

NLP & BUSINESS

Philosophy as Fiction

Reflections on Ken Wilber's New "Novel"

by Surinder Deol

Two summers ago I bought *A Theory of Everything*, my first Ken Wilber book. The book and its theme struck a deep chord within me and I ended up ordering all eight volumes of his complete works. For the next four months I spent every spare minute reading those hefty volumes, highlighting portions of the text, memorizing certain lines. It was a kind of craziness that you go through rarely in your life. But the payoff was extremely high. During that period I learned more about religion, spirituality, psychology, and philosophy than in the previous forty years of my life. It was truly a transformational experience.

Ken Wilber is the most important voice in Eastern and Western philosophy. Even his critics acknowledge his greatness though they also see him as a target for attack for their own reasons. He synthesizes Eastern and Western philosophies as no one has in the past. His writing at its best can climb poetic heights rarely scaled since Emerson. His raw sense of humor can easily earn him the right to act as a host of a late night show if he ever decided to give up writing.

The question is: why would Ken Wilber write a novel called *Boomeritis*

with a subtitle "A Novel That Will Set You Free," when he could have written another "normal" text on philosophy? I won't try to second-guess his reasons, but this much I know from his own confession that after writing the book in the usual fashion (with end notes and all that) he had decided to shelve it. Why? Because he was not ready to get into another fight with his academic establishment critics (a.k.a. pluralists, relativists, post-modernists, and everyone else in departments of cultural studies who thinks Ken Wilber is wrong). He turned 180 degrees and decided to rewrite *Boomeritis* as a novel.

When I learned about this I had a mixed feeling about it. I knew that he had a potential to become a poet, but novelist—I wasn't sure. Now after having read this 450-page novel I continue to nurture the same mixed feelings.

We know that literature and philosophy are twins born from the same mother, often displaying typical sibling rivalry, but living and growing comfortably most of the time. Together they are stronger; they nourish and strengthen each other. Literature easily lends itself to a philosophical discourse. But can we say the

same about philosophy? When philosophy is turned into fiction, it easily loses its ground. It is no longer philosophy. It is a jumble of words in the mouths of its character. Of course, we can always re-translate fiction back into philosophy, but this transition can never be easy. Ken has a philosophic viewpoint; even more importantly he is the creator of an integral vision that he has shaped meticulously meshing together hundreds of Eastern and Western philosophies and psychologies. How can he suddenly present a major portion of that work as a piece of fiction without compromising the integrity of his entire work?

There are consolation prizes, of course. For once, he has silenced his critics. Academics don't like to argue with characters in works of fiction; they love living targets. The 21 year old Ken Wilber, who is an MIT student and AI dreamer, is a figment of real Ken Wilber's imagination. Professors who run long seminars in the novel are fictional characters, though Ken often confuses the reader by mentioning real authors, titles of their books, including many of his own books. So where is the boundary line between fact and fiction? If philosophy can be so easily turned into fiction, what else in life can have enduring meaning and purpose?

A typical Wilber book contains book-size end notes. *Boomeritis* incorporates end notes into its fictional text. What about plot and characters? It's all there but not in the sense of a beach novel. The story has a happy ending and the fictional Ken Wilber lives happily ever after with his girlfriend Chloe and dog Isaac in Denver, Colorado.

How can there be a novel without sex? Be patient, there's lots of it. Words make Chloe's naked body twist and turn before your eye dozens of times, though your interest may lie some- place else. Ken has done a great favor to his readers by putting the "sexual" content in bold letters. This means that if you are not interested in the stuff you can easily by-pass it.

Despite my best effort I could not find my comfort-zone around *Boomeritis*, the novel. But when I re-read the book as a work of philosophy I was on a well-trodden path; the scenery looked familiar, including the road blocks, detours, heroes and villains, everything—it's vintage Wilber. Two examples:

Who is stopping us to get to integral awareness? The green meme. What immediately prevents this jump into an integral awareness? A fixation to the green meme. And what is the major cause of fixation to the green meme? *Boomeritis*. (p. 111)

And what is *Boomeritis*? *Boomeritis* is that strange mixture of very high cognitive capacity (the green meme and

noble pluralism) infected with rather low emotional narcissism (purple and red meme) ... *Boomeritis* is one of the primary roadblocks to an integral embrace... *Boomeritis* is not confined to Boomers, any more than Lou Gehrig's disease is confined to Lou Gehrig. Anybody can get it; it's simply named after its most famous patient. (pp. 36-39)

Spiral Dynamics is the thread that holds the book together. Having read the original text by Don Beck and Chris Cowan and taken a three-day workshop by Don Beck, I can say that Ken raises Spiral Dynamics to a new level of clarity and depth. If anyone had a doubt that Spiral Dynamics will be the dominant human development framework for early 21st century, that doubt should be put at rest. Ken adds

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so much richness to the memes identified by their color codes that beige, purple, red, blue, orange, green, yellow and turquoise will henceforth have a different meaning for me. I also wish that Ken had paid half as much attention to yellow as he did to green. As a self-confessed green (though not strictly a boomer as I did not grow up in America of 1960's), I am keen to move forward, easing the traffic jam at the end tunnel of green meme. But I can't because I don't know enough of yellow. Maybe I have to patiently wait for Ken's next 1,000 page regular text that he has promised some years ago to know the secrets of yellow and turquoise!

Why should NLP practitioners read this book? Because so many of them are deeply infected by the green meme, and so many of them are true Boomers. NLP has lot to learn from emerging levels of consciousness (which the Spiral is all about) and the emerging science of memetics. It is not difficult to foresee in the near future the need for separate NLP courses for Deeply Infected Greens, Killer Bee Reds, Book Thumping Blues, and Dot Com Burnt Oranges. The possibilities are endless!

And why should business care about Boomeritis? Because corporate America is at present experiencing an ethical meltdown (Enron, Anderson, Global Crossing, Tyco, WorldCom, Xerox). The much-espoused green meme has worked as a façade to cover the dirty work of pre-conventional beige, purple and red memes to pursue personal power and unlimited greed of those in high positions to the detriment of hard working oranges and idealistic

greens. The traditional training techniques can't show any lasting results in this situation because pre-conventional memes don't really care about vision, culture and values. NLP is also of limited use because it is not some individuals who need transformation (where NLP is most effective), but we need to transform the whole system. We need a new approach, an approach that uses NLP presuppositions together with the Spiral of development as described by Ken Wilber in this book as well as in his previous works in order to move the system to an integrated whole creating a true union of economics, spirituality, ethics, and human development.

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