’s “integral vision.”

This contradiction of affirming and denying the same thing is evident throughout the book. Wilber not only deems monotheism as “lower” and “narrow,” he also takes issue with other philosophies, which he asserts are frozen at lower levels and hinder the evolution of consciousness. For instance, what he calls the “green” level of awareness is good in that it challenges rigid worldviews (such as monotheism) with a more

inclusive and pluralistic approach; however, its relativism and multiculturalism blinds it to real hierarchies of value and spirituality. Wilber can include what is good in the “green meme” while transcending its limitations; but when the green viewpoint claims to be the highest and best orientation to life (that is, when it claims to be true), it is false as well as limiting culturally, spiritually, and intellectually.

Wilber knows better. It is ironic that he would contradict himself so obviously when he uses the test of logical consistency to criticize “the politically correct” who “claim that all truth is culturally situated (except its own truth, which is true for all cultures),” that “there are no transcendental truths (except its own pronouncements, which transcend specific contexts),” and that “all hierarchies as value rankings are oppressive and marginalizing (except its own value ranking, which is superior to the alternative)” (37). What’s good for the goose is good for the gander. One cannot use the test of logical consistency against another view while exempting one’s own view from that acid test of reality.

While Wilber supposedly makes everything “true” (at its level), he presents what he takes to be “TRUTHS” that transcend and correct lower levels of being and understanding. He often chastens movements and individuals for their narrow or limited vision. This puts the lie to his central ethical claim: “The health of the entire spiral is the prime directive, not preferential treatment for any one level” (56). Wilber prefers nondualism to materialism, monotheism, and “boomeritus.” He prefers his “integral vision” to fragmented views, and so on. Everything cannot be true if anything is true.

Wilber’s nondualism cannot make any sense of the objective realities of good and evil (which are dissolved in the state of total oneness); it cannot account for the reality of personality (because personality is left behind in the highest, mystical state); and it cannot explain the individual as ontologically real and in need of salvation (because the highest state of awareness is beyond individuality and without forgiveness of sin). In the end, Wilber’s philosophical system is neither internally coherent nor factually adequate to the reality created and sustained by the Triune God of the universe. This is because Jesus Christ, the Alpha and Omega of all reality, is given no place at all.

-- reviewed by Douglas Groothuis

NOTES

1. See my review in the *Christian Research Journal*, Summer 1997, 50–52.
2. J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1987), 36. See his entire discussion of the scientific evidence for a finite universe that had a temporal beginning, 33–38.
3. For a brief discussion of this cosmological argument, see Winfried Corduan, *No Doubt about It: Basic Christian Apologetics* (Nashville: Broadman, Holman, 1997), 102–22.