



Critical Book Review

Eye to Eye: By Ken Wilber

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Introduction:

In this profound work the author conceptualizes, describe and differentiate the three levels of knowledge. He proposes that the knowledge which most of us assume to be we accumulated in mind only into three levels. According to him the human beings are equipped with three different levels of faculty of knowing and accumulating knowledge. These three levels are known as sensibilia, intelligibilia and transcendilia. The first one is the faculty of our physical senses which is capable of exploring the physical world only. The second one is concerned with our mind and our intelligence which is responsible to imagine and developing various concepts like mathematics and languages and psychology. The highest level is of conscience which tries to or is equipped with the faculty to connect us with the absolute, to know the unknown or to enter into the realm of God. In a stunning display of integrative embrace, Wilber weaves these various fragments together into a coherent and compelling vision for the modern and postmodern world.

What make sense:

Encompassing science, psychology, philosophy and religion, this book examines three realms of knowledge: the realm of the senses, of the mind and of the spirit. Drawing from a broad spectrum of disciplines, he shows how many common models of reality err by confusing the three realms. In this book Wilber presents a model of consciousness that encompasses empirical, psychological, and spiritual modes of understanding. Wilber examines three realms of knowledge: the empirical realm of the senses, the rational realm of the mind, and the contemplative realm of the spirit. *Eye to Eye* points the way to a broader, more inclusive understanding of ourselves and the universe. This is about philosophy of science and spirituality, and the quest for a new paradigm to reconcile them. It touches on several common errors and fallacies in this quest, most of which the author admits he's committed in the past. One is the confusion between the eye of flesh, eye of reason, and eye of contemplation, and that using one of these eyes for the wrong thing constitutes a "category error." Another is the pre/trans fallacy, which both science and religion commit in opposite ways, in confusing the lowest and highest levels of development with each other. The author talks of objective reality, as distinct from subjective and inter-subjective. The "eye of flesh" implies objectivity, but this eye is worthless without a brain to find meaning from these images--in other words, the eye of reason, the realm of inter-subjectivity. His models are mostly developmental, identifying stages of development, implying, of course, that the higher stages are better than the lower stages. All of this leaves out values--in particular, the values of the author himself, which have gone into shaping these models. He obviously values

spirituality over science, for example, because he lists it as a higher stage of development, but people with different values would likely create different models. In other words, it's subjective or inter-subjective. This book contains the first presentation of a coherent ALTERNATIVE view/epistemology that I have read. He succinctly argues that there are three basic realms of DIRECT experience and knowledge: the physical realm (which we collectively test by the scientific method); the rational/mental realm (which we collectively test by logic); and the spiritual realm (which we collectively test by spiritual & contemplative practices). His view takes all three realms seriously, and so he avoids the frequent tendency within this debate to derogate either science or the spiritual life. I would have liked much more detail on this, however, and he does not even go into where morality and emotion fit. Overall, however, I found it very helpful in just being able to coherently think about reality in a non-scientistic way, something that mere critiques of scientism do not offer.

Epistemology, the study of what can be known, has been all but abandoned in the modern era of philosophy. Beginning with Kant's revelation of the limits of what can be known by rational consciousness, the (rationally based) project of Western philosophy gave up on its prospects for ultimate knowledge. Since it couldn't see beyond the capacities of the rational mind and the realms of the real that higher levels of consciousness could disclose, it resigned itself to the more limited task of evaluating "empirical" data, that is, data disclosed by the senses. Only that which could be disclosed by the senses was deemed "really real," even though the language, mathematics and logic that were used to process the empirical data are not themselves disclosed by the senses of a human being at the primary level or first level of knowledge.

In "Eye to Eye," Ken Wilber applies his spectrum of consciousness model to epistemology. Each of the realms in the spectrum (grossly simplified as body, mind, spirit,) according to Wilber, can be investigated in accordance with its own nature, or with the appropriate "eye." That is, the "eye of flesh," the "eye of mind," and the "eye of contemplation." Investigation of one realm with the eye of another produces, at best, a limited, or representational, understanding (as Kant pointed out with respect to the eye of mind), and at worst, what Wilber calls "category error." Attempting to investigate the realm of spirit, for example, with the "eye of flesh," that is, the eye that perceives only sensory phenomena, will not yield real knowledge of the realm of spirit, which is not disclosed to sensory perception. This results in errors like "empirical" science, which purports to recognize only sensory phenomena, declaring the realm of spirit to be nonexistent or at least non-verifiable, because it can't be "seen." Well, it can't be seen unless you look with the right "eye." Wilber explains why it is critical that the proper "eye," and the corresponding modes of investigation and verification, are used to investigate, and establish validity claims in, the various realms in the spectrum of consciousness. More importantly, he says that all these realms can indeed be known, and that the validity of such knowledge can be tested and verified by the same "scientific" method now applied to the material and rational realms, provided the proper eye, and the proper verification protocols, are used. This constitutes nothing less than a breakthrough in the logjam of modern epistemology. Wilber builds on this core material by exploring some of the promises and failures of the "New Age" movement and presents an outline of his concept of structure, stage and self, the mechanics of the evolutionary development of self. This volume also presents seminal material on what may be Wilber's most original and influential contribution to thought, the "pre/trans fallacy." Wilber says that many thinkers confuse pre-rational stages with trans-rational stages because both are non-rational. This results in either elevating the lower stages (babies are enlightened, hunter/gatherers were more "at one" with the universe, etc.) or diminishing the higher realms (enlightened sages are schizophrenic, confusion of higher realms with repressed lower ones, etc.). This compounds the likelihood

of using the wrong eye to investigate particularly the higher realms of the real. "Eye to Eye" is probably not the book to begin with if you have not read any of Ken Wilber's work. It is rather technical and does not contain a very good overview of his thought system, which may make it more difficult to fully appreciate this book. I recommend "A Brief History of Everything" as the best Wilber primer, and Wilber himself recommends the new "A Theory of Everything." However, "Eye to Eye" is indispensable to more dedicated students of Wilber's work and, I would argue, to any serious student of epistemology. Wilber does a fantastic job of discussing proof within the context of empirical observations (science), cognitive meaning structures (culture), and spiritual experiences. Humans have different equipment for apprehending each domain of reality, have different "eyes," so-to-speak.

Wilber discusses the process by which proof is defined and demonstrates that proof extends beyond simple physical observation as understood through science. No single eye sees all of reality; therefore, no single eye is qualified to make explanations regarding what is observed through other eyes. Can you prove the meaning of Shakespeare using science, asks Wilber? Spiritual awareness can no more "prove" the sky is blue than science can "prove" spirit exists. To use another analogy, the eye cannot prove the existence of sound, nor the ear prove the existence of sight. These are wholly different domains. I find much to value in Ken Wilber's thinking. However, in his critique of modern theory in physics I find a major flaw. On page 130 he asserts: "Science is rather certain that biological life appeared billions of years after matter. Prior to that time, there was no life, no mind. If mind has to measure or observe matter in order for the latter to exist (or have its wave packet collapsed, we arrive at an absurdity." His thinking here is Newtonian rather than modern. He speaks of matter as if it were something real. But listen to Einstein: "There is no place in this new kind of physics both for field and matter, for the field is the only reality". (The Philosophical Impact of Contemporary Physics, pg. 319). He speaks of time ("billions of years") as objective, but listen: When his friend Michele Besso died in 1955 Einstein said, "Now Besso has departed from this strange world a little ahead of me. That means nothing. People like us...know that the distinction between past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion." In his last years when asked by reporters or others untrained in physics what space and time were, he would respond: "Space is what we measure with a measuring rod and time is what we measure with a clock", indicating that space and time are just mental concepts that we humans have created to deal with practicalities. Before the arrival of mind there were no space and time. There were no billions of years. When we speak of the past in the present we are constructing or hallucinating a map, a model, an image of an order we impose as our understanding of the universe.

Wilber presents a model of consciousness that encompasses empirical, psychological, and spiritual modes of understanding. Wilber examines three realms of knowledge: the empirical realm of the senses, the rational realm of the mind, and the contemplative realm of the spirit. *Eye to Eye* points the way to a broader, more inclusive understanding of ourselves and the universe.

"*Eye to Eye* introduces the notion of epistemological pluralism with the (Christian mystic) metaphor of the "three eyes of knowing," i.e., sensory/flesh (sensibilia), mind/reason (intelligibilia), spirit/contemplation (transcendelia). This multi-leveled understanding then brings to light a "category error," or when one "eye" (or realm) tries to usurp the roles of the other two, or is outright mistaken for another. Therefore the "problem of proof" can be solved since each domain provides their own particular validity claims for differentiating the principle spheres of human knowledge (respectively, science, psychology/philosophy,

mysticism). The presentation thus contains an extended examination of the philosophical history of science and its reductionistic tendencies (known as scientism), yet it does so by offering a rational synthesis (or a vision-logic of mandalic reasoning) which can not only include science but also authentic spirituality and contemplative practices. *Eye to Eye* also contains the all-important essay "The Pre/Trans Fallacy," whose conception (a few years back) overturned the common Romantic error adopted by Wilber's earlier writings. This pre/trans fallacy clarifies a major (and disastrous) confusion in the modern world, which simply states that if we are to truly understand and accept the "form of development" (identify, transcend, integrate) at each stage of evolution in a pluridimensional universe, then we must always properly differentiate between pre- and trans- personal domains of consciousness. The book therefore offers not only a strong critique of scientific materialism, but it also brilliantly shines an illuminating light to help guide the "New Age" out of its dark cave of mythic thinking and its regressive (pre-rational) approaches to spirituality."

Wilber's point, though obvious, is important in understanding that there are multiple states of awareness and to properly understand what is transpiring in any one of those states necessitates actually being within that particular stream of consciousness--what Wilber repeatedly calls "worldspace." Otherwise, one cannot fully appreciate the inherent nuances that attend within that conscious space. I can draw on an obvious example from my own experiences to back up Wilber's assertion here. For few weeks I completely lost my sense of smell and taste may be due to the novel virus and thus an entire "worldspace" (what one may call an olfactory universe) was shut off from me, try as I might to imagine it once again. While Wilber's argument from a phenomenological perspective makes eminently good sense, the danger in his approach is that he tends to fall prey to premature reifications when he uses such words as "Buddha nature or Spirit" as if such terms have already been universally accepted by all and sundry . . . which they have not. Moreover, he tends to confuse experience with its causation-reality, forgetting in the process of how easy it is for anyone to be deceived or duped by how certain phenomena are produced. Lastly, he speaks of arriving at an absurdity of an effect happening before its cause, and yet physicists have done experiments that have demonstrated that at the quantum level causes can come after their effect. Recently some scientists (see the book *Biocentrism*) have asserted this retro-causality happens at the macro level as well. If I had space I could give several illustrations of this. I'm oversimplifying, but if we remove space, time, matter and the direction of causality from Wilber's assertion, the only thing left is "biological life", and whatever that is, it seems to hold the answers.

The fundamental problem, I would suggest, is not in the fact that there are many worldspaces (there are), but over how we interpret such experiences. The very reason we have confidence in the relative reality of an apple versus one person's claim of seeing God is that the former can be socially mediated whereas the latter lacks such social verification. It is premature to say the least that such experiences can be properly adjudicated even if we have an idealized Wilber sangat of enlightened beings. The seasoned magicians can easily trick onlookers with the most rudimentary of magic and all this even while we are well trained in our five senses. One can only imagine how easy it would be to trick someone into inflating their own meditative experiences into something far grander than it actually is. Furthermore, the term apple is much more specific than the word God which is far too abstract and too generalized a term to be useful in a discussion designed for specificity. I appreciate Wilber's nice turn of phrase here about Kosmic addresses and how we need to access certain phenomena by correctly entering those domains. Phenomenologically speaking, yes we do live in a multiverse of differing states of awareness. But I think we should be cautious about how we

use the word “real” when describing what these experiences ultimately mean and entail. When it comes to subtler realms of consciousness, the difficulty in determining the relative reality (or permanence? or consensually share inputs?) of what arises is much more fraught with potential missteps, given the paucity of an overwhelming agreement on such matters. I can draw upon my own spiritual tradition to underline this epistemological conundrum. In meditation circles (particularly within Vipassana and OshoKendras), it is almost axiomatic that when an initiate goes within during meditation he or she will see the radiant form of their guru who will guide them by light and sound to higher and higher regions of awareness and bliss.

Wilber does write about this, but I think he assumes far too much in his mandalic way of mapping things out as if the mystical cartography has already been settled upon by earlier pioneers. I wish Wilber would stay within the bounds of reasonableness where he makes strong and believable arguments for exploring differing realms of consciousness.

What is missing:

After the first two chapters Ken falls into some traps. First he repeats himself a lot without saying something new. Secondly, his solution is not inclusive but prefers a transcendental mode. That means that the highest spiritual experience tops all other explanations. He's a big fan of Freud, whose theories have already been debunked at great length. He still finds value in them, and explains ways that Freud has been misunderstood, or was, in fact, wrong. I was completely unpersuaded, and found his obsession with Freud annoying. In this regard, I wish I could see eye to eye with Wilber since I agree with him on a number of issues, but when he succumbs to prematurely theologizing the inner quest with unnecessary reifications, I end up cross eyed. Further Wilber does not clearly differentiate the domains of mind and brain and those of thinking and intelligence. This would have been of better impact if Wilber would have drawn a line differentiating the ever expanding mind versus the calm mind in sync with brain intellect. The depth of Wilber's thinking and his ability to string together disparate disciplines while keeping to critical speculation is exemplary. While at times Wilber will repeat himself and get very nearly lost in the minutiae of his theory, even there can be seen the complete joy and wonder of a man who has suffered and still loves life. This is not something to read, get the point and walk away from. This is a worldview that must be pondered, considered and let seep into the depths of your vision.

Impact of this book on me

As a Person, this book successfully penetrates deep inside me and destroyed many self imposed convictions and assumptions. I feel wiser and calmer thinking about the vast understanding of the author and his view about the reality. I appreciate the differentiated faculties of knowledge acquisition and their mutually exclusive domains.

As a researcher, this book helps in understanding more clearly the different aspects of reality, dissects various aspects of epistemology, and lay a founding to understand and differentiate between science, theology, psychology and reality. Now I feel equipped with the fundamentals of research and various schools of thoughts. I understand that the more humane topics of human conscience and awareness need more efforts from the researchers like us and can be studied scientifically through the well defined and tested constructs.

As a professional academician, I feel that this knowledge can be implemented for the overall development in the understanding of my fellow students and learners. The different realms of knowledge could be well understood and implemented in further research and self development.