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A Jostling on the Shelves

Connie Barlow

Months ago, when I was planning my summer 1995 reading, I decided that two books would be marvelously suited for a coupled review in the *Teilhard Perspective*. Perhaps, I hoped, the 1995 books by Ken Wilber and Daniel Dennett would reveal the same majestic tension of evolutionary worldviews in collision as did the masterpieces by Teilhard and Jacques Monod.

Ken Wilber's 524-page opus (with half again that many pages in small-type, not-to-be-missed notes) kept me entranced for more than a week. *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* is ill-served by its tabloid title; the subtitle *The Spirit of Evolution*—is far more on the mark. (The "sex" part of the title, in fact, does not even surface until page 472.) Shambala is the publisher, but the scholarship would have passed muster with any university press. The ideas come fast and furious. Fortunately, Wilber is an excellent writer, sometimes a beautiful writer. And his uncompromising way of taking a stand on so many issues of scientific, philosophical, and religious consequence kept my critical faculties on the alert. Despite perhaps initial resistance, I usually found I had to agree with him.

A student of consciousness and pioneer of transpersonal theory, Wilber has a genius for transcending conflicting ideas and worldviews. For example, he takes neither side in the "things v. processes"

debate; rather, in his view, reality is composed of "holons" (a term invented by Arthur Koestler). The most fundamental feature of the universe is nestedness. Every thing or process is both a whole in itself and a part of something else—hence, a holon. I was stunned to discover the logical sloppiness in traditional schemes (such as that of Karl Popper) for depicting the nestedness of the universe—atoms, molecules, cells, organisms, and so forth. Nested classifications that make no distinction between "populations" and "enduring compound individuals" violate an immensely useful logical rule: If an entire category is extinguished, then every level more fundamental than it goes on much as before, but every higher level vanishes. Consider: If one constructs a holarchy that contains the sequence "prokaryotic cells, eukaryotic cells, multicellular organisms, Gaia," then extinction of all multicellular organisms would mean the extinction of Gaia. (Unlikely.) But by viewing Gaia as a *population* of prokaryotes, the logic is preserved. Gaia falls outside the holarchy of enduring compound individuals. In my view, Wilber would have done well to introduce the concept of "swarm" from complexity theory, which considerably enhances the power and appeal of a simple population, but that is a quibble.

Wilber also does a fine job of pointing out the shallowness in so-called holistic or new paradigm ways of thinking. The holists (including systems thinkers), in Wilber's view, are just as bad as the reductionists and atomists they abhor in one crucial way: both groups are "flatland ontologists." That is, both groups focus on the exterior, functional, or relational aspects of something, ignoring its *interiority*. Here Wilber gives tribute to Teilhard's emphasis on "the within." Organisms are not just instrumental parts of the great whole of the biosphere; they have their own interiority. And, yes, humans *are* special for the level of consciousness within. "The Eco philosophies, with few exceptions, are the photographic negative of the Ego philosophies; the two of them are the flatland twins in the dance of Gaia's destruction...The one absolutizes the noosphere, the other absolutize's the biosphere, both contributing equally to the failure of integration...If the biosphere is Divine, then the noosphere must be the Crime." He cautions that, while transcendence to or emergence of new levels is the very essence of human spiritual as well as cosmic evolution, the new level can become pathological if the lower levels are thenceforth repressed or denied. A healthy noosphere utterly depends on a healthy biosphere; yet the cure for humanity's wrong relations with the biosphere must come through advances in human understanding and valuation in the noosphere—not regression to a more primitive level of noospheric development.

In his introduction Wilber cautions us to "read the book a sentence at a time." What audacity!, I said to myself. And so I was prepared to do just the opposite—out of spite. And yet I was never tempted by boredom, frustration, or over-familiarity to skip or skim even one page. So my recommendation to you: Mark it up and take notes. The book is too important to read without the opportunity for later reflection and recovery of ideas that resonated, and it is too dense and long to read more than once!

Ken Wilber thus fulfilled half of my summer reading wish. Yes, I had indeed found a masterpiece on a path parallel to that of Teilhard. What about the book I had hoped would measure up to *Chance and Necessity*, the 1970 anti-Teilhardian book by Jacques Monod?

Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life was a disappointment. Daniel Dennett, whose previous book was the controversial and acclaimed *Consciousness Explained*, begins well enough: "Almost no one is indifferent to Darwin, and no one should be. The Darwinian theory is a scientific theory, and a great one, but that is not all it is. The creationists who oppose it so bitterly are right

about one thing: Darwin's dangerous idea cuts much deeper into the fabric of our most fundamental beliefs than many of its sophisticated apologists have yet admitted, even to themselves." But then, in my mind, Dennett stumbles in several serious ways. "There is no future in a sacred myth. Why not? Because of our curiosity." Dennett makes the error of assuming that a myth, by definition, is necessarily based on superstition or outright falsehood; truth, in his view, cannot be mythologized. (Our own Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme have shown otherwise!) At the same time, anything that is "science" cannot be "sacred." And yet, as even a cursory reading will show, Daniel Dennett not only has religion, he is an ardent proselytizer. He goes so far as to conjecture a Darwinian answer to all the just-so, life-allowing curiosities of the universe that spawned Tipler's anthropic cosmological principle. The answer: an evolution of universes!

I had several serious problems with the stylistic choices Dennett made for this 521-page book. First, he attempts to do too much, spinning off into lengthy criticisms of the ideas of others. The story, his point, gets lost. Second, the level of each critique is so technical that few general readers will be able to follow the argument. I view myself as well-read in evolutionary theory, yet I could barely keep up with his reproof of Stephen Jay Gould. And what a reproof it was! Dennett does a hatchet job on the dean of contingency. I am no fan of Gould's viewpoint that evolution is just one crazy thing after another. And, like Dennett, I am angered that Gould's takes on evolution are received by nonspecialists as *the* scientific viewpoint (I wince to think of the damage Gould has done in two decades of monthly columns in *Natural History* magazine: evolution has little chance of finding a partnership with spirituality in the minds of those readers). Nevertheless, I was repulsed by the nastiness of Dennett's attack. That sort of harangue would not be tolerated in a peer-reviewed journal, and it would be most unlikely to survive the review and editing process at a university press (the book was published by Simon and Schuster). But then again, perhaps what goes 'round comes 'round: recall the nasty attack Gould made on the character of Teilhard from the platform of *Natural History* magazine.

Dennett does do a service, however, in inventing a lovely pair of metaphors to depict the fundamental contrasts in evolutionary views: "skyhooks" and "cranes." One species of a "skyhook" interpretation of evolution posits mind or spirit giving birth to the universe with a bang, which from then on may (or may not) evolve strictly by "cranes"—that is, accomplishments that spin off further accomplishments, what Jacob Bronowski called the "ratchet" of evolution. Another kind of skyhook, however, would be a telic draw, such as the Omega Point of Teilhard. Advance and novelty is not booted from behind but beckoned from ahead. Dennett, of course, sees only cranes—a view I share, to a large extent. One passage elegantly evokes this view: "If there are no skyhooks needed to make a skylark, there are also no skyhooks needed to make an ode to a nightingale." Dennett is an emergentist through and through. It is cranes all the way down, and there ain't no skyhook out yonder. But then he inexplicably backs away from the emergentist view in finding no "meaning" in the universe. He is surely entitled to his view that the universe has no inherent meaning that it carried from the start. But as a good emergentist he ought to acknowledge that just as life emerged, and flight emerged, and music emerged, meaning too emerges. Perhaps "meaning" has in fact emerged with us. It comes into being through our sense of awe and our groping interpretations of the cosmos. The particulars of its genesis make the phenomenon of meaning no less real, no less a manifestation of the universe, than is flight marred by its mundane invention a mere several hundred million years ago by a six-legged form of life on one among billions of

star systems. Flight is now undeniably a feature of the universe; today so also may be meaning.

Dennett doesn't see meaning in that way. Rather, he clings to the existentialist stance (so eloquently and frighteningly rendered by Jacques Monod a quarter century ago). The universe is meaningless, Dennett proclaims, and we humans—who apparently stand outside the cosmos as onlookers must invent meaning for our own humble uses. It is a human phenomenon, not a cosmic phenomenon.

Loyal Rue makes the same misstep, in my view, in his 1994 book, *By the Grace of Guile: The Role of Deception in Natural History and Human Affairs* (Oxford University Press). In calling for rebirth of a myth to "reenchant the universe," he declares that "the ultimate purpose of this book is to oppose a monstrous truth with a noble lie." For him, nihilism is not a philosophical conjecture; it is truth—albeit monstrous truth. We need a "noble lie" to cloak the universe with meaning and thus restore "personal wholeness and social coherence." Otherwise, *By the Grace of Guile* is a brilliant and far-ranging book, but for me the chief merit was in getting me to finally pick up Rue's earlier book, *Amythia: Crisis in the Natural History of Western Culture* (University of Alabama Press, 1989). Here Rue says all the important things about the dire need to restore a sacred narrative—but he doesn't outright declare that the story and the meaning drawn from it are necessarily a ruse. Consider this sampling of some of his most delectable passages: "Only a rigorously contemporary myth can place our hopes where our energies can make a difference." "The task of averting amythia is to be accomplished not by leaving the church, but by changing it radically." "In myth we encounter the integration of cosmology and morality. In myth we are presented with a unity of the 'true' and the 'good'." "A shared myth is the source of both social coherence and personal integrity. Myth creates a synergy of individual rights and social responsibilities." Rue's suggestion, overall, is to replace the root metaphor of a personal God with the root metaphor of evolution—all the while maintaining the Covenant tradition of our Judaeo-Christian heritage. For me, it was an easy step to see how one could take Rue's lead and translate the *promise of survival* of the people who followed the sacred rules of Yahweh into the *opportunity for survival* of our species if we follow the sacred rules of membership in what Thomas Berry calls the earth community. As with all the best books, Rue's is a fine catapult for one's own most imaginative thoughts.

The four books now go back on the shelf, and I suspect I will off and on sense them jostling for my attention. Surely, Wilber's masterpiece and Rue's 1989 gem will not suffer neglect.

Work on Teilhard, 1980-1994: an Annotated Bibliography

Compiled by James F. Salmon and Thomas M. King

This annotated bibliography is a selected list of works published during the recent past by and about Teilhard. The selected listings are grouped under headings of works by Teilhard and works about Teilhard. The latter are categorized into religion, philosophy, science, and miscellany. Finally, the location is given of some principal libraries containing collections of writings by Teilhard. The emphasis is on literature written in English and French. There have been publications in other languages but English has been the most common medium used. Dissertations have not been included in the listing. The period 1980-94 showed a decline in the number of publications relative to 1966-80, but the listing below indicates there is still considerable interest and scholarship regarding Teilhard.