



Tomorrow's Wider Embrace

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Down the decades of the twentieth-century, the mystical wisdom of the East has had a hypnotic appeal for many Western minds—like Heinrich Zimmer, Giuseppe Tucci, Alexander David-Neel, Rene Guenon, Aldous Huxley, Carl Jung, Lama Anagarika Govinda, Alan Watts, Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell and Fr. Bede Griffiths. Today, Ken Wilber is the brightest name in the East-West encounter. A young American (born 1949) of astonishing erudition, profound insight into the mystery of consciousness, and a beautiful prose stylist as well, Wilber has produced a series of books that embody an exceptional understanding of the Eastern spiritual and philosophical traditions, and a syncretic sensibility integrating Eastern and Western thought—a pioneer in a truly integral or world philosophy.

Wilber's early books focused on transpersonal psychology. The Western roots of transpersonal psychology (also known as the "Fourth Force," coming after Psychoanalysis, Behaviourism, and Humanistic Psychology) lie in the psychological-spiritual visions of Carl Jung, Roberto Assagioli, Abraham Maslow and Stanislav Grof. Earlier, William James (in a celebrated observation) noted: "Our normal waking consciousness is but one special type of consciousness, while all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different." Transpersonal psychology postulates that the ego is "suboptimal" because "our true

identity” is beyond the ego. It therefore discards the limited focus of psychoanalysis and the ego in favour of a transcendental perspective of “our ineffable subjectivity” which extends to the Self (*Brahman, Shunya, Tao*), whereby the ego is viewed as a contraction of identify, a constriction of “unity consciousness” or “no-boundary awareness” which is our “real self.”

Wilber has uniquely consolidated the premises of the Fourth Force, and his model of the higher stages of consciousness is the jewel in the crown of transpersonal psychology. The self’s “Supreme Identity” commands centrality, and with this transpersonal turn Western psychology has for the first time acquired the complexion of an *adhyatma vidya*.

Wilber’s first book (written when he was twenty-three), *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, offers a synthesis of numerous schools of psychology, therapy, and consciousness, East and West. Through the “spectrum” model of consciousness, Wilber advances six “bands” or “levels” of consciousness—the Mind (or Spirit) Level, the Transpersonal, the Existential, the Biosocial, the Ego, and the Shadow. Each of these levels of consciousness in descending order is the outcome of a progressive fragmentation/reduction of the Spirit Level, the self’s original identity of “unity consciousness.” This primal cosmic identity of the self with the All declines to a separate organism (body-mind totality), resulting in the splitting of nondual Reality into organism vs. environment, subject vs. object (the Existential Level). This dualistic splitting continues and identity diminishes from the organism to the ego, resulting in the duality of ego vs. body (the Ego Level). Dualistic fragmentation descends further and identity narrows from the ego to the persona (a narrow role self), resulting in the final duality of persona vs. shadow (the Shadow Level: the shadow is the sum total of tendencies repressed because they are unacceptable to the persona). Thus the Self becomes “distinct from and false to itself,” Unity is sundered into dualities, and the non-dual Spirit narrows into the impoverished persona. A concern with this descent or Involution—or the way “Unity consciousness becomes individual consciousness, our Supreme Identity becomes a personal identity, the Self becomes a self”—and Evolution, or the way the self regains its original condition of Unity beyond all the illusory dualities and opposites of *maya*, is at the heart of Wilber’s thought. *The Spectrum of Consciousness* is clearly alive to

avacheda-vada (theory of limitation) which emphasizes *upadhi* (limiting adjunct) that causes misidentification.

According to Wilber, each of the major schools of Western psychology (such as Freudian, Jungian, Existential, Humanistic and Gestalt) has “zeroed-in on one major band or level of the spectrum. It is not different schools forming different theories about one level of consciousness, but different schools each predominantly addressing a different level of the spectrum.” The self’s recovery of its lost Wholeness begins with the integration of persona and shadow into a healthy ego (psychoanalysis), then enlarges into the reowning of the body by the ego into an existential organism (Gestalt and Humanistic Psychology) and culminates in the organism embracing the All in blessed not-two-ness which is the “suchness” of the Self (Advaita Vedanta, Mahayana Buddhism, Zen). Transpersonal therapy recommends a corrective recognition of the growth-value of experiences and opportunities which foster the expansion of identity, the evolution of consciousness, the *nivritti marga*.

Wilber’s *Up from Eden* is a genuine classic. A dazzling mix of anthropology, paleontology, psychology, mythology and mysticism, *Up from Eden* constructs a history of consciousness in relation to human evolution. Wilber has composed this awesome chronicle of consciousness with such a rare wealth of wide-ranging multidisciplinary rhetoric and complex argumentation that a summary of *Up from Eden* cannot capture its unique spirit.

Wilber observes that over a span of six million years of human evolution, four types of consciousness have prevailed: the archaic-uroboric, the magical-typhonic, the mythic-membership, and the mental-egoic. In the archaic-uroboric consciousness, which prevailed from roughly six to two million years ago (the period of *Australopithecus africanus*, *Homo habilis* and *Homo erectus*), self and nature were often undifferentiated in a condition of instinctual embeddedness in nature. The “uroboros” is the mythic image of the serpent eating its own tail, and symbolizes for Wilber all of the prehuman stages of evolution, matter to vegetal to reptilian and early mammalian. He refers to uroboric subconsciousness as “Eden,” and notes that the uroboric lack of subject/object, inner/outer differentiation was not a “trans-personal heaven” but a “pre-personal slumber.”

The magical-typhonic consciousness, which prevailed from two million years ago to around 10,000 years ago (the times of Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon) involved a beginning differentiation of the body from nature but a lack of distinction between self and the body. The magical-typhonic consciousness was a “bodyself,” still magically interwoven with nature and its elemental powers. This fledgling separate self was the first to experience the dawn of “some form of death terror” since dread of extinction goes hand-in-hand with separate existence. The “typhon,” in mythology, is half human, half serpent, and therefore is a fit symbol for the first differentiation from uroboric subconscious instinct. As for the mode of time of the magical-typhonic consciousness: “The foragers, hunters and gatherers of typhonic prehistory...lived pretty much moment to moment or, at most, day to day.... For a typhonic hunter, immortality consisted in living until tomorrow.”

Wilber reckons the discovery of agriculture around 10,000 BCE as the effect and the vehicle of a new structure of consciousness—mythic-membership: “The world of farming is the world of extended time, of making present preparations for a future harvest.... With the advent of farming, men and women entered an extended world of tense, time and temporal duration, expanding their life and consciousness to include the future.” Wilber considers this new awareness of a “tensed world” as the consequence of the evolution of language (50,000 BCE to 10,000 BCE). Mythic-membership was a verbal (mythic narrative) and temporal-text consciousness marked by both a growth of consciousness and by a “heightened death seizure.” The high period of this mode of consciousness was the age of the classical mythologies and civilizations: Egyptian, Babylonian, Sumerian, Aztec-Mayan, Chinese, Indus Valley and Mycenaean.

The second millennium BCE witnessed the beginning emergence of the mental-egoic consciousness which has since continued to the present as the “average mode” of consciousness. Consciousness now significantly differentiated from nature and the body into utter willful independence. However, the ego not merely differentiated from nature and the body, but lamentably “dissociated” from both, resulting in the schism between self and nature, reason and instinct, which continues to plague us. The “Hero Myths” so prevalent at the start of this period are, for Wilber, symbolic of the emergence of the ego. Further, from this point onward, consciousness for the first time begins to experience the human condition “as an insufferable state of sin, exile, or delusion.” Yet

in each period—magic, mythic, and rational—Wilber also traces the history of those few who managed to transcend the average mode and find instead the higher, transpersonal, spiritual modes—the shaman, the saint, and the sage, respectively.

For Wilber, the ego is not the height of alienation, but actually “half way home”: “The ego is perched midway between slumber in the subconscious and enlightenment in the superconscious...” Wilber views evolution as “the return of Spirit to Spirit via development.” Fifteen billion years ago “the material cosmos blew into existence with the Big Bang, which was really the roaring laughter of God voluntarily getting lost for the millionth time, for the fun and sport (*lila*) of it...” From that point on, observes Wilber, evolution back to Spirit began: “Look at the course of evolution to date: from amoebas to humans. Now what if that ratio, amoeba-to-human, were applied to future evolution? That is, amoebas are to humans as humans are to—What? Is it ridiculous to suggest that the ‘what’ might indeed be omega, *geist*, supermind, spirit? That subconscious is to self-conscious as self-conscious is to superconscious? That prepersonal gives way to personal, which gives way to transpersonal? That Brahman is not only the *ground* of evolution but the *goal* as well?” “We may all take heart,” observes Wilber, “for it now appears certain that you and I came up from Eden so that we may all return to Heaven.” Drawing inspiration from the insights of Fichte, Hegel, Schelling, Sri Aurobindo, Nicolas Berdyaev, Teilhard de Chardin, Erich Neumann, Jean Gebser and Joseph Campbell, Wilber has formulated in *Up from Eden* a towering discourse on the origin, nature and destiny of consciousness.

In *The Atman Project*, Wilber elaborates two major movements in the development of individual consciousness (ontogeny): “the Outward Arc” and “the Inward Arc.” Wilber notes that though ontogeny does not exactly recapitulate phylogeny (evolutionary development of the species) there are similarities between the two. The Outward Arc points to the growth of the individual self from the prepersonal, predifferentiated unity of the newborn with the environment (the “pleromatic self”) through embryonic forms of separateness (the “uroboric,” “typhonic” and “membership” stages) to the emergence of the full-fledged separate ego, the “mental-egoic” self. (“Pleroma” is a gnostic term denoting physical nature—like *prakriti*). While the Outward Arc is “the story of the ego” and the “psychology of time,” the Inward Arc is “the path of return” and “the psychology of eternity.” The Inward Arc points to the

development of the self beyond the mental-egoic stage (*Nirmanakaya/sthula-sarira*), through the “Centauric” or Existential stage of a body-mind totality and the “Subtle” stages (“low” and “high”) of the *Sambhogakaya/suksma-sarira*, to the “High-Causal” self of ultimate transpersonal Unity (*Dharmakaya/karana-sarira*). The “low-subtle” sometimes manifests paranormal powers or *siddhis* like out-of-the-body experiences, precognition, clairvoyance and psychokinesis, while the “high-subtle” self is “the realm of high religious intuition, of symbolic vision; of audible illuminations and brightness upon brightness;...of higher presences, guides, angelic beings, ishtadevas....”

Following Wilber’s scheme, we might say that the Bhakti poetry of the Alvars and Nayanmars is gloriously expressive of the high-subtle consciousness. The ishtadeva or Favourite Deity of the Bhakti saints—Lord Ranganatha (Vishnu) of Srirangam for the Alvars and Lord Nataraja (Shiva) for the Nayanmars—“is God as an archetypal summit of one’s own consciousness...that Deity which, from the beginning, has been one’s own Self or highest Archetype,” as Wilber summarizes it. The transcendentalist devotional rapture of the Bhakti saints is a mark of “consciousness in a rapid ascent...differentiating itself entirely from the...rational ego.” The high-archetypal form of the Deity “mediates the ascension of consciousness.” In the high-subtle, “consciousness reverts to, or remembers, its own prior and higher identity.” The Outward Arc and the Inward Arc combine to constitute a cycle from subconsciousness through self-consciousness to superconsciousness, some seventeen stages of which Wilber carefully outlines and summarizes, based on hundreds of researchers East and West, in what is the most comprehensive psychological developmental model yet proposed.

In the course of his presentation, Wilber introduces the notion of “the pre/trans fallacy.” Of the three poles of evolution—prepersonal, personal, and transpersonal—the prepersonal and transpersonal are often erroneously “confused” or “collapsed” (“since both are, in their own ways, nonpersonal”): either the transpersonal is “reduced” to the prepersonal or the prepersonal is “elevated” to the transpersonal. In the worldview of orthodox science and Darwinism bred by the former fallacy, development moves from prepersonal nature to the “high point” of the rational ego with nothing beyond. In the worldview of orthodox religion based on the latter fallacy, humanity declines from a spiritual source to the “low point” of the personal ego. Wilber has rigorously examined the merits and limitations of these two worldviews in relation to a more integral and

inclusive philosophy. Wilber's account of the "Pre/Trans Fallacy" is a landmark in modern psychology, and is one of the first tools we have for distinguishing between trans-rational development and pre-rational regression.

The Spectrum of Consciousness, *The Atman Project*, and *Up from Eden* constitute a monumental trilogy on consciousness. The intellectual virtuosity with which Wilber fuses ancient Eastern insights and modern Western knowledge to achieve a total vision of consciousness is unparalleled.

Wilber's other written or edited books of that period include *Eye to Eye*, *Quantum Questions*, *The Holographic Paradigm*, *A Sociable God*, *Spiritual Choices*, and *Transformations of Consciousness*. His work was interrupted when, ten days after his marriage, his beloved wife was diagnosed with cancer. Wilber took the next five years off, and served as her primary support person, until her passing in 1989. At her request, he wrote of their struggle (*Grace and Grit: Spirituality and Healing in the Life and Death of Treya Killam Wilber*).

He emerged from that period to write his magnum opus, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality—The Spirit of Evolution*, an 800-page treatise called by Dr. Larry Dossey "One of the most significant books ever written." [There follows a long summary of SES, which we have deleted because it overlaps information given below.—Eds.]

In his recent book-a-year writings—*Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* (1995); *A Brief History of Everything* (1996); *The Eye of Spirit* (1997); *The Marriage of Sense and Soul* (1998); and *One Taste* (1999)—Wilber has produced what amounts to a testament of postmodern spirituality, which seeks to "integrate the wisdom of premodernity, modernity, and postmodernity." At the heart of the premodern world, Wilber sees "the Great Nest of Being"—the "essence of premodernity," the "dominant worldview" and "the nearly universal consensus about reality held by humanity for most of its time on this earth":

Reality is a rich tapestry of interwoven levels, reaching from matter to body to mind to soul to spirit. Each senior level "envelopes" or "enfolds" its junior dimensions—a series of nests within nests within nests of Being. Each senior level in the Great Nest, although it includes its juniors, nonetheless possesses emergent qualities not found on the junior level.

Wilber claims that with the rise of “modernity” in the seventh and eighteenth centuries, the Great Nest of Being “took a colossal hit from which it never recovered.” The pivot of this argument is Max Weber’s definition of modernity as “the differentiation of the cultural value spheres” of art, morals and science (or what Wilber calls “the Big Three”—“the Beautiful, the Good, and the True;” or “I, We, and It;” or “Self, Culture, and Nature”). For Wilber, this “differentiation” constitutes “the dignity of modernity,” whereby art, morals and science could now each “pursue its own truth without violence and domination from the others. You could look through Galileo’s telescope without being hauled before the Inquisition. You could paint the human body in a natural setting without being tried for heresy against God and Pope.”

But, Wilber contends, this “differentiation” went too far into a “dissociation” in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that led to the contemporary “flatland.” If the differentiation of the value spheres was “the dignity of modernity,” their dissociation was “the disaster of modernity,” which allowed an imperial science to dominate the other spheres, including art, morals, consciousness, and spirituality, reducing and “destroying” them in their own right, with a resultant worldview of *scientific materialism*, which is still the “dominant, official worldview” of the West.

This “collapse of the Kosmos” (as Wilber also calls the disaster of modernity) is tantamount to a rejection of the core of interior truths of “all of the world’s great wisdom traditions” (which have served as “the backbone of every human culture prior to modernity”) and has generated a modern flatland “with no consciousness, no interiors, no values, no meaning, no depth and no Divinity.” Wilber views “the modern West” as “the first major civilization in the history of humanity to deny almost entirely the existence of the Great Nest of Being.” For Wilber, “the challenge of our times” is to “introduce the within, the deep, the interiors of the Kosmos, the contours of the Divine” into a world “reduced to the flattest surface,” to reclaim the Great Nest of Being from the colonializing violence of “scientism.”

Therefore, according to Wilber, if modernity managed to *differentiate* the value spheres, the task of postmodernity is to *integrate* them. Wilber examines three major “rebellions” against “the disaster of modernity”: Romanticism, Idealism and Postmodernism. Each of these “reactions to flatland” was marked by “a resurgence of the interior domains screaming to be heard, acknowledged, realized, honored.” Wilber

has taken the best of each and woven them into a integral vision of startling beauty, thus uniting premodern (Great Nest) with modernity (differentiations) with postmodernity (integration, via integral-aperspectival or vision-logic, a mode of cognition that sees unities-in-diversities). In Wilber's view:

each epoch, each era, each stage of evolution brings with it important truths, valuable insights, and profound revelations. Each stage is true, each succeeding stage is 'more true': it contains the previous truths and then adds its own, emergent, novel truths, thus both including and transcending its predecessors. This is not elitist, and it offers no reason for any epoch (even ours) to picture itself as privileged, because it, too, is destined to pass, to be transcended and included in tomorrow's greater embrace.

In order to integrate the Great Nest with modernity, Wilber points out that the Big Three of art, morals, and science actually contains four major spheres, not just three (science is divided into individual and systems sciences). These "four quadrants," when applied to the Great Nest, allows the essence of the premodern worldview to be differentiated in the light of modernity, and thus open to integration via vision-logic, a feat which, if accomplished, would amount to the inclusion of the best of premodern, modern, and postmodern, and the feat to which Wilber has devoted his recent books.

The four quadrants represent the "interior" and "exterior" of the Kosmos in its "individual" and "collective" forms (see figure). The Upper Left (intentional) is the interior-individual, or "the inside of the individual;" the Upper Right (behavioural) is the exterior-individual, or "the outside of the individual;" the Lower Left (cultural) is the interior-collective, or the "inside of the collective;" and the Lower Right (social) is the exterior-collective, or "the outside of the collective." Wilber calls the quadrants "the four corners of the Kosmos" or "the four faces of Spirit." Further, each of these four quadrants is a holarchy of "at least ten basic levels," which Wilber describes in detail, drawing from research in evolutionary biology, crosscultural studies, developmental psychology, cultural anthropology, hermeneutics, contemplative spirituality East and West, structuralism and poststructuralism, cognitive science, aesthetics, to name a few.

In order to integrate these differentiations—integrate the four quadrants, and thus fulfill the promise of a constructive postmodernity—Wilber maintains that we have to value each of their truths equally. Wilber suggests that "each of these quadrants has its

own particular type of truth or type of validity claim”: *propositional truth* of the Upper Right (accurate correspondence with an “objective state of affairs”/ “of matching map and territory”); *subjective truthfulness* of the Upper Left (not “true exteriors but sincere interiors”—without deception and deceit which distort subjectivity—which cannot be “determined propositionally” and therefore involves “not the truth of the map but the truthfulness of the mapmaker”); *intersubjective justness* and morals of the Lower Left (the “cultural fit” of being “intersubjectively in tune” with the rules, meanings and practices of the “cultural worldspace”); and *interobjective functional fit* of the Lower Right (the “mesh” of the total social system as an exterior whole based on what each social part can “do” in the social network).

Each of these types of truth is composed of “evidence and data” drawn from its own quadrant, and none of these truths can be reduced to the others—each has to be integrated and included on its own terms, “speaking its own language.” For example, the “subjective truthfulness” of satori is not falsifiable by the “objective truth” of a CAT scan report or an EEG graph: CAT scan is an Upper Right tool adequate to empirical surfaces with “simple location” and therefore not an injunction that provides a “valid apprehension” (“direct experience of data”) capable of confirming or rejecting satori, which is an Upper Left depth of subjectivity whose injunction is zazen or vipassana. Further, “because *depth* does not sit on the surface for all to see” as empirical truth but is a subjectivity of truthfulness, the attempt to use Upper Right falsifiability as a determinate of Upper Left truth is also hopelessly confused:

When the needle jumps on the EEG machine, what am I experiencing? Am I seeing a brilliant interior illumination that seems to carry a compassionate depth and warmth? Or am I thinking of new ways to rob the local liquor store? The EEG machine will not, and cannot, tell you. And in the quest for this type of interior truth, the validity claim is truthfulness, trustworthiness, sincerity (Upper Left). If I am being insincere in my reports, you will not get an accurate phenomenology of my interior states at all but only a series of deceptions and concealments. Moreover, if I have already thoroughly *lied to myself*, I will honestly believe I’m telling the truth, and absolutely nothing on the EEG machine will be able to spot this. So much for empirical tests. Thus, meditative physiology relies on objective data guided by the yardstick of propositional truth,

whereas meditative phenomenology relies on subjective data guided by the yardstick of truthfulness; and we can see a striking example of the Upper Right and Upper Left approaches to consciousness, with their different but equally important validity claims.

Wilber likewise shows that scientific truth (Right Hand), art (Upper Left), and morals (Lower Left) cannot be reduced to each other. In a classic explanation of the example of “the thought of going to the grocery store” (in *A Brief History of Everything*), Wilber shows the “circle” of interrelations of the intentional, behavioural, cultural and social dimensions of this “thought” and establishes the truth that consciousness/reality is “distributed across all four quadrants” and not “located solely” in any one quadrant. Wilber’s recent writings constitute a prolegomena for a new “integral theory of consciousness” which is an “all level, all-quadrant” approach that honours the truths of all the four quadrants and their various levels. As such, none of the four quadrants (nor any particular level in any quadrant) has the “only” or “final” truth—all are to be embraced and integrated. Most of the epistemologies prevalent today—from science to art to morals to postmodern poststructuralism—accept one or two of those truth claims; few honor them all. Wilber, on the contrary, displays a pioneering passion to decipher and vindicate the importance of all of these quadrants and all of these levels (“I don’t see any other way,” he says, “that we can generously integrate premodern, modern, and postmodern truths”).

At the beginning of his work in the mid-‘70s, Wilber championed a “synthesis” of the structures and therapies of all the levels of the spectrum of individual consciousness, and now in the late ‘90s, he is pursuing an “integral vision” of the holarchies and truths of all the four quadrants of the Kosmos. Across twenty-five years of research and meditation and sixteen books, Wilber’s holism has wonderfully magnified to “a wider embrace” from individual consciousness to the Kosmos. From an intentional spectrum psychologist of the Upper Left quadrant (*The Spectrum of Consciousness, No Boundary* and *The Atman Project*) through a cultural anthropologist of the Lower Left (*Up From Eden, A Sociable God*), to an integral philosopher of unmatched capacity (*Eye to Eye; Sex, Ecology, Spirituality; The Eye of Spirit*), Wilber has expanded into a simultaneous historian of “everything.”

Wilber's sixteen books constitute a curious variation on the Great Nest of Being: each new book is a "nest" that "enfolds" its predecessors and "adds something emergent, distinctive, and defining" that is not found in its predecessors. From *The Spectrum of Consciousness* to *One Taste*, Wilber's books are a sequence of "enveloping nests of increasing embrace." With majestic theorizing, erudite exposition, meticulous scholarship, rigorous argumentation, Wilber has pointed the way to an integral vision. He has been a voice of India's best in a way that few Westerners can equal. Moreover, Wilber's spiritual prose, with surpassing wisdom, confers the benediction of reading as meditation. Often, Wilber's philosophy of nonduality turns into a poetry of *prajna*. Wilber's spiritual lyricism of nondual rapture incarnates the ineffable condition of the self-realizing ending of everything in the final "embrace" of not-twoness after "billions and billions of years" of "untruthfulness," "ignorance and deception":

And there, hidden in the secret cave of the Heart, where God and the Goddess finally unite, where Emptiness embraces all Form as the lost and found Beloved, where Eternity joyously sings the praises of noble Time, where Shiva uncontrollably swoons for luminescent Shakti, where Ascending and Descending erotically embrace in the sound of one hand clapping—there forever in the universe of One Taste, the Kosmos recognizes its own true nature, self-seen in a tacit recognition that leaves not even a single soul to tell the amazing tale.

And remember? There in the Heart, where the couple finally unite, the entire game is undone, this nightmare of evolution, and you are exactly where you were prior to the beginning of the whole show. With a sudden shock of the utterly obvious, you recognize your own Original Face, the face you had prior to the Big Bang, the face of utter Emptiness that smiles as all creation and sings as the entire Kosmos—and it is all undone in that primal glance, and all that is left is the smile, and the reflection of the moon on a quiet pond, late on a crystal clear night.

A visionary synthesis of multidisciplinary doctrines of diverse thinkers of different times and cultures into a precious theory of jnana yoga, an original refiguration of the perennial philosophy as a new paradigm for the postmodern wasteland, and a miracle of *prajna* and *karuna*, the writings of Ken Wilber are the highest achievement of

spiritual theory in the twentieth century, and one of the great wonders of contemporary thought.