

Review of A Brief History of Everything by Ken Wilber 2nd ed. 330p (2001)

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ABSTRACT

This can is a shortened version or summary of his huge best seller **Sex, Ecology, Spirituality and like it** is jargon-laden and badly needs a glossary. Though he severely criticizes the excesses of the three movements, this is a deconstructive and New Age Mystical and postmodern interpretation of religion, philosophy and the behavioral sciences from a very liberal, spiritual point of view—i.e., without the worst of deconstructivist, postmodern and new age jargon, rabid egalitarianism and anti-scientific anti-intellectualism. He analyzes in some detail the various world views of philosophy, psychology, sociology and religion, exposing their fatal reductionistic flaws with (mostly) care and brilliance, but most of the sources he analyzes are of almost no relevance today. They use terminology and concepts (language games) that were already outdated when he was researching and writing 20 years ago. One has to slog thru endless pages of jargon -laden discussion of Habermas, Kant, Emerson, Jung et.al. to get to the pearls.

You get a terrific sampling of bad writing, confused and outdated ideas and obsolete jargon. If one has a good current education, it is doubly painful to read this book (and most writing on human behavior). Painful because it's so tortured and confusing and then again when you realized how simple it is with modern psychology and philosophy. The terminology and ideas are horrifically confused and dated (but less so in Wilber's own analysis than in his sources).

This book and most of its sources are would-be psychology texts, though most of the authors did not realize it. It is about human behavior and reasoning-about why we think and act the way we do and how we might change in the future. But (like all such discussion until recently) none of the explanations are really explanations, and so they give no insight into human behavior. Nobody discusses the mental mechanisms involved. It is like describing how a car works by discussing the steering wheel and metal and paint without any knowledge of the engine, fuel or drive train. In fact, like most older 'explanations' of behavior, the texts quoted here and the comments by Wilber are often more interesting for what kinds of things they accept (and omit!) as explanations, and the kind of reasoning they use, than for the actual content.

If one is up on philosophy and cognitive and evolutionary psychology, most of this is archaic. Like nearly everyone (scholars and public alike—e.g., see my review of Dennett's Freedom Evolves and other books), he does not understand that the basics of religion and ethics-- in fact all human behavior, are programmed into our genes. A revolution in understanding ourselves was taking place while he was writing his many books and it passed him by.

Those wishing a comprehensive up to date framework for human behavior from the modern two systems view may consult my article *The Logical Structure of Philosophy, Psychology, Mind and Language as Revealed in Wittgenstein and Searle* 59p(2016). For all my articles on Wittgenstein and Searle see my e-book *'The Logical Structure of Philosophy, Psychology, Mind and Language in Wittgenstein and Searle* 367p (2016). Those interested in all my writings in their most recent versions may consult my e-book *Philosophy, Human Nature and the Collapse of Civilization - Articles and Reviews 2006-2016* 662p (2016).

The `Einstein of the New Age` holds forth in his unique and brilliant style on the history of world views and how to put spirit back in our life. If you have the patience to learn his jargon and read slowly there is alot of serious brainfood here.

I read this and his *Sex, Ecology and Spirituality* (1995) with Hofstadter's famous *Godel, Escher, Bach*(GEB) written in 1980 (both of which I have reviewed here). Wilber's work has many parallels with GEB, both of

them massive works attempting to tie together disparate fields and different views of life and both totally lost in the labyrinths of language which Wittgenstein freed us from. Unlike Hofstadter, who was mainly interested in the nature of intelligence, Wilber does not treat math, music or DNA, and he concentrates on world views that have a spiritual relevance. He spent a vast amount of time working out the relationships between ideas and how they relate to individual and society, spirit and science. Though he cites GEB (and almost every book of relevance in last 100 years!) he does not specifically use the GEB concepts of recursiveness, incompleteness, and tangled hierarchies, but just as well, as he would just get even more tangled in the hierarchies than he is. However, Wilber's holons nested in holons, criticism of incomplete ideas that either lack sense (e.g., science) or soul (e.g., spirit) and his diagrams and descriptions of the hierarchical nature of all holons are much in the spirit of GEB.

Hofstadter spent little time on spirit (though Zen pops up now and then) and had little to say about the meaning of it all and has written little on the subject since.

This is a much shorter and more accessible version of his famous SES (see my review). Unlike the former book which has hundreds of pages of notes and hundreds of references, there is not even an index here. If you don't have the time or patience for the whole book, read *Superconsciousness* Parts 1 and 2 which are an xln summary. His shortest book, *The Marriage of Self and Soul* (see my review) is a much easier read that gives you a good idea of his style and purpose.

He details a lot of intellectual history (philosophy, psychology, religion, ecology, feminism, sociology, etc.) and shows where nearly everyone went too far in the direction of Ascent (to the spirit) or Descent (to science, materialism, reductionism or Flatland). He tries to show how to heal the rifts by combining sense and soul (spiritual and material life, science and religion, internal and external, individual and social). Everything is related to everything else (holons in holarchies).

The Age of Enlightenment denied the spirit, the individual and the interior life but developed art, morals and science and led to democracy, feminism, equality and ecology, but this reductionism compressed the intellect and the spirit into the Flatland of science, rationality and materialism. He sees the loss of the spiritual point of view with the Age of Enlightenment as the major factor responsible for the malaise of modern times, but real spirituality or 'intelligent religion' (i.e., the quest for enlightenment) as opposed to 'primitive religion' (everything else--see my review of Boyer's *Religion Explained*) was always rare. It is intelligent religion he sees as the panacea, but it is primitive religion that the masses understand, and it too has only materialistic goals.

In this book, he never makes it clear that Jesus was a mystic in the same sense as Buddha etc., but what was to become the Catholic church largely destroyed his mystical aspects (personal search for enlightenment, no mind etc.) in favor of primitive religion, priests, tithes and a structure seemingly modeled on the Roman army (but see his SES p 363). But for the early Christian church, the cognitive templates (see Boyer) were servants of the genes and enlightenment was not on the menu. Jesus was not a Christian, he had no bible and he did not believe in a god any more than did Buddha. We have Christianity without the real intelligence of Jesus and this, as he explains in detail in SES is a major cause of the West's extended stay in Flatland (reductionism).

Wilber is a bookworm and he has spent an incredible amount of time analyzing classic and modern texts. He is extremely bright has clearly had his own awakening, and also knows the minutiae of Eastern religion as well as anyone. I doubt there are more than a handful in the world who could write his type of book.

A major shortcoming is that most of the material he analyzes is of questionable relevance today. They use terminology and concepts that were already dated when he was researching and writing 15 years ago. One has to slog thru endless pages of jargon laden discussion of Habermas, Kant, Emerson, Jung etc. to get to the pearls. He immerses himself in Freud and the psychoanalytic interpretation of dreams (e.g., p92), though most intellectuals now regard these as merely quaint artifacts of intellectual history.

If one is up on philosophy and cognitive and evolutionary psychology, most of this seems archaic. Like nearly everyone (scholars and public alike) he seems not to understand that the basics of religion, ethics, society, in fact all human behavior, are programmed into our genes. A revolution in understanding ourselves was taking place while he was writing these books and it mostly passed him by (and most of society). The evidence (for those who need it) is accumulating rapidly that most of what we do and who we are is resident in universal programs evolved at least 100,000 years ago. Those who doubt this should start with Pinker's brilliant book 'The Blank Slate: the modern denial of human nature', Boyer's 'Religion Explained', and a couple recent texts with 'evolutionary psychology' in the titles or perhaps best is my recent summary of how to describe behavior

Like everyone up til quite recently, the hundreds of authors he discusses lacked any real explanation for human behavior. Why do we even have such ideas and behavior? What are the methods we can use to find out? Everything happens below the surface. Possibly a few Zen and Hindu mystics got some insight into the mechanical churning of the cognitive templates but their explanations are invariably opaque to the rest of us. He seems unaware that his holarchy of the mind (except for top 3 levels) operates in everyone all the time due to its presence in our cognitive templates (and of course our genes).

Though he has read some of John Searle's superb philosophy, and has passing references to research in cognitive psychology, it is amazing that he could extensively research philosophy without studying Wittgenstein, religion without reading Osho and psychology without Tooby, Cosmides et al. Much of evolutionary psychology was only published in journals at the time he was writing and Wilber has almost no references to journals among the hundreds in SES. But Wittgenstein is the most famous philosopher of modern times and Osho the most famous spiritual teacher. It is remarkable that although he spends so much

time in his books discussing the intellectual aspects of therapy (Freud, Beck, Maslow etc.) and clearly understands that the spiritual path is the ultimate therapy, he totally ignores Osho, who had the most advanced therapeutic community in history functioning worldwide for the last 30 years.

A major problem is that Wilber is lost in the airy realms of intellectual debate. Basic biology gets the short straw. As in SES, probably the worst mistakes he makes (along with most of the planet) are ignoring and misunderstanding basic biology. He states that the eye and the wing have to evolve all at once and this has to happen in both sexes at the same time (all at once is known to be tens of millions of years and of course everything evolves in both sexes at the same time!), and that the chances of an enzyme originating by chance is essentially zero (true but irrelevant as natural selection is by chance but it has a test for survival!). Elsewhere he says Darwin really does not explain evolution! Any intelligent high school biology student can refute this! Of course Darwin did not know genetics nor plate tectonics, but it is nevertheless inexcusable to make such statements without careful qualification.

The brute fact is there are 6 billion sets of selfish genes carrying out their programs to destroy the earth. They are an acid that will eat through any intellectual conclusions, egalitarian fantasies and spiritual rebirths. Selfishness, dishonesty, tribalism and shortsightedness are not due to accidents of intellectual or spiritual history. He says that the lack of spirit is destroying the earth, and though there is of course this aspect to things, it is much more to the point to say that it is selfish genes that are responsible. Likewise, he says 'Biology is no longer Destiny', but it is an easily defensible point of view that the reverse is true. The attempt to understand history in terms of ideas ignores biology and in particular denies human nature. Selfish genes always live in Flatland (his term for reductionism) and, as he noted elsewhere, less than 1000 people in all of human history have escaped the tyranny of the monkey mind into enlightenment.

Another major problem (admittedly not unique to him) is that this is very elitist stuff. The aim is to rejuvenate humankind and maybe save the world, but I doubt most readers will persist to the end of these books and that they will come away a changed person. How is the realization that we can meld sense and soul going to change the world? It is Wilber's hope we can somehow be enlightened (figuratively or literally).

Though he severely criticizes the excesses of the two movements, one could regard this as a deconstructive or postmodern interpretation of religion, philosophy and the behavioral sciences from a very liberal, spiritual point of view—i.e., without the worst of the horrific jargon, rabid egalitarianism and antiscientific anti-intellectualism. This is not a criticism of Wilber, but only to suggest that it might be useful to regard some of his books as belonging to this general movement.

Wilber embraces a simple utilitarianism (greatest good for greatest number)—i.e., the greatest depth for the greatest span (p334) but of course this has serious problems such as leading inexorably to the collapse of industrial civilization, starvation, disease, violence and war. Which people should we make happy and how happy and when (i.e., now or in the future)? On what basis do we distribute resources now and how much do we save for the future population? He calls upon our Basic Moral Intuition (BMI) but it is not really to help others but to help ourselves, and the few thousand (or let's be very optimistic and say few million) who are spiritually advanced do not run the world and never will.

Instead of the intellectual or spiritual approach Wilber takes to history, others take ecological, genetic or technological approaches (e.g., Jared Diamond's book *Guns, Germs and Steel*). In the long run it appears that only biology really matters and we see daily how overpopulation is overwhelming all attempts to organize and educate the world. The democracy and equality which Wilber values so highly are just means created by selfish genes to facilitate their destruction of the planet. It is clear as day that they are not the solution but the problem (see my *Obituary for America*). In spite of the hope of Wilber and many others that a new age is dawning and we will see the biological and physical evolution of a new human, the fact is that we are the most degenerate species there ever was, getting worse by the day, and the planet is nearing collapse. The billions of years of eugenics (natural selection) that thrust life up out of the slime and gave us the amazing ability to write and read books like this is now over. There is no selection for the healthier and more intelligent and in fact they produce a smaller percentage of the children every year. Nature does not tolerate physical and mental aberrations but society encourages them. Our peak was probably CroMagnon man or maybe even Neanderthals (who had larger brains) about 100,000 years ago. It seems plausible that only genetic engineering and an enlightened oligarchy can save us. China is overwhelming the West with the latter and soon with the former, and as long as they avoid democracy and equality it will continue.

In the USA, democracy, equality and the burgeoning 'diverse' are now the largest single force for planetary collapse. They only want to replicate and consume. This was a rational strategy when it was fixed in the genes about 100,000 years ago but it is suicidal now. The spiritual rebirth he talks about is not that of born again Christians nor of Hindus, Buddhists or Muslims.

If Wilber want to get his messages to the masses he will have to dumb down his writing and forget about trying to incorporate the world's intellectual history. He also needs to learn basic biology, psychology and human ecology. One of his primary messages is that spirituality (higher consciousness—i.e. the pursuit of enlightenment) is a scientific pursuit, and so there is no conflict between it and science (though he only explains why in other books such as *SES and Marriage of Sense and Soul*). I fully agree, but the problem is that most of religion involves the mechanical churning of the primitive cognitive templates (see Boyer) and has very little connection with spirituality in the sense Wilber has in mind. He describes how Schelling and Hegel united nature and spirit but this seems quite irrelevant to society and even to Wilber, who presumably woke up with meditation and not by reading. Finally, he mentions that the West mostly lacks the techniques for uniting the two, which Zen has found long ago.

He says at the end that it is the poor and ignorant who are the major environmental problem and that this is somehow due to our Flatland approach, so if we just wake up, get spiritual and help them out this will solve it. However, it's clear that everyone is part of the problem and if one does the math (vanishing resources divided by increasing population) it's clear that a drastic reduction in population is necessary and our only choice is to make this happen now by mandatory control or later by starvation, disease and war.

At the very end he tells us that one of the basic ethical principles is to do no harm, but to live (and above all, to reproduce), is to do harm and if reproduction remains a right then there is no hope for the future. Like so many, he emphasizes rights and says less about responsibilities. It should be obvious that we must eliminate rights in favor of privileges that need to be earned. It is a reasonable and necessary view that if society is to treat us as human, we must accept responsibility for the world and that this concern must take precedence over our personal needs. Of course, it is unlikely that any government will ever implement this, and equally unlikely that the world will continue to be a place any civilized person will wish to live in.

