

VISSER, F. (2003). Ken Wilber: *Thought as passion*. Albany, NY: SUNY. xi + 330 pp. ISBN: 0-7914-5815-6. *Reviewed by Daryl S. Paulson*

Frank Visser has written, arguably, the definitive book on Wilber's philosophy. Visser's book spans the evolution of Wilber's thought through four distinct stages.¹ Most individuals interested in humanistic or transpersonal psychology are familiar with Wilber's works but, apart from them, Wilber is far less well-known, perhaps even obscure. This is unfortunate, for Wilber has made tremendous theoretical contributions.

Wilber has been called the Einstein of consciousness studies by some, but for others who refer to him as the epitome of arrogance, he seems self-absorbed, rarely answering critics directly and skirting their issues, stating that they misread his works, sometimes even referring them to works he has not yet written. So, what is going on? Unfortunately, this book does not tell us. But it gives a reader a peek at Wilber's personal life, but only what he has already shared in print.

While clearly honoring Wilber's work, Visser is capable of thinking for himself and presents his own comments on Wilber's works throughout this book. The book comprises a foreword written by Wilber, an introduction, seven chapters, chapter notes, and a complete bibliography of Wilber's works up to the time of publication.

In the introduction, Visser tells us that, without holding any degree in psychology or advanced degrees in any field, Wilber has become a leading theorist in transpersonal psychology. Only in his 20s, Wilber burst onto the stage of transpersonal psychology with several papers and his first book, *Spectrum of Consciousness*. Although subsequently known as a transpersonal theorist, he has disavowed this label and renamed his works, prefixed by "integral." Hence, integral psychology, integral philosophy, integral art, and so on, were born. Wilber's greatest contributions, like Roberto Assagioli, Haridas Chaudhuri, and Sri Aurobindo, derive from his synthesizing abilities. Visser clearly summarizes the key points of Wilber's work that he will discuss in each chapter, so we have a preview of what is coming.

In Chapter 1, we learn that Wilber was born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, in 1949 and, because his father was in the Air Force, moved often. The moves were socially difficult for Wilber, as they would have been for any other young person. He attended high school in Great Falls, Montana, coincidentally, my home town. Visser states Wilber was at the top of his class and excelled in football, basketball, volleyball, and gymnastics. Visser describes Wilber as a genius—which, most likely, he is—and presents a resumé-type background on Wilber—the bright side, the exception being his second wife's losing battle with breast cancer. Wilber has had, for the most part, a reasonably secure life. He did not fight in the Vietnam War, nor did he become a "druggie" during the 60s, as did so many of his peers. Like Jung and Heidegger, Wilber's trials have been intellectual. Visser tells us that Wilber attended Duke University, planning a career in medicine. That plan changed when he discovered eastern philosophy, initially in the *Tao Te Ching*. From that point on, his intellectual diet included spiritual and psychological "movers and shakers," such

as Krishnamurti, Alan Watts, D. T. Suzuki, C. G. Jung, Fritz Perls, Sigmund Freud, Otto Rank, and Melanie Klein.

Visser begins Chapter 2 with a description of transpersonal psychology and the period in Wilber's life known as "Wilber 1," which spanned the period roughly from 1972–1978. "Wilber 1," Wilber's initial philosophic—spectrum—perspective was presented in several papers and in the book, *The Spectrum of Consciousness* (1977). These writings shook the very foundations of transpersonal psychology. Before Wilber emerged onto the scene, transpersonal psychology was associated mostly with the study of altered states of consciousness. This was a natural fit for many coming of age in the 1960s, who initially identified spiritually with different states of consciousness, achieved mainly through drug-induced experiences (e.g., marijuana and LSD) and, later, through meditation. But Wilber's work provided intellectual grounding by synthesizing psychology, spiritual traditions, philosophy, and science. Now, perhaps for the first time, these disciplines fit together, without being at odds with one another. Wilber accomplished this, in part, by situating each discipline's focus within a specific spectrum band of consciousness. Hence, conflicting schools are not incompatible, they just address different spectrums of consciousness.

At this time, Wilber had adopted a Jungian view to describe the psyche, but he went beyond it in that, although the ego emerges from the unconscious ground, its association with it is repressed and split a number of times into dualistic oppositions. The first split is between God (Self) and self, the second between organism and environment, the third between ego and body, and the fourth between persona and shadow. At some point in life, given a person is developing beyond the egoic concerns, that individual reconnects with the unconscious. However, in time, Wilber found this model problematic, and Visser goes into some detail describing Wilber's dilemma with this view and his eventual rejection of it.² Visser discusses *No Boundary: Eastern and Western Approaches to Personal Growth*, a simplified book version of *The Spectrum of Consciousness* and one of Wilber's most popular books, as well as how Wilber and fellow intellectual, Jack Crittendon, founded the journal, *ReVision*, and wrote many important transpersonal essays.

In Chapter 3, Visser describes in great detail Wilber's shift to "Wilber 2," a period which lasted from 1979 to 1982. Wilber now incorporated a developmental model (sometimes called his ladder model) to describe human growth. This model presented growth in three general groups: preegoic, egoic, and transegoic development, with a number of substages within each group. This model was initially presented in *The Atman Project: A Transpersonal View of Human Development* (1980). Wilber also incorporated some developmental concepts of Sri Aurobindo's works, found in *The Life Divine* and *The Synthesis of Yoga*. And, too, Wilber was influenced by the works of Da Free John (aka Adi Da Samraj), particularly the transpersonal stage concepts of the psychic, subtle, causal, and nondual levels. In *Up From Eden: A Transpersonal View of Human Evolution* (1981), Wilber began incorporating key concepts found in Jean Gebser's work, portraying cultures like individuals, developing through stages—the archaic, magical, mythical, perspectival, and aperspectival—to use Gebser's terminology. To these, Wilber added the transpersonal levels described by Da Free John.

In Chapter 4, Visser presents “Wilber 3” (1983–1987), which was also a developmental model, but one that included multiple lines of development, instead of just a central one. Howard Gardner had performed research in multiple types of intelligence, such as cognitive, moral, musical, kinesthetic, and emotional, and Wilber incorporated them. Yet Wilber developed his thinking farther than did Gardner and included other lines of intelligence, such as spiritual, specific talents, intimacy, creativity, interpersonal, physical, and self-identity. “Wilber 3” began when Wilber presented the essay, “Ontogenic Development,” published by the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*. Visser also discusses the book, *Eye to Eye: The Quest for The New Paradigm* (1983), composed of a number of journal articles, including one that describes three types of knowing originally presented by the Christian mystic, St. Bonaventura, in the thirteenth century. The three ways of knowing were termed the eye of flesh (science), the eye of reason (philosophy), and the eye of spirit (direct spiritual knowledge—gnosis).

Visser also discusses several other books in this chapter. Specifically, *The Holographic Paradigm and Other Paradoxes: Exploring the Leading Edge of Science* (1982), an edited book of articles previously published in the *ReVision* journal and *Quantum Questions: Mystical Writings of the World’s Great Physicists* (1984), in which Wilber presented culled thoughts of Heisenberg, Schrodinger, Einstein, de Broglie, Jeans, Planck, Pauli, and Eddington to show that these physicists did not equate physics with spirituality, even though Wilber described them as mystics. This counters a number of other writers, such as Frithjof Capra (*The Tao of Physics*), who do equate the new physics with spirituality. Wilber did this not to criticize spirituality but to argue that it can stand on its own merits. Visser also discusses *A Sociable God: A Brief Introduction to a Transcendental Sociology* (1983), which was Wilber’s attempt to present a sociology of religion. Visser continues with a synopsis of the book, *Spiritual Choices: The Problem of Recognizing Authentic Paths to Inner Transformation* (1987), a book co-edited by Wilber that depicts the promises and perils of finding both an authentic spiritual path and a teacher. A final book discussed in this chapter is a collection of essays by Wilber, Jack Engler, and Daniel Brown, entitled *Transformation of Consciousness: Conventional and Contemplative Perspectives on Development* (1986). In this book, the developmental models of Western psychology are linked with mystical developmental models.

In Chapter 5, Visser switches gears and tells us of Wilber’s relationship with Terry Killian, his second wife, as portrayed in the book *Grace and Grit: Spiritual and Healing in the Life and Death of Treya Killian Wilber* (1991). Wilber met Terry Killian while living with Frances Vaughan and Roger Walsh just outside of San Francisco, where Wilber stayed to write without financial worry or interruption. When he met Killian, a firestorm romance ensued—several weeks—and then marriage. Terry had undergone a routine physical examination just before their marriage, and that is when their ride through hell began. Terry, who later changed her name to Treya (more a woman’s name than a man’s, in her words), was diagnosed with breast cancer. The “human side” of Wilber is reflected in every page of *Grace and Grit*, and Visser does a superb job rendering it. Visser also provides a very clear presentation of Wilber’s interpretation of death and rebirth, grounded in a Tibetan Buddhist perspective. This ride through hell, culminating in Treya’s death, essentially prevented Wilber from writing for a decade.

Chapter 6 corresponds to “Wilber 4” (1995–2003), which is the All-Quadrant, All-Level (AQAL) view. Here, Wilber expands the lived world space to four lived world spaces. In Wilber’s view, reality is contextual, like the postmodern view, but his view clearly is not postmodern. Wilber also views phenomena as “holonic”—that is, both parts and wholes. All phenomena are wholes in and of themselves yet parts of other wholes. An atom is a whole atom, but it is part of a molecule, which is part of an organelle, which is part of a cell . . . The quadrant perspective includes subject and object, as well as individual and collective. No quadrant can be reduced to or explained in terms of any other quadrant.

Quadrant reality is also hierarchical. Each higher—more inclusive—quadrant space transcends yet includes the former. Wilber launched this perspective in *Sex, Ecology, and Spirituality (SES)* (1995), followed shortly by *A Brief History of Everything*, a simplified question/answer version of SES. Within a year, 1997, *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad* was published, presenting more of Wilber’s views on integral feminism, integral art, integral philosophy, integral anthropology, integral psychology, and the effects of meditation. Shortly after this, Wilber attempted to integrate science and religion in *The Marriage of Sense and Soul: Integrating Science and Religion* (1998). Wilber then published his journal entries over the course of a year, entitled *One Taste: The Journals of Ken Wilber* (1999). This provided a more personalized view of Wilber, as he presents his thoughts almost daily during the year of 1997. Next came *A Theory of Everything: An Integral Vision for Business, Politics, Science, and Spirituality* (2000), presenting an integral vision for application beyond Wilber’s traditional focus. At this time, Visser explains, *The Collected Works of Ken Wilber* (1999–2000) appeared and Volume IV contained a new book, *Integral Psychology* (1999). This was a stream-lined version of the book, *System, Self, and Structure*, that Wilber had planned to write for years but had never published. *Boomeritis: A Novel That Will Set You Free* (2002), Wilber’s first novel, is the last of Wilber’s books, to date. It is the story of a young computer science student (Ken) and his quest for meaning in a fragmented world. It is also an attack on the “boomer” generation for its egocentrism and narcissism, as well as Wilber’s attempt to attract a younger audience. However, this was also a transition period for Wilber, who now realized that a “fifth force” psychology was needed, an integral force.³

In Chapter 7, the last chapter, Visser, a theosophist, points out similarities between theosophical teachings and Wilber’s theories. Visser tries to show that the two are similar and that Wilber’s thoughts can be viewed in terms of theosophy. This is Visser’s perspective, not Wilber’s. Wilber is not a theosophist, nor is he a student of esoteric studies, such as are Alice Bailey, Rudolf Steiner, Helena Blavatsky, Manley Hall, or Adolf Portman. It is to Visser’s credit that he attempts to extend Wilber’s integral model to include theosophy, but it is not Wilber’s view. Visser discusses, in part, Wilber’s attempts to form the Integral Institute (II) and his current internet site, “Integral Naked” (IN), where Wilber interviews his friends and some well-known celebrities.

Visser does not discuss weaknesses in Wilber’s work, such as, for example, that it rests on theory, not research. Wilber argues that this is not so, because he uses valid research results. Even so, although the raw data Wilber uses in his works are collected from others’ research, his way of integrating them is theoretical. That

manner in which he has performed the integration does make sense, but it has not been formally tested in the crucible of the lived world. Wilber, out of necessity, also picks and chooses—gives preference—to what goes into his model and what is left out. Jack Crittendon, in the foreword to *The Eye of Spirit*, stated that critics attack Wilber based on research in their own fields and do not credit Wilber for a coherent over-all approach. This is arguably true but only partially. Integral models are very important to link aspects of “what is,” but it is doubtful that Wilber has “the true integral model.” There likely are multiple integral truths, each valid, depending upon one’s viewpoint and life experiences. Wilber likes to state that, in his view, everyone is right, at least partially. From reading Wilber’s work, however, one gets a sense that he feels he is more right. Wilber’s great contribution is his unusual ability to see relationships between apparent contradictions. All who are interested in transpersonal studies owe Wilber a huge debt but must recognize, too, that no single theorist owns Integral Studies.

In summary, Visser provides an outstanding synthesis of Wilber’s published works through the evolution of his thoughts over time. Visser’s book will be of value to any transpersonal humanist or integral philosophy student who does not want to read all of Wilber’s works to understand his message.

NOTES

¹ At this time, Brad Reynolds has posted on Wilber’s Shambhala website in an essay entitled “Where’s Wilber at?” In it, he states that Wilber is now at “Wilber 5,” a post-metaphysical all-quadrant, all-level (AQAL) approach. Unfortunately, Reynolds also states that Visser misunderstands Wilber, because Visser describes only the first four stages of Wilber, overlooking the current stage, Wilber 5. Reynolds also views Wilber as a “bodhisattva”—the embodiment of Manjushī—presumably increasing his status from pandit to enlightened being. This is a rather large jump for a theorist, but the reader can decide the validity of this view.

² Michael Washburn, however, has taken the Jungian approach, integrated it with current developmental research, some of Wilber’s thoughts, and has produced a convincing alternative to Wilber’s structural model.

³ Wilber was not the first person to envision an integral model. Sri Aurobindo discussed this approach in the early twentieth century in his synthesis of Karma, Jñāna, and Bhakti Yogas. An integral model grounded in Aurobindo’s thought was presented by Haridas Chaudhuri as Integral Yoga in the mid-1960s. Chaudhuri was the founder of what is now the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS). Roberto Assagioli’s Psychosynthesis also took an integral approach. In the late 1960s, Robert Gerard, a pioneer and under-appreciated contributor of Psychosynthesis, termed his psychology “Integral” psychology, which blended esoteric and transpersonal psychologies. Paul Herman wrote on Integral Psychology in the early 1980s and taught a course at CIIS beginning in 1970 entitled “Integral Psychology.” Finally, Michael Murphy presented a full spectrum of integral practices in his book, *The Future of the Body: Explorations into the Further Evolution of Human Nature* (1992) and, with George Leonard, in *The Life We Are Given* (1995).

The Author

Frank Visser is an internet specialist who studied the psychology of religion at the Catholic University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands, and is also the author of *Seven Spheres*.