Organizational Transformation for Sustainability.
An Integral Metatheory

Mark G. Edwards (2010). New York: Routledge.

An Appreciative (Over)(Re)View

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Introduction

I began studying the field of organizational leadership back in 1995. I encountered a wide range of theories in the course of my masters degree studies. To find my bearings, I found myself aligning with a few ideas that appealed the most to me, and marginalized, even denigrated many of what I felt were the more pedestrian theories. I could argue at length with classmates and professors about why the theories I liked were so much better than the ones they were espousing. Anybody recognize this stage of relating to a new field of inquiry?

As my studies continued into a doctoral program in the same field, I took a course on leading organizational change. There, I had the benefit of a professor who had the capacity to vividly bring to life a different set of theoretical perspectives on the topic each week. I recall discussing with my classmates after each session that now, finally, "this was the way to understand what was going on." Then the next class, "no, this is it!" After six different classes and six sets of theoretical lenses, we began the task of trying to see how they could all appear so true, and how to organize them. At this time, the professor drew upon a systems approach to try to coordinate and show relationships between these sets of theories. This helped make some sense out of the chaos, giving us a degree of meta-perspective to situate the theories.

While this was indeed helpful and gave us a leg up from the feeling of being lost in the multitude of theories we had been exposed to, it was not able to address all the concerns I had at the time. Soon after this I came across Wilber's work and saw another way to make sense of the patterns of theories that I had been exposed to. However, my exposure to Wilber's work was not specific to the field of study I was engaged in, and left me with a lot of work to sort out how to make better sense of the truth domains and relationships among all these theories. Much of this work was left incomplete as it was demanding to do and took time, so the utility of Wilber's model didn't immediately reap its potential in this area for me.

Fast forward to 2011, and I finally get around to picking up Mark Edwards' *Organizational Transformation for Sustainability. An Integral Metatheory*. Bill Torbert says in his preface; "it

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ought to become a required touchstone for further theorising and research in organizational transformation" (p. xiii). I would add that it should be required reading to help graduate students in the field of organizational leadership and organizational change to enable them to have a domain specific foundation for understanding how to take a methodical, robust, and pragmatic perspective on the theories they encounter.

It is with this appreciative experience that I wish to present the core themes, methods, and outcomes of Edwards' work. My plan is to simply go through and describe his work in broad strokes to give you as a reader (and potentially a reader of Edwards' book itself) enough of a sense of the scope, depth, and complexity of the work. Once I have done this, I will conclude with some reflections on my experience encountering Edwards' work.

Organization of the Book

There are ten chapters covering the journey Edwards has taken in developing this integral metatheory. It is based on the substantial work he undertook for his dissertation. These ten chapters are preceded by a brief introduction to integral pluralism. Chapter one addresses the need for metatheory in the study of organizational transformation, while chapter two then sets out the domain of metatheory and some definitions. Chapter three takes on the task of defending metatheorizing from a variety of attacks is has been subject to over time. Chapter four shifts to the particular focus Edwards has chosen for this work, stories of organizational transformation. Then the method for building metatheory is laid out in chapter five. Chapter six then displays the results of this in the form of a multiparadigm review and analysis of theories about organizational transformation. Chapter seven takes this analysis and reveals a network of lens relationships. This leads to chapter eight where Edwards presents his integrative metatheory for organizational transformation. Chapter nine reflects on the work with an evaluative eye and chapter ten points towards an overarching integral metastudies. The scope of each chapter in itself is quite substantive. As Torbert says in his foreword, it is a demanding read. Demanding in that the reader needs to hold a complex series of highly developed constructions that draw essential elements out of each topic brought into view during the journey. With this quick orientation in mind, let's get the journey started!

The introduction sets the stage, opening with a lovely quote pointing to how a person with only one theory to address life in a meaningful way is truly lost. Edwards immediately sets out the need to be able to step outside and take theories as objects of reflection and tools to be used (liberating structures in Torbert's language) rather than being limited to or had by them. Yet simply having an array of theories in itself can confuse more than help, thus the need for a metatheory that can coherently integrate middle-range theories. This is no small task given the diversity of such theories. Edwards points to an integral metatheory as having the requisite capacity to address this challenge and links it to the global challenges being faced today. To make the task both manageable and practical/applicable, Edwards chooses to focus on the field of organizational transformation as applied to organizational sustainability. His introduction then lays out the terrain ahead and closes with a brief iteration of how his work sits within the larger body of research on theory and metatheory building and how the work on developing such big ideas can contribute to shaping society.

Chapter one is *The Need for Metatheory in the Study of Organizational Transformation*. Edwards opens with a quote from Karl Popper about being prisoners caught in our theoretical frameworks, from which we can, if we try, step out into roomier ones that can serve us better. The job of metatheory in relation to this is seen as being "the big-picture approach to knowledge that attempts to integrate other theory" (p. 10). He points out that not only do theories try and explain the workings (in this case) of organizations, they also influence their design. Once theories and metatheories are into such systems they tend to operate more as givens, the way things are, and are highly resistant to alternatives. Thus we become prisoners of our own ideas. Edwards situates his book as an effort to break out of the prisons we have become accustomed to by taking an integrative approach to metatheorizing.

Yet he is clear that the kind of integrative approach he wants to take is a pluralistic one rather than a totalizing one. He sees a need to be able to utilize an expansive enough framework to "respond to the multitude of vying theoretical perspectives" while also finding "ways of valuing the differences between mainstream and more marginal scientific discourses" (p. 15). This tension between mainstream and marginal discourses has not been sufficiently addressed by existing theoretical approaches, so Edwards sets out to show how an integrative pluralism can go beyond the responses of integrative monism, non-integrative pluralism and, inter/multi-disciplinarity. He then takes his more specific focus and goes deeply into the state of this situation in relation to organization and management theory. The existing diversity can easily contribute to fragmentation, exemplified by paradigm wars between functionalist and interpretivist approaches.

Edwards next takes up the scenario I described in my introduction as he examines how this theoretical pluralism can be frustrating for students. Having experienced this first hand, I can attest to the need for an integrative metatheory. Being on the other end of the issue now, teaching aspects of this work, I also recognize the challenges of trying to find ways to teach the complexity that an integrative metatheoretical approach brings. It is not simple to convey the way of looking that underlies such an approach.

Edwards closes this chapter by showing how an integral approach can address these challenges. He positions his work according to three aspects. First, that integral metatheorizing can be applied across disciplinary contexts, which is essential to address the kinds of diversity and fragmentation present. Second, he takes an appreciative meta-inquiry stance that recognizes that each theory contains some value. Third, he points to the long history of terms like integrative and integral being used in various traditions of metatheorizing, while situating his approach as not trying to create a "Theory of Everything." Then he lays out the tools he will use in this work, namely Wilber's AQAL or Integral Theory and Torbert's Developmental Action Inquiry. These aspects, drawn together in this work, create a capacity for Edwards to approach the job of metatheory building in a methodologically rigorous manner.

From this foundation, Edwards takes us into chapter two, *Metatheoretical Domain and Definitions*. Here he does the work of identifying the domain and scope of his research. To begin this he outlines the tension between the kinds of specificity definitions push for with the kind of tolerance for ambiguity that is part and parcel of the domain of metatheory. Within that tension, he then examines definitions of organizations, organizational transformation, and within that,

change, transformation and translation. Further distinctions are examined in relation to transformation and development as well as economic growth, mergers, acquisitions, and takeovers, and finally transitions. By surveying this range of terms, Edwards creates a model showing the relationship between organizational transformation, development, and expansion. Here we can already see hints of how his metatheoretical approach allows for greater scope and clarity to come into what is normally a fragmented set of discourses that don't interact with each other.

The same approach is brought to theory and metatheory building. Edwards goes through meanings of concepts, constructs, models, frameworks, theories and paradigms and how they relate to theory (and metatheory) building. Here he is able to show the relationships between grounded theory building based on case-based research, middle-range theory building based on variance-based research, and metatheory building based on conceptual research. The territory of metatheory becomes clearer as we are taken through rich descriptions distinguishing characteristics and relationships between these areas. He also addresses the notion of "orienting generalizations" in the context of metatheoretical lens. While Wilber uses the term as a way of justifying the foundation for his metatheory, or even as a methodology, Edwards redefines it as one tool for metatheorizing. Thus conceptual lenses become a core tool in the book, and are laid out as such:

> The lens metaphor is used here to emphasize the idea that theory not only receptively interprets research findings but plays an active role in shaping what we research. In the receptive sense, theory acts as an interpretive filter that structures and makes sense of the data and its subject matter. In the active sense, theory acts in shaping the real-world of empirical realities. (p. 42)

Lenses as a metaphor for concepts helps us see the central role that concepts play. In the domains of theories and metatheories, the active aspect of lenses' functions is often missed. Edwards goes on to say that "a conceptual lens does not merely interpret organizational objects, it is core to the process of constituting those objects" (p. 42). Thus the lenses we work with shape what we create, as well as how we perceive, and metatheorists use these lenses to build their overarching conceptual systems. Finally, to close the chapter, he draws on the term holon to have a non-reductive way to theorize about change.

Chapter three, *The View from Somewhere Else*, takes up the defense of metatheory, addressing a variety of critiques that have been raised against it. Edwards first takes on the modernist critique of metatheory as being a dead end because of being vague, hard to test, not practical, too concerned with categorization, and philosophical rather than scientific. He takes us through these critiques by acknowledging areas where their perspectives serve to illuminate real challenges (such as a lack of focus on method in the field) as well as showing biases and inconsistencies in the critiques. Next he addresses what are considered to be more challenging critiques coming from postmodern thought. These include how metatheory can be used as a tool for totalizing or creating "grand narratives" that marginalize various perspectives, which he addresses by pointing to how his pluralistic approach inherently avoids this. He also shows how it avoids neglecting local perspectives on issues. Another critique is that metatheory tries to take a view from nowhere, or perform the "God trick" of being value neutral. Further critiques relate

to metatheory as being uncritical and decontextualizing. By addressing all of these challenges that exist in various discourses, Edwards is able to show how a pluralistic integrative metatheory actually includes both modern and postmodern strengths while addressing their shortcomings.

Having taken three chapters to do the background work of setting the scope of the work, laying out definitions, and addressing critiques up front, Edwards then turns to the task at hand and in chapter four on *Stories of Transformation*, reviews the scientific literature on organizational transformation and outlines the metatheoretical resources being used. He takes us through an historical overview of organizational change theories, showing how the field has evolved over time and used different terminology, and how those changes reflected changes in focus and theories in use. The different kinds of paths transformation can take are also explored, and a helpful table lays out the chronological stages and how they related to the prevailing socioeconomic factors in society at those times. The chapter also takes a more detailed look at the two core metatheoretical resources Edwards draws on, Wilber's AQAL framework and Torbert's Developmental Action Inquiry approach. He carefully shows the development and core ideas of each approach, taking five pages on Wilber's work and four on Torbert's. Thus the reader is well informed about the tools being used in this work and how their strengths and limitations (addressed in more depth in a later chapter) are being taken into account.

Chapter five on *A General Method for Metatheory Building* addresses one of the major critiques identified in chapter three, that the field of metatheory has been characterized by a lack of rigorous method. Instead, it has developed through philosophical insights, rational argumentation or idiosyncratic theory analysis. A central contribution of Edwards' work has been to address this by showing not only how a metatheoretical view can help the field of organizational transformation, but in the process also contribute to the field of metatheory building by exemplifying how to bring an adequate method to the apparent madness. To begin this work, he surveys existing approaches to metatheory building, covering traditional scholarship, the dialectical method, metatriangualtion, and multiparadigm inquiry as well as Ritzer's work in metatheorizing in sociology. Once these are described, Edwards critiques each of them as a way of outlining their limitations. For instance, Wilber's method can be shown to fall in the traditional scholarship area, which relies heavily on the unique capacities of the researcher. The use of orienting generalizations is then shown to be an outcome of the metatheorizing process rather than a method for it. Another example is in examining Burrell and Morgan's metatriangulation approach. Here Edwards sees that while drawing on two specific paradigms to build their metatheory, it "seems highly likely that there are more paradigms and metatheoretical lenses employed in organizational studies than just these two" (p. 91).

From his analysis and critiques, Edwards then lays out his plan. He describes an eight-phase general research design and method for metatheory building. This includes: groundwork, domain specification, design, multiparadigm review, multiparadigm analysis, metatheory building, implications, and evaluation. He then goes through how these phases are applied in his research project, giving us a clear and explicit description of how he is applying the work of bringing methodological rigor to his project of metatheory building.

With the method outlined, Chapter six takes us to *A Multiparadigm Review and Analysis of Organizational Transformation Theories*. Here we see the depth of Edwards' work in concrete terms. He begins by outlining the scope of a multiparadigm review, which

> differs from a standard literature review in that it specifically looks for concepts and themes that constitute the underlying architectonic of a theoretical system. It does this across multiple layers of expression, that is, at the level of basic constructs, parts of theories, complete theories, research paradigms and metatheories. (p. 101)

The units of analysis Edwards uses "are the core explanatory themes for each of the theories of organizational transformation" (p. 101). He subjected these to "multilayered analytical procedures, to develop the final, comprehensive set of metatheoretical lenses" (p. 101) used in understanding work on organizational transformation. Now, take the thought of doing all of this and apply it to a review sample of 335 books, book chapters, journal articles, and online papers! Edwards describes how he went from 472 explanatory themes from this review and categorized them according to 15 research paradigms. He notes that there was redundancy and overlap in this list as well, and how he used bridging and bracketing techniques to further analyze the data and reveal specific lenses.

Further categorization occurred through identifying different types of research foci. These included the what, why, how, and who of transformation. By organizing the categories of conceptual lenses around these five common framings, Edwards enables the complexity of the metatheory he has built up to relate to modes of perception and questioning that we all know. Within each of these frames are a number of specific lenses. Further, there are a set of three meta-level lenses Edwards identifies. This leads to the identification of 24 lenses of organizational transformation. This is a rich and complex result, yet appropriate to the richness and complexity of the phenomena being studied.

However, simply identifying these 24 lenses in itself could still leave us disoriented, wondering how to choose appropriately among far too many resources. Thus in chapter seven, Edwards goes into *The Network of Lens Relationships*. This work is based on three principles: internal consistency, high abstraction, and uniqueness. Looking at lens categories, external and internal relationships are examined to create categories of conceptual lenses. These include; holarchy, bipolar, cyclical, relational, standpoint, and multimorphic. The possible combinations of these lenses are beyond the scope of his work to comprehensively describe, so Edwards selects a few possibilities to illustrate the power and potential of this method. First he highlights the importance of the holon construct by looking at three forms of holarchical relationships; developmental holarchy, governance holarchy, and ecological holarchy. The details of these lenses and potential relationships among them reveal a much richer picture than what many of us are used to in mainly drawing on the developmental holarchy lens alone.

Edwards then goes on to illustrate a number of possible combinations of lenses and how exclusive reliance on specific lenses can become problematic from the view of these other lenses. He outlines a number of relevant critiques that viewing one lens from another lens can produce. An example he uses is between cyclical lens theorists and those who prefer bipolar or holarchic lenses. These examples help to make the case for a complementary approach rather

than exclusionary one. Another issue he identifies is a kind of reductionism, where for example theories draw on only one pole of a bipolar dimension. This also applies to how multi-dimensional lenses can be reduced to bipolar framings by theorists. As if the large number of challenges in this are not enough, Edwards goes on to identify issues with conflating relationships between lens categories. To remedy these issues, he lays out a series of ten points to consider as guidelines for reducing these problems. This leads into an indexing of these metatheoretical lenses. A table illustrates one example of this, where Edwards show how an ecological holarchy lens with four levels (micro, meso, macro, and macro-macro) can be indexed with an interior/exterior lens, resulting in eight categories of lenses available to examine organizational transformation. This simple example displays the power of the framework Edwards has assembled. Further examples are given such as crossing developmental holarchy with transition process lenses, bipolar with quadrant lenses, and even looking at multiple lens combinations. This chapter illustrates how much more can be done with the flexible use of lens relationships than is currently common among theorists.

With all this behind him, Edwards turns to his focus of application in chapter eight on *Sustaining Visions. An Integral Metatheory for Organizational Transformation.* As is characteristic of his writing throughout the book, he begins by framing the topic in a manner that thoroughly situates the reader's attention. The reasons behind the choice of sustainability in relation to organizational transformation are laid out from a number of angles, all well supported. He then takes us through examples from each of the six categories of integral lenses that can be applied to the topic. Each of the twelve examples he provides illuminate the subject in a powerful manner. As one after the other is described, there is a feeling of having one's perception stretched as the horizon, scope, and complexity of the topic expands.

Of course this is only the beginning of the possibilities offered by the development of metatheory. Edwards goes on to show the real power of the framework he has been busy building by illustrating eight metatheoretical frameworks for sustainability. These are combinations of the previous integral lenses that create new matrixes rich with explanatory power. The first example combines two holarchic lens; developmental and ecological. The result is a matrix that positions the four levels for ecological hierarchies in relation to the seven levels of development. He also shows how an interior-exterior lens can be combined with an ecological holarchy. This helps us see how much can be lost when limiting ourselves to an individual-collective polarity lens. The resulting table has more granularity than the more commonly used four quadrant framework. Another example that extends our horizons is the combination of social mediation lenses with the developmental hierarchy lens. This expands the focus of attention from internal organizational capacities to also including relational and communicative processes. The use of an alignment lens with a metatheoretical set of integral lenses results in a powerful matrix revealing a range of options for transformation towards sustainability. Edwards concludes this section by providing three different examples of how the spirituality lens can be combined with other integral lenses. Table 8.6 lists the 24 integral lenses and how they frame organizational sustainability, revealing a rich and powerful set of possibilities for understanding and developing action.

Now, with our brains thoroughly stretched, Edwards takes us over the edge, putting together a complete integral metatheory for organizational transformation. He begins by highlighting the

centrality of the holarchic group of lenses, which include the intra, inter, systemic holonic and inter-systemic orders. He then uses a series of diagrams to illustrate the very abstract frameworks created through the process of applying these lenses. First, he shows how bipolar lenses and cyclical lenses can be applied at the intra-holonic order. Then he illustrates relational lenses applied at the inter-holonic level. Another illustration addresses how the holarchic lenses can be applied at the systemic order. Finally, a table shows the inter-systemic order for describing metatheoretical lenses, focusing on the matrix created by running the stakeholder lens across the perspective lens. As can easily be seen, the "integrative metatheory described here opens up a more generous landscape for theorising about transformational change" (p. 196).

Coming down from these dizzying heights, chapter nine takes a reflective look at the work as a whole. In *Evaluating the Big Picture*, Edwards takes on the task of critiquing his own work. He shows how "depending on its scope, metatheory can be used to compare and contrast highly abstract ideas across many different theories and research paradigms" (p. 197). To illustrate, he begins by drawing on the health-pathology lens to examine various forms of partiality in the different categories of lenses and how they are commonly used. He then examines reductionist forms of holarchic lenses, such as abbreviation of the number of levels in a lens or exclusion of the higher/deeper aspects or stages such as the spiritual. His examination covers a number of common issues found in the use of these theoretical lenses.

Then the task of evaluating the integral metatheory he has created is approached by drawing on "three sets of criteria … (i) Ritzer's criteria for assessing the quality of metatheorizing projects, (ii) Wacker's "virtues" of good theory and (iii) Whetten's criteria for theoretical contributions" (p. 206). This review and critique reveals various areas where the criteria are well met and others where limitations of time, resources, or space have left gaps and point to areas deserving further work. It becomes clear that new variables or lenses have been created from this work, adding value to the field through extending the range of options available for both explanatory uses as well as creating interventions in systems. The final criteria examined looks at the underlying assumptions informing the position taken, that of an appreciative and inclusive stance, and application of principles of unfoldment and enactment. The value of these stances is highlighted in relation to a model that does not include them, showing how that model has not sustained and evolved its contribution to the field over time due to the lack of these positions.

Next, Edwards takes on the task of critiquing Wilber's AQAL framework. True to his principles, this is an appreciative critique, aimed at contributing to the ongoing work of developing the AQAL framework. He identifies discrepancies between the lenses developed through his methodical approach, (compared to as noted earlier Wilber's more traditional scholarship approach), as well as differences in lens relationships, flexibility, and definitional issues. He highlights specific definitional issues and the lack of comprehensive inclusion of lenses drawn on, but going beyond the five core AQAL ones (quadrants, stages, states, lines, and types). A table highlights formally-included lenses, ones used but not included, and conceptual lenses not found at all in the AQAL framework. Another critique involves lens relationships, where "certain perspectives are associated with certain quadrants despite there being no metatheoretical evidence or logical necessity that this is the case" (p. 219). Edwards then illustrates this with a table showing a non-reductive application of perspectival, interior-exterior,

and ecological level lenses. With these examples it becomes clear that this integral metatheory is powerful.

After all of this work, we are taken in chapter ten *Towards an Integral Meta-Studies*. This is introduced by an illustration of how Charles Darwin pointed to the significant range of ideas preceding and contributing to his own work. By doing this, Edwards clearly situates his own work as primarily being involved in taking a wide range of existing, although somewhat implicit sets of knowledge and explicitly (as well as methodically) showing the implication and benefits of putting them together in a comprehensive and integrative framework. The landscape he surveys includes showing how various fields have already developed degrees of meta-studies, such as in sociology. He illustrates how theory, method, data, and interpretation sit on the foundation of primary empirical observation and experience, while meta-theory, meta-methodology, meta-data analysis, and meta-hermeneutics sit at the next level. Taking all of these in together creates the field of integral meta-studies as a whole. This model helps to situate the various aspects and keep some from encroaching on the domain of others (such as how meta-hermeneutics ventures into making claims about what is possible in terms of meta-theorizing).

Drawing on this model, Edwards shows how his own work in developing an integral metatheory for organizational transformation could be followed by similar work in developing meta-methodology, meta-analytical, and meta-hermeneutics in this area of study. He then briefly looks at how from this integral meta-studies perspective current global issues can be reframed from crisis to opportunities. This leads to closing remarks on the power of big picture which takes us full circle back to the beginning of this work. The need for powerful, flexible, and practical big picture thinking is as germane today as it has ever been.

Remarks

Now, if reading over this brief description of Edwards' work has not left you reeling in appreciation of how he has laid out a platform for extending work in multiple domains, then either you were sleeping while reading, are a hidden genius we have not heard from, or I simply have not done a good enough job of giving you a taste of Edwards' work and you will have to read it for yourself (you should anyway). As I struggled to find ways to present enough of the work to show the depth of thought behind it, I found myself coming to even greater levels of appreciation for it.

My appreciative stance towards the work arises from several sources. One is as mentioned in the introduction, that having studied the field of organizational leadership and transformation, I found the organizing power and clarity of the metatheory crystalizing various lines of thought I had not been able to pursue previously. Recalling Nathan Harter's philosophically oriented overview of leadership studies *Clearings in the Forest,* I felt like I had been taken up for a ride in a helicopter and could now make out the terrain. I could see the forest for the trees, make out different kinds of terrain and their relationship to each other, and zoom in for a more detailed look almost anywhere I choose. I feel empowered by a feeling that I can find more appropriate and powerful lens combinations to suit a much wider range of situations I encounter in trying to both teach in the classroom and provide practical training and consulting in the corporate environment.

A second source of appreciation is reflecting on the work of my own dissertation in relation to Edwards' work. Not only my own work, but the many dissertations I have been fortunate to serve as a reviewer for. I have read many excellent dissertations, many of which do what good dissertations do, break new ground in a field. Yet Edwards work goes beyond this by breaking ground in multiple fields at the same time, (i.e., developing a methodological foundation for the development of integral metatheory as well as significantly expanding the domain of knowledge about organizational transformation), creating a generative platform to enable future work for scholars in multiple domains for a long time to come.

A third source of appreciation, (and I'll stop soon enough), comes from having one of my core values fed. I love to learn. When I can encounter a situation where I can learn something, I dive in and am likely to suck as much of the essence out of that situation as possible. If I'm not learning, I don't feel alive. So I appreciate Edwards' work because it taught me so much, on so many levels.

Now, does all this mean I have no critical perspectives to offer? When I take the time to absorb this work and reflect on it, a variety of elements come into focus for me as areas that could be inquired into. For example, I am stimulated to enter into dialog about how different views (drawing on Roy's (2006) distinction between view and perspective in her *Process Model of Integral Theory*) of the nature and purpose of our existence here in this world could impact the ways in which metatheory in a given domain might emerge. But those are thoughts for later conversations.

For now, I will conclude by saying that if you are interested in metatheory, organizational transformation, sustainability, great examples of clear and thorough writing, or just like to gain a view from a profound set of perspectives, then get and read Mark Edwards' *Organizational Transformation for Sustainability. An Integral Metatheory.*