

Interview with Ken Wilber

The Marriage of Sense and Soul

Network: What do you regard as the major stances toward the relation between science and religion?

Ken Wilber: Well, in *The Marriage of Sense and Soul*, I outline what I think are five of the most important. These are the different ways that we can look at the relation of science and religion, and they are all generally incompatible with each other, which is, of course, the problem. **One**, science denies any validity to religion. **Two**, religion denies any validity to science. **Three**, science is but one of several valid modes of knowing, and thus can peacefully coexist with spiritual modes (this is generally known as epistemological pluralism). **Four**, science can offer ³plausibility arguments² for the existence of Spirit. **Five**, science itself is not knowledge of the world but merely an interpretation of the world, and therefore it has the same validity as poetry and the arts.

Network: Perhaps we could discuss the meaning of those. Because one of your major conclusions is that all five of those stances fail in adequately integrating science and religion.

Ken Wilber: Yes, that's right.

Network: The first two stances are rather obvious. If science and religion completely deny each other, then no integration between them will occur.

Ken Wilber: Yes. Unfortunately, those are probably the two most prevalent stances into today's world. We all know fundamentalists who don't believe in evolution, but instead believe the biblical account that the world is 4,000 years old. Fundamentalist religion around the world is deeply suspicious of science in any form.

The problem, of course, is that there is simply a massive amount of evidence for many scientific theories, and one can deny this evidence only by tightly closing one's eyes. And let us note that, when these fundamentalists get really sick (with cancer, pneumonia, or such) nine out of ten times they run to the scientific doctor, not their priest.

Network: Then there are scientists who deny religion in any form.

Ken Wilber: Yes. We all know dogmatic scientists who believe in nothing other than the sensory-empirical world and its data as discovered by the scientific method. They leave no room for anything that is interior, anything disclosed by introspection, vision, or contemplation. This of course rules out much of authentic spirituality, which is seen inwardly with the eye of contemplation. But it also leaves out much of modern science, too, because virtually all of the conceptual tools of science itself—from tensor calculus to imaginary numbers to Boolean logic to differential equations—are seen only inwardly, with the eye of mind.

But this type of dogmatic scientist is determined to deny inwardly perceived realities, and so this person, of course, is not going to be interested in integrating science and religion, so that stance obviously will not work.

Network: What about the third, that of epistemological pluralism?

Ken Wilber: Yes, this was the general stance of the perennial philosophy, or the nearly universal core of the world's great wisdom traditions, namely, that reality is a hierarchy of

being and knowing, reaching from matter to body to mind to soul to spirit. And therefore, each level or dimension of reality has an appropriate mode of knowing. Thus, matter and bodies are known by sensory empiricism; the mind and its contents, from logic to mathematics, are known by rationalism; and the soul and spirit are known by gnosis, prajna, satori, and so on. This likewise gives us a spectrum of human disciplines: matter is studied by physics, bodies by biology, mind by psychology, soul by theology, and spirit by mysticism.

This is perhaps the most sophisticated of the five stances, and it certainly has much to recommend it.

Network: But you believe it ultimately fails.

Ken Wilber: Yes, and for the simple reason that it cannot stand up to much of modern knowledge. For example, we have abundant evidence that mental consciousness is, in some sense, connected with the biomaterial brain. It is not simply hovering over matter, completely transcending it. And yet this simple fact completely escaped the perennial philosophy. What if all the so-called higher realms, including soul and spirit, are also nothing but various brain states? The entire Great Chain completely collapses into matter (or biomatter), and there goes your epistemological pluralism with it. According to this view (which is really the second stance we discussed), you don't need higher modes of knowing, like gnosis or satori, because there are no higher levels of being. There is simply the biomaterial world, of which empirical science alone gives all the knowledge you need.

That, anyway, was what modernity and modern science said to the ancient traditions of the perennial philosophy, the Great Chain, and its epistemological pluralism. And those traditions have never really recovered from that devastating blow. So if we are going to rehabilitate epistemological pluralism, it will have to be done in a way that is fully compatible with modern science.

Network: That is what your book attempts to do.

Ken Wilber: Yes, basically.

Network: Let's finish with the last two stances then return to that topic.

Ken Wilber: Okay. The fourth is that science can offer 'plausibility arguments' for the existence of Spirit. In this stance, scientists who are sympathetic to spirit, look to their own scientific disciplines for clues or hints that spirit might exist. The idea is that, as empirical science pushes into the deepest secrets of the physical world, it discovers facts and data that seem to demand some sort of Intelligence beyond the material domain. (The standard example, of course, is the Big Bang. Where did that come from?) There are numerous variations on this argument, most of which are twists on the traditional argument from design, namely, incredibly intelligent natural designs demand an incredibly intelligent Something-or-Other behind them. This is a very old argument, stretching back at least to early Greece, that has recently been attached to modern advances in the sciences (particularly quantum, relativistic, systems and complexity theories).

For scientists who adopt a spiritual view, this is perhaps the simplest and most popular approach to reconciling science and religion. We see it in everything from *The Tao of Physics* (which maintains that modern physics discloses a worldview similar to Eastern mysticism) to the thoughtful writings of Paul Davies (e.g., *The Mind of God*, which maintains that 'By the means of science we can truly see into the mind of God'), to the Anthropic Principle (which

maintains that the evolution of human beings is so improbable that the universe must have known what it was doing from the very start), to the 'new holistic paradigm' approaches (which maintain that systems theory is demonstrating the same great web-of-life that the holistic spiritual traditions embraced).

I have a great deal of sympathy for many of those plausibility arguments. But, alas, none of them can stand up to the critical philosophy of, say, Immanuel Kant or the Buddhist genius Nagarjuna, both of whom strongly demonstrated the limits of rationality in the face of the Divine. If deeply spiritual Nagarjuna is unswayed by these plausibility arguments, you can guess how they go over with nonspiritual types. This is why the vast majority of scientists (and modernity itself tends to take these 'arguments' with mild interest at best, wild amusement at worst).

I myself think they are very useful for orienting the mind toward spirit, but they do not in any way deliver what the deepest religious awareness has always delivered, namely, direct spiritual experience. And since they are already saying that spirit exists, then they should be ready to move beyond mere ideas about spirit and into direct experience of spirit, which demands gnosis or prajna, in other words, they should move on to epistemological pluralism, but only if we can appropriately modernize it.

Network: Finally, the 'science is the same as art' stance.

Ken Wilber: Yes, this is the general stance of postmodernism. It says that our world is an interpretation, not merely a perception. This means that all interpretations are relative and bound only to local cultures of knowing, none of which is privileged. Science, art, poetry, fact and fiction, history and myth, all stand on the same epistemic footing, which is, basically, nothing.

Network: That seems to be the dominant belief of postmodernity.

Ken Wilber: Indeed. The problem is, it doesn't really integrate science and religion, it simply kills them both. No real truth is out there, only shifting, relative, constructed, different interpretations, none of which is better than the others. The problem with that view is that it is a massive self-contradiction. It claims that there are no universal truths; but it presents that claim itself as a universal truth. It says that all truths are culturally constructed, except its own truth that this is so. Postmodernism, in short, claims that its stance is superior in a world where nothing is supposed to be superior. In any event, it is certainly of limited use in genuinely integrating science and religion, both of whom claim to be offering universal truths (just as the postmodernist does, but at least science and religion admit it).

Network: So the conclusion is that, although none of those five stances work, epistemological pluralism comes the closest, but it must be radically overhauled and updated.

Ken Wilber: Yes, that's right.

Network: Let's go into that.

Ken Wilber: This is a terribly abbreviated summary, but perhaps it will give the general notion of how we can reconstruct epistemological pluralism in the light of modern knowledge.

The core idea of epistemological pluralism is that each person has available the eye of flesh, the eye of mind, and the eye of contemplation, which is simply a short version of the Great Chain, matter to mind to spirit. But the crucial point about each of those eyes is that they are experiential. You can have sensory experiences, mental experiences, and spiritual experiences. These can be investigated with direct empirical and phenomenological techniques, in a very grounded and this-worldly fashion.

Network: But the standard skeptical response is, how do you know that spiritual experiences are giving real knowledge and not hallucinations or imaginations?

Ken Wilber: Well, that question occupies the middle section of the book, and is rather involved. Perhaps I could summarize it by saying that I try to outline the three major defining characteristics of genuine knowledge according to modern science itself. These are injunction (or experiment), apprehension (or data), and confirmation/rejection (or fallibilism). I show that these apply in physics, biology, even logic and mathematics. I then show, or try to show, that they equally apply to authentic contemplative knowledge, and I argue this case at length. If this is so, then all three types of direct experience, sensory, mental, spiritual, could be embraced with similar confidence. How to do this occupies the last third of the book.

Network: You call this an 'integral approach'.

Ken Wilber: Yes, the idea is to find a way to honour the entire spectrum of human experience and consciousness, without trying to reduce all modes to one mode or claim that one approach is the only way. This honours epistemological pluralism. At the same time, we need to approach this entire topic with a certain scientific attitude, ultimately based on direct experiences confirmable by others who have tried the same experiment. Religious dogma will no longer do; direct spiritual experience must come to the fore. And this direct experience must be submitted to the scientific test of injunction, apprehension, fallibilism. This honours both the traditional epistemological pluralism, but set in the context of a scientific honesty and demand for evidence. It is my own belief that is one way to unite the best of ancient wisdom with the brightest of modern knowledge.

See review of Ken Wilber's book on page 57.