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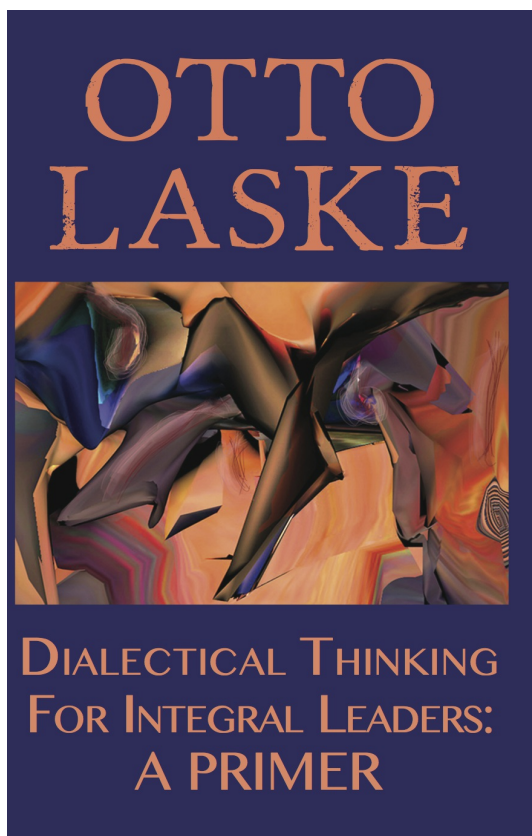
## 8/19 – Otto Laske, *Dialectical Thinking for Integral Leaders*

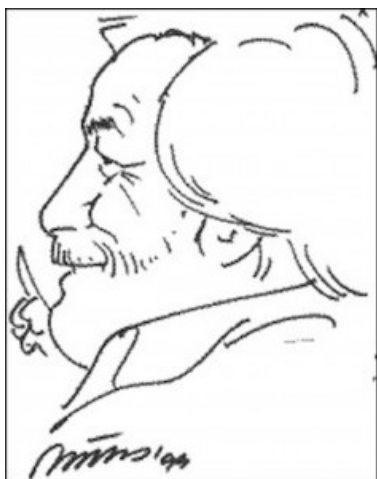
2015-08-18 08:08:22 Russ Volckmann

### Reflections on Otto Laske, *Dialectical Thinking for Integral Leaders: A Primer*

Otto Laske, *Dialectical Thinking for Integral Leaders: A Primer*. Tucson: Integral Publishers, 2015.

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**Full disclosure:** *I am the publisher of Otto Laske's newest book, **Dialectical Thinking for Integral Leaders: A Primer**. As such I must acknowledge that I am part of a for profit company that seeks to bring integral/transdisciplinary voices into the public dialogue ([www.integralpublishers.com](http://www.integralpublishers.com)). Otto's is such a work and one I believe all those interested in their development should attend to, be it through an integral worldview or some other developmental path.*

Early in my appreciation of the work of Ken Wilber I wondered about his treatment of process. Aside from nods to Whitehead (whose books I still have read only excerpts from, but keep by my side in my office for that day I am ready to dig in further) I did not read or hear a treatment of process in Wilber's work that was satisfying.

In my work with learners in the subject of integral leadership I tended to focus on process as the subject of psychology in the internal-individual quadrant, biology and sociology in the exterior-individual quadrant. In addition, I would consider the relationship between the individual and context. Culture and systems were included in the equation – particularly expressed as collective constellations of worldviews (culture) and as a dynamic aspect of the systems quadrant, including structure, communication patterns, boundary management, stakeholder engagement, decision-making, problem solving and a host of leadership and management functions.

I grew to recognize that what we were exploring seemed much more about how we think about phenomena, events and occurrences, rather than focusing on the particular theories of leadership. It also occurred to me that our thinking involves attention to processes that we need to attend to in support of development, individually and collectively.

Along came Otto Laske. He makes it very clear that this book and his approach is focused on how we think, not what we think. Laske states,

*Becoming fully dialectical, and thus mature, is important for the integral movement and all those touched by it, in all of its forms, because all of the problems it is taking on are transformational problems*

He continues,

*Dialectical thinking is NOT about meaning making; it is rather about finding TRUTH and, at the same time, enabling masterful handling of complexity...*

Meaning and sense making have been important themes in my own work. I think they continue to be important, particularly psychologically. As such they shape behavior in the upper right quadrant of Wilber's map in relation to individual engagement with culture and systems. How we think is influenced by our assumptions about meaning and sense making. How is it a monological (internal to the individual) process and how is it dialogical (the product of interactions with our human and nonhuman environment)? Laske is suggesting that we must re-examine how we think, but does not here address the question of monological and dialogical dynamics in how we think. Perhaps he will/has in other work.

Laske's work presents, in very usable terms, a framework and practices that promote more complex thinking capabilities for individuals. These practices can be applied in any domain from collaborative teams to organizational systems and to systems of systems. As a reader, though, my challenge is to understand how his approach might help me (and others) grasp a way of thinking that is holistic and attends to time as a critical variable. After all, this is what I found missing in the boost Wilber and others' work had given me. Time is a critical variable in relation to process and development.

I have been aware that Wilber's work and integral theory have supported expanding my thinking in relation to context and seeing the potential for relating quadrant variables, lines of development and levels or stages of development. Nevertheless, these categories are essentially static, despite attempts to describe transitions, for example in entering and exiting phases of stage development. Also, recognizing that developmental and anomic movements are possible suggests that movement – some sort of process – can be described. But in Laske's terms this is only the beginning in building our capacity for comprehending complexity.

He states,

*The central argument in this book is that human thinking is at its core dialectical, thus open to becoming a highly developed form of common sense and of formal logical thinking...I am showing in this book that logical thinking carries with it a transformational energy...*

The world needs to apply dialectical thinking to addressing the complex issues we face in the world today, many of them the unintended consequences of simple logical thinking. Drawing on the work of Roy Bhaskar, Michael Basseches, and Eliot Jaques, Laske has developed a framework that begins with Common Sense and then includes stages focused on Context,

Process, Relationship and Transformation. Each of these is a stage in the development of dialectical thinking. They lead to enhanced Practical Wisdom that then enhances our Common Sense as our capacities for dialectical thinking are refined.

Each level of classes of thought forms can be understood in three ways:

1. Pointing to a dialectical concept (p)
2. Elaborating a dialectical concept (e), and
3. Linking dialectical concepts (l).

Thus, if we take Process as an example, we might engage with it in terms of

1. e: “emergence and inclusion of opposites”,
2. p: “patterns of interaction”, and
3. l: “embeddedness in process”.

Pointing, Elaborating and Linking relate to each of the four main themes of the framework. Attention to these variables leads to integration in our thinking dialectically.

For example, in relation to context – where most of us are very comfortable – pointing leads us to examine the relationship between parts and the whole. Elaborating has us consider the structure and stability of the system we are concerned with. Linking has us consider the system under variable conditions, that is, multiple contexts and frames of reference. This still leaves us with the challenge to integrate these. When we do that, we must then turn to Process, Relationship and Transformation with similar sets of elements.

It occurs to me that Laske’s approach should find welcome application in transdisciplinary research and development. Whether in the approaches of the Frankfurt school or the followers of Basarab Nicolescu, so well described by Sue McGregor (<http://integralleadershipreview.com/13135-616-the-nicolescuian-and-zurich-approaches-to-transdisciplinarity/>) or in the projects described in McGregor and Volckmann, Transversity ([http://integralpublishers.com/ip\\_books/transversity/](http://integralpublishers.com/ip_books/transversity/)), transdisciplinary work requires a far more holistic mode of thinking than traditional linear thinking.

Jay Bernstein (<http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/rt/printerFriendly/510/412>) suggests that transdisciplinary work can be done by an individual who can integrate content and method from multiple disciplines. Such an individual would not only know the terminology, models and research methods associated with multiple disciplines, but would also need to be able to think far more holistically about the subject than is typical of research published in most disciplines. In a sense, we still anticipate heroes of discovery and despite appreciation for the team behind the hero, we pretend that it is the individual who deserves our appreciation. This is less and less evident in transdisciplinary research, particularly in relation to the many highly complex mix of scientific, technical, socio-cultural and psychological issues. In planning

and implementing ways to effectively address climate change, for example, all of these disciplines have a role to play.

In addressing issues like climate change it is even more likely that it will take teams and teams of teams to be effective in addressing our challenges. In transdisciplinary teamwork, as Laske so clearly points out, ways of thinking that hold the potential, not just for including perspectives from different disciplines and domains, but for integrating those perspectives is critical. Integrating diverse worldviews and perspectives in teamwork is, of course, not a new challenge. It is one that decades of consulting, team building activities and coaching have been trying to address. I wonder, having engaged in that work myself for more than three decades, how much more successful teams might have been if they had been able to effectively address this integration challenge. Spiral Dynamics (and other frameworks) offers one type of intervention for addressing this. I would suggest that Laske's is an additional intervention that can make a positive difference.

I will share a challenge that Laske's work poses for me. I suspect that this challenge would also confront others in any developmental work.

Aside from just remembering the framework, to develop facility with it requires practicing both understanding and presenting this understanding with others. I am reminded of the approach used by Stagen in their development program for CEOs. In addition to learning about the Red, Blue, Orange and Green worldviews of Spiral Dynamics by identifying these within themselves, later in the program the CEOs learn how to identify these in others and to communicate to others in terms of the variable worldviews. Eventually, they learn to simulcast or communicate to multiple worldviews in a shared context like a team or shareholders meeting. But it takes a lot of practice to do this well. A similar point may be made of Laske's approach.

Who said development comes easy? Not me. Nearly 80 years of living has led me to greater clarity about how much more development cognitively, socio-emotionally and psychologically might have been possible if I had paid attention more, been more open, thought more deeply, communicated more thoroughly. How much more useful might I have been to my coaching and consulting clients? How much more solid a relationship with a friend, a spouse, a child might have been possible? How much more psychologically healthy might I have become? These are questions about transformation, the goal Laske lays before us.

Laske does not attempt to answer questions such as these here. Nevertheless, he shows us a path for engaging the complexities of the world in order to support transformation. We can build on the mapping of Wilber and embrace methods such as Laske's. Each brings their strengths and we can use our strengths to better integrate what we learn from them. For me, I intend to keep Laske's primer close to hand. I want to see how much more meaning I can extract for myself, my relationships with others, and my work so that we all might build a more generative future.

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