

What can IDM offer the Integral Movement? Reflections on the Second ITC Conference

By Nick Shannon

I have recently returned from a fascinating three days at the “Integral Theory” conference led at John F Kennedy University near San Francisco. The conference, attended by an international audience of over 500 people, had the core theme of “Enacting an Integral Future”. I was there to learn about “Integral Theory” and also to hear Otto Laske and Jean Ogilvie present their paper, “On the Autonomy and Influence of the Cognitive Developmental Line: Reflections on Adult Cognitive Development Peaking in Dialectical Thinking”. As it turned out the paper won first prize in the section of “Upper Left Quadrant” - of which more later.

To the extent that people attending the conference, and others for whom Integral Theory is a meaningful doctrine, choose to use Integral Theory as a way of thinking and being, it could be argued that there is an emerging and international Integral “movement”. The most obvious common link between people in the movement is their study of the work of the American author, Ken Wilber, who has also founded the Integral Institute, an organization that seeks to promote and advance the Integral theory by showing how it can be applied in various different domains, for example, Integral art, Integral ecology, Integral economics, Integral politics, Integral psychology, and Integral spirituality. Wilber is perhaps best known for his “AQAL” (all quadrants, all levels) model that, in essence, sets out to map reality in terms of four irreducible perspectives - (shown graphically as four quadrants:- subjective, intersubjective, objective, and interobjective), and then separates those quadrants into developmental levels, hierarchically arranged.

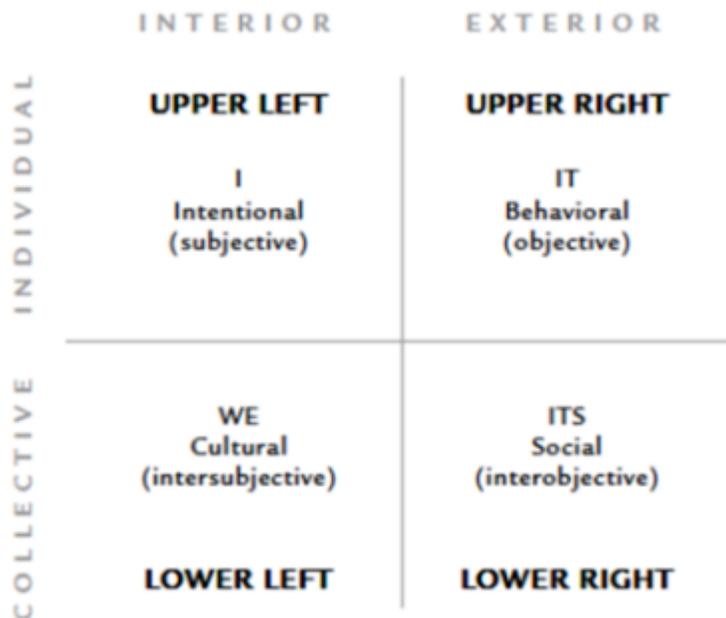


Fig. 1. Wilber's Quadrants

In addition, Wilber stipulates three additional categories, which he refers to as lines, states and types that inhere in each quadrant. A “line” (also referred to as a stream) could be said to connect levels of development under a specific heading. For example, in the Upper Left Quadrant, examples of lines include cognitive, emotional, kinesthetic, moral, spiritual etc. In the Lower Left Quadrant, lines include cultural values, worldviews, linguistic meanings, and so forth. As lines pass through levels they demonstrate increasing degrees of complexity and development. Each level is also said to “transcend and include” the previous level, indicating a strong relationship between levels. A “state” is described as a temporary phenomenon with its own unique characteristics. Examples of states in the Upper Right Quadrant include brain states, hormonal states, and behavioural states. Examples of states in the Lower Right Quadrant include weather states, economic states, and ecological states. The final category is one of “Types”. Here types refer to a more permanent grouping of characteristics than states. There are for example, personality types (Upper Left Quadrant), blood and body types (Upper Right Quadrant), governmental regime types (Lower Right Quadrant) and religious types (Lower Left Quadrant).

Wilber’s AQAL model has at least two appealing features. Firstly it is inclusive, which is an understated way to say that Wilber has found a way to bring a vast array of theory, scientific findings, and belief systems under one roof. And in doing so, he has raised the possibility that what society often takes as absolute or indisputable, is perhaps just one part of a vast mosaic of ways in which we can look at the world. This insight leads many people to a greater appreciation of the different perspectives that other people hold, and perhaps to hold their own belief system with a more humility. Secondly, the model has an elegant symmetry where the basic structure of a quadrant is repeated in all of the others. This symmetry, which is set out in 20 tenets, simplifies the complexity of an all-embracing map of reality – Wilber’s boldly named “Theory of Everything”. Perhaps more significantly the appeal of Wilber’s work lies in the range of applications to which AQAL has been put. While Wilber has focused mostly on the implications of his model for psychology and spirituality, in particular higher levels of consciousness, the take up of Integral Thinking has been far and wide. Projects are being undertaken globally in fields as diverse as International Development, Business, Education, Coaching, and Forestry. And in the great North American tradition of personal self-development, a manual has been published on the subject of Integral Life Practice.

However, as I discovered at the conference, and with all credit to the organizers who invited them to come forward, Wilber and Integral Theory are not without their critics. Unsurprisingly, they also come from far and wide but, perhaps paradoxically, they seemingly include some of Wilber’s greatest supporters. It appears that Wilber had not always responded gracefully to his critics, and yet, the conference organizers urged us as attendees to move towards a new phase of integral theory (2.0) – based on Wilber but not “Wilber-centric”, and to be affectionately (as opposed to aggressively?) critical. Wilber followers are sensitive to the perception that Wilber is seen as “new age” by the mainstream academic community, and in that context it was interesting to see Robert Kegan appear as the key-note speaker, and even more interesting to hear him deliver a decidedly un-academic presentation.

So without necessarily being rooted in mainstream academia itself, what then can IDM offer both Wilber followers and the Integral movement? As much as Wilber’s writings are prolific and dense, Wilber’s critics are numerous and varied in their attacks. I do not pretend to defend

Wilber against all of their criticisms, and nor would I want to, but I do want to propose that the Constructive Developmental Framework (CDF) and dialectical thinking, as taught at IDM, may offer some way of reconciling some of the difficulties seen in the AQAL model, and may even help the Integral Movement gain some of the academic respectability that its keenest supporters crave. Moreover, and this is perhaps the common ground of IDM and the Integral Movement, in that the ultimate goal of the latter appears to be that of sponsoring developmental movement to “higher” levels of consciousness, IDM offers some very practical tools and teaching to achieve such development.

There are four points I want to make regarding how IDM teachings can support the Integral Movement’s goals, and one important point to make of difference or departure. The first two points relate to how AQAL is understood and interpreted. The second two relate to how adult development can be fostered in people. Firstly, IDM’s focus on adult development is itself a strong contribution to the content of Wilber’s Upper Left Quadrant, as evidenced by the award to Otto of conference organiser’s prize. Secondly, IDM’s focus on the dialectical elaboration of abstract concepts lends clarity to Wilber’s blurred notion of waves, types, levels, lines and quadrants, and to the nature of the AQAL model itself. Thirdly, IDM can help, through its teaching of dialectical thinking, the Integral Movement to realize a language that is in itself more transformational and less pre-occupied with the complex structures that AQAL, as a “theory of everything” entails. And fourthly, IDM offers a teaching curriculum geared, specifically, to the cognitive “line”, which meets students where they are developmentally, and facilitates their growth social-emotionally. The point of departure is that, in no sense, does IDM attempt to embrace the “Spiritual”. In fact, CDF as taught by IDM is principally pre-occupied with the stage of adult cognitive development following on from what Piaget termed the formal operational stage involving the development of abstract reasoning. This developmental stage can be revealed through the language that adults use to communicate their thinking, and thus CDF is intensely focused on the structure of spoken language as a tool to understand an adult’s mental life. The content of language, and that includes spiritual content, is put aside in favour of an analysis of what language can tell us about the way someone is thinking.

The Upper Left Quadrant

Because Wilber has written extensively on Integral Psychology and Spirituality, this quadrant – relating as it does to subjective experience - is the one that has had the most attention and appears to be the structural model for the other quadrants. CDF makes an important contribution to our understanding of the quadrant itself, by separating the cognitive and social-emotional lines of development, and then investigating their relationship. Whilst Wilber suggests that lines of development are independent, CDF suggests a much closer relationship, albeit a complex one. This focus on the relationship between different lines is an example of how dialectical thinking can serve to integrate concepts where Wilber has only gone as far as putting them in separate categories, tying them loosely together in the same quadrant, but not spelling out the relationship. In addition, by highlighting the inter-related nature of lines of development in the Upper Left Quadrant, CDF also suggests that the assumed distinctions between developmental lines in the three other quadrants may not be as clear cut as Wilber suggests.

More importantly, CDF shows us that much as Integral theorists might like to see the left-hand quadrants as subjective and the right-hand quadrants as objective, all quadrants are constructed by the mind. The common ground of the quadrants is our human awareness of reality, i.e. consciousness, not reality itself. Since we don't come to know reality directly, only through the filter of the mind, the study of adult development and the way that people at different developmental stages construct their reality should take precedence over the attempts to unfold reality per se. As Laske says, "everyone constructs their own Wilber".

Dialectical Unfolding of Concepts

I have already described some of the multitude of concepts such as lines, states, stages and types employed by Wilber in the AQAL model. What exactly are we to make of such concepts? As Lakoff and Johnson have shown, abstract concepts are metaphorical in nature. For example, in order to derive meaning from the concept of "wave" one has to have some sensory experience of a physical wave. When you and I have similar sensory experiences of a wave, then we might share the same meaning of the concept. But since there are many different kinds of waves, water, sound, light, radio etc. we should not take it for granted that we are thinking about the same thing when we talk about waves in general. And so it is that a speaker (or writer) must spell out abstract concepts through language if we are to grasp what he or she means by them.

Dialectical thinking, as taught at IDM, focuses the listener on the use and elaboration of the abstract concepts used by a speaker. In fact, a cognitive interview is an attempt to see just how far speaker can go in explaining his or her own thinking. This method takes understanding someone to a new level, since the focus is on the use and structure of language as opposed to the content. The meaning of abstract concepts is not simply taken for granted. The approach could also be useful to those studying Integral Theory since Wilber's work has promoted a language and nomenclature that is dauntingly pervasive and somewhat impenetrable, raising the question "how do we know whether we are talking about the same thing?"

More specifically, a foundation of dialectical thinking is the notion of preservative negation, encapsulated by Thought Form 2. Preservative negation enables us to move in our thinking from one concept to a more complex and deeper understanding via a process that entails sequentially: stating a concept; elaborating the concept by relating it to another concept that is apparently (or substantially) opposite to, or excluded by the initial concept; and finally creating a new concept that is broader and deeper, encapsulating both the first and second concepts. This kind of synthesis of concepts captures a developmental movement that underpins consciousness. From the very start of our lives our minds categorize our sensory experience. If we consider infants, for example; they might distinguish initially between "me" and "not me". This differentiation can be followed by further differentiation as the "not-me" concept is itself categorized (mother/father), or by integration where such concepts become part of higher-level concepts, such as "family" and "people". While language anchors concepts to separate entities by giving names to them, dialectical thinking reminds us that concepts are always related in some way, no matter how separate they might seem. Hence, the dialectical exploration of the AQAL model might also enable a greater appreciation of how Wilber's categories are related.

From Contextual to Transformational Language

If our thinking is based largely on metaphor (as Lakoff and Johnson maintain) it is interesting to consider the metaphors that underpin the AQAL model and to contrast these with the metaphors underpinning dialectical thinking. It should be immediately obvious that AQAL is primarily a model based on spatial-relations. Quadrants are containers laid out in space, the contents of which are arranged hierarchically in lines or waves, and organized structurally into separate levels, stages and tiers. This is primarily a visual model or map. Exploration of the model is a task of describing which concepts are in which quadrant and where they stand in relation to the hierarchy of other concepts. Note that in spatial-relations terms, “up” is often associated with “good” and higher levels are mostly seen as “better”. This metaphorical association has led some people to criticise Wilber’s model for valuing higher developmental levels more than lower ones. Furthermore movement is generally seen as being “upwards” and as “growth”, whereas in theory it could be in any direction. Therefore for Wilber, concepts at higher levels have to transcend and include concepts at lower levels, even though this seems unlikely when we investigate evolutionary models. The quadrants, metaphorically associated with physical containers, also make it difficult to see how something could be in more than one quadrant at a time, and hence deprive us of an understanding of the relationship of concepts in one part of the model to another. Whether we like it or not, the two-dimensional spatial representation of AQAL carries with it implications for the way we think and reason about it. Such an effort, therefore, to represent consciousness (if not a theory of everything) is inevitably flat and lifeless, as Laske has pointed out, being described principally in terms of context thought forms.

Underpinning Dialectical thinking is the metaphor of living systems. I believe that the 28 thought forms have their origins in our experience as human beings of nature. Our understanding of such thought forms depends largely on our experience of the natural world, something we can acquire with age, but which comes to us only after we have developed the foundations for logical thinking. Once we become conscious of the limitation that language has in describing reality, which is principally the way that it imposes rigidity on concepts, we may be more willing to explore our conceptual world metaphorically. And so, as a dialectical thinker comes face to face with Wilber’s AQAL model, he or she is bound to ask questions: - what implications might arise if we were to see levels, lines, stages and states in constant flux? What new insights might we gather if we were to link these different elements of the model together? What are the limits to the stability of the systems presented here? How might these systems re-organise and transform themselves at higher or lower levels of functioning? Once these questions are asked then AQAL starts to lose its static nature and become alive. Such “mind openers” as Laske terms them, thus have the power to turn AQAL into something much more compelling and transformational as a model.

Cognitive Development and Higher Levels of Consciousness

Many people feel the desire to live their lives in more balanced, fulfilling and happier ways, and for thousands of years, religions, cults, gurus and therapists have promised a dazzling array of methods to achieve such growth. Yet, a science of what makes us happier and more developed as human beings is only just emerging. In addition to creating communities of practice, the Integral Movement has produced its own guidance manual in the form of a book on Integral Life

Practice, divided into 4 core modules – Body, Mind, Spirit and Shadow. Whilst the issue of whether such practice actually leads to development is still to be settled empirically, an examination of the book's module on Mind reveals little more than an exhortation to take different perspectives and to explore and apply the AQAL model. There is no link to what is known about adult cognitive development and very little to practice. The Integral Movement thus appears to lack the tools for cognitive development, other than the repetitious teaching of its own model.

IDM teaches dialectical thinking through a variety of different courses and offers an assessment process to measure an individual's level of cognitive development. There is no promise here of higher levels of consciousness, simply the offer to show individuals how they currently make sense of the world and what they can do to enhance that view. And since the teaching of dialectical thinking is largely through listening and analysis of peoples' descriptions of their work and the organizations that they work for, IDM's courses are directly relevant for the majority of students who work in organizations of their own. Learning to think dialectically is not a quick fix for intellectual deficiencies, nor is it likely to result in a sudden jump in social-emotional development, but it is a first step in understanding the limitations of our conceptual language, and enquiring further into the nature of reality. If we are to understand the strengths and limitations of Wilber's work and especially get a deeper insight into AQAL, dialectical thinking is a necessity.

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