

The Tyranny of AQAL¹

Reflections on the JFKU Integral Theory Conference, July 2010²

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When you play the game of Scrabble, do you notice how play sometimes gets scrunched down into one small corner of the gameboard? People keep coming up with ingenious new words, but they are confined to a shrinking and increasingly congested space. That's the way we often felt about the July 2010 Integral Conference at JFK University. Stimulating and often brilliant, but generally limited to one small (but highly important) section of the Integral gameboard.

At a conference with so many enticing speakers, we like to browse. To get the lay of the land, we circulated among three or four presentations during each workshop session, gleaning the essence of the speaker's presentation. Then we supplemented those initial impressions by reading the appropriate papers, and later listened to the recordings of each speaker who seemed to have something especially valuable to say. In the course of those three days, we surveyed some remarkable presentations by Kegan, Smith, Cook-Greuter, Forman, Esbjorn-Hargens, Visser, Combs, Marquis, Hubbard, Ganti, Parlee, Roy, Whetton, Golin, Fuhs, Zeitler, Ingersoll, Meyerhoff, Reams, Gafni, Hamilton, Schlitz, Fischler, Laske, Smith, Walsh, Anderson, Ross, O'Fallon, Patten, Winton, and Stein, among others. In almost every case, the underlying subject was AQAL, and the underlying assumption was that some version of AQAL was representative of or virtually equivalent to Integral. In other words, the primary or exclusive subjects of inquiry in most of these presentations were the parameters of quadrants and levels – with lines, states, self, and/or types occasionally thrown in for good measure.

¹ AQAL is a “tyranny” in the metaphorical sense. That is, the AQAL paradigm is becoming so unnecessarily narrow and restrictive that it inhibits inquiry into a broader range of integral distinctives and alternative models. “Tyranny” is used here, not in the polemical sense, but as a quasi-technical term that describes the fourth stage of the four-generation cycle of cultural development, as outlined by Strauss and Howe. (See the section The Evolution of Integral later in this article.)

² This article is not a “report” on the conference per se. Rather, the conference is used to provide a context of common experience that readers who were conference attendees can use to assess the validity of our contentions.

³ Hugh & Kaye Martin have contributed six book-length studies on their ADAPT Model to *Integral World.net* – several of which frequently rank among the Top 50 in IW's readership rankings. Hugh & Kaye are best qualified as integral practitioners and theorists because they have led integral lives. Both have richly diverse backgrounds in a multitude of fields: personal transformation, natural medicine & health, artistic & creative expression, teaching & education, societal change, natural & cultural environments, advanced academics, and marriage & family. Hugh received his degrees at Swarthmore, Penn, and UC Berkeley. Kaye received her degrees and certifications from Cal State Fullerton and Bauman College.

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Wilber's Full Range of Parameters

We found ourselves asking throughout these presentations such questions as, All well and good, but what about Wilber's other parameters? What about all the factors of human development⁴ delineated in *Integral Psychology* and other seminal works that constitute Wilber's extended Integral Operating System (or IOS)?⁵

Yes, quadrants, levels, lines, and states are extremely important, but what about other Wilber concepts relating to the dimensions of the growth process? What about the great nest, map, wave, trait, transformation, ladder, correlative structure, chakra, spiral, realm, plane, sphere, physio-biosphere/ noosphere/ theosphere, terrestrial realm, plane of existence, celestial plane, stream, height & depth, U-shaped pattern, pathology, and pre/trans fallacy?

Yes, self and types are important, but what about other Wilber concepts pertaining to the participants in the growth process? What about proximate & distal self, self-system, archeology of self, ego, bodyself, felt body, culture, role, voice, gender type, agency vs. communion, eros vs. agape, Enneagram, subpersonality, shadow self, functional invariant, I-I self, true Self, and soul?

What about Wilber concepts that are aspects of the processes by which growth takes place? What about fulcrum, embedding, metabolism, horizontal translation, vertical transformation, actualizing the great nest, uncovering, methodology, modules of Integral Life Practice (ILP), treatment, therapy, evolution & involution, transcend & include, sociocultural evolution, and waking up?

What about Wilber concepts that are features of the guidance and orchestration of the growth process? What about navigation, integration, spirit-in-action, Integral Institute, full-spectrum therapist, witness, seer, pure consciousness, and spirit?

We grant that at least some additional topics beyond the AQAL matrix were covered in the conference. However, we would contend that the preponderance of talks accepted the AQAL model as the central organizing principle of integral theory ('forms the basis for much of our shared vocabulary,' in the words of one commentator) -- and that in fact many presentations treated AQAL as the very definition of Integral itself.

Ken Wilber is one of the great generalists of our time. He may not get all the particulars right, but he is terrific at sketching out all the elements worthy of consideration. Wilber's *Integral*

⁴ Yes, integral theory is more than human development. But not a whole lot more. Human development is a very comprehensive field that subsumes many other more specialized fields – such as parenting, teaching, counseling, therapy, organizational consulting, academic research on human development, and the orchestration of one's own personal growth and self-improvement. From a wider perspective, human development encompasses all areas of human endeavor where people grow and evolve – fields as diverse as psychology and education, history and economics, science and technology, art and music, literature and film, ecology and metaphysics, ethics and social activism, health and sexuality, religion and pop culture. The great majority of conference presentations applied Integral to one or more of these topics. Thus, human development in some form was by far the most commonly-addressed topic of the conference. But more generally, human development is in our estimation the most fruitful field for Integral investigation. Human growth is the developmental system we know most about. Therefore, it yields the most detailed set of parameters upon which to base any Integral model that aims to be comprehensive.

⁵ Wilber's IOS is described in the next section, If Not AQAL, What?

Psychology is perhaps the most structurally-sophisticated of his works. Despite its apparent simplicity, this remarkable book goes furthest in delineating all the factors that constitute a complete theory of human development. If we ignore or underestimate a significant portion of those factors, we run the risk of overlooking some of Wilber's main contributions to human thought. Moreover, if we fail to incorporate that broader range of factors into a comparably broad system, we are contravening the central principle of Integral – i.e. that all the factors we are considering are 'integrated' into a single, comprehensive model.

If Not AQAL, What?

At this point, a question naturally arises in the reader's mind: "If not AQAL, what?" If AQAL is not to be the central organizing principle of Integral Theory, what can we offer to replace it?

We ourselves began asking that question about seven years ago. After careful study of *Integral Psychology* and other important works by Wilber and other Integral thinkers, we began to recognize the limitations of AQAL. It became clear that AQAL was only one important aspect of Wilber's own extended model of human development – what we call his Integral Operating System (or, IOS).⁶ At the same time, we became increasingly aware that the AQAL mindset is extremely pervasive in the Integral community. Then, very gradually, in the course of publishing a series of six book-length studies on *IntegralWorld.net*, the outlines of a revised and expanded model⁷ began to take shape. That model incorporates all the parameters that Wilber explored in *Integral Psychology*, adds a few more to fill in the gaps, and organizes all those parameters into a simple but comprehensive system called ADAPT – All Dimensions, All Participants, All Processes, Together.⁸

Thus, to continue the Scrabble metaphor, AQAL is just one important corner of a much broader Integral gameboard. Wilber's expanded IOS enumerates many of the other important squares on the gameboard. The ADAPT model endeavors to show how all those squares can be arranged into a cohesive gameboard pattern.

Any new system, especially one that challenges a model as beloved as AQAL, inevitably encounters much resistance. Here are some representative objections, critiques, and suggestions we received⁹ regarding our own system, along with our rejoinders. Any other alternative model would receive similar comments.

⁶ Wilber's audio series from Sounds True is entitled the Integral Operating System. There he discusses AQAL principles as applied to real life. We are using the term 'Integral Operating System' here in a much broader context.

⁷ We do not consider ADAPT an 'alternative model' or 'competing model,' because it is derived from Wilber's own model and consists primarily of Wilber's own parameters. That is why we call ADAPT the 'next generation' of AQAL.

⁸ For details, see our conference presentation, AQAL, the Next Generation, or the more extended version on *IntegralWorld.net*. We refer to our studies, not as a form of self-promotion, but to show that it is indeed possible to devise a viable Integral model that is far more comprehensive and far more 'integrated' than AQAL.

⁹ From over a dozen conference speakers and many attendees, not verbatim.

- **Too big a playing field.** “That’s just too big a playing field for integral theory to absorb right now.” Our response: You don’t have to play on the bigger field until you need it. In the meantime, just acknowledge it’s there.
- **Too AQAL-phobic.** “Your approach is too AQAL-phobic. You attack or denigrate a line of inquiry that has proven immensely fruitful.” Our response: On the contrary, we consider AQAL a magnificent contribution to human thought. Now we can use that great example to become even more comprehensive.
- **Too Wilber-centric.** “This approach is too Wilber-centric. Concentrating on Wilber is passé.” Our response: Any good theory builds on the best work that’s gone before. The colossal contribution of Ken Wilber is a place all of us have to start. In the words of the “great one,” before we can “transcend” Wilber, we must “include” him.
- **Too complicated.** “Your new theory is complicated and hard to follow.” Our response: Every new theory seems complicated at first, because it is unfamiliar. However, the basic model of ADAPT is simplicity itself: Life is a journey by sea, or “human odyssey;” that journey has a map, a set of voyagers, a ship, and a navigator/captain. The complexity comes only as we drill down into the nested holons beneath the main concept to explore the details.
- **Requires too much retooling.** “Your approach would require too much reconfiguring and retooling.” Our response: You have the option of retooling, but you don’t have to. If you concentrate on AQAL, just recognize that you’re specializing in one very important niche.
- **Broader than Human Development.** “Integral theory is broader than human development alone.” Our response: see footnote 4.
- **Different objectives.** “Your aims and objectives are much different from ours.” Our response: Very true. Integral theory as an academic discipline often seeks to identify the fundamental structures of reality. Integral theory from our perspective seeks to identify the structures, sequences, and systems that make human life significant and rewarding. (See footnote 4.)
- **Not rigorous.** “This approach is not meta-theoretically rigorous enough.” Our response: Like any social science, a full-bodied integral theory will always be half-science, half-art. The rigor of meta-theory is extremely important. But that level of rigor can sometimes inhibit the flashes of brilliant intuition that brought us “integral” in the first place.
- **Not academic.** “Your model is not framed in language and argumentation that is sufficiently academic.” Our response: Wilber himself was often judged not sufficiently academic by many speakers and panelists at his own conference! What chance have we got?

The foregoing objections may all have some validity. However, the central issue remains: Integral theory is concentrating its attention almost exclusively on one small corner of a much broader field of inquiry. By limiting itself to a few major concepts, integral becomes not a “Theory of Everything,” but a “Theory of a Few Very Important Things.” By failing to show how the full range of concepts fit together, it ceases to be “integral” at all.

We are not claiming that our ADAPT Model is the answer. Any valid revision of Wilber’s AQAL and IOS will ultimately require the collaborative efforts of many authorities on the Integral worldview. However, we are confident that we have struck upon some key points of discussion that must be addressed before integral theory can evolve to its own next level.

The Evolution of Integral

According to Strauss & Howe (*Generations*, 1991, and sequels), cultures may evolve over decades of time through a mechanism they call the *generation cycle*. A generation is the biological period of life, normally about 20-25 years, between the time one is born and the time one first procreates. According to the authors, dynamic cultures repeatedly pass through a generation cycle consisting of four characteristic generations.

1. *Prophetic generation*: Conceives a new cultural vision and a new impetus for change;
2. *Reactive generation*: Reacts against or detaches from the dominance of the prophetics;
3. *Civic generation*: Fills out and implements the vision of the prophetics;
4. *Bureaucratic generation*: Institutionalizes and standardizes what once was the prophetic vision.

After the four generations are complete, the cycle repeats all over again – but at a higher level of development, and with a new prophetic vision.¹⁰ The transition from old to new vision is sometimes an arduous and painful one. Adherents to the old system experience its departure as the death of an old and dear friend. The original prophetic vision that began as a force for expansion and liberation can become in its later stages an entrenched “tyranny” that must be resolved before the next vision can be embraced.

Integral theory is itself a culture that is progressing through a generation cycle – in this case telescoped into 40-50 years, instead of the normal 80-100. In this schema, Wilber is of course the prophetic; incisive critics and skeptics like Visser and Meyerhoff are the reactives; brilliant actualizers like Cook-Greuter, many other speakers at the conference (as well as the JFK Conference itself) are the civics; and the bureaucraties are the natural tendency in all of us to cling to familiar, established truths.

We by no means presume to see ourselves as the next prophetics. However, we may be among the first to see the glimmering outlines of a new vision. We hope through our work to stimulate broader discussion on a topic of central importance – the very structure and scope of the field of integral theory itself.

¹⁰ Editors’ note: For additional discussion of these generations, see Ken White’s Politics in a new key: Breaking the cycle of U.S. politics with a generational/developmental approach in Integral Review’s special issue on politics, at <http://integral-review.org/documents/White,%20Politics%20in%20a%20New%20Key%20Vol.%206%20No.%201.pdf>