The Meeting of two Meta-theories – A Systems Centered discussion of Ken Wilber's Integral Model

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Introduction

Ken Wilber is a modern philosopher and theoretician who has had a profound impact on many areas of human inquiry, including psychotherapy, organizational development, education, medicine, science, art and spiritual practice. Recently he has consolidated his ideas into a simple and useful model he calls the Integral Model. (Wilber, 2005) Like SCT, the Integral Model is a meta-theory that is applicable to every area of human discourse. Ken often compares the Integral Model to a set of software to run the hardware of human knowledge. This article will present a basic introduction to the Integral Model.

Understanding the Integral Model may help us think about theoretical and practical problems with greater facility and lead to surprising and elegant insights. Combining one meta-theory with another (SCT and the Integral Model) may also be useful to help us to think in different and more skillful ways when helping an individual, a group or an organization find the most direct path to a goal.

In systems-centered terms, the Integral Model offers a structure that boundaries all of the major categories of human knowledge in ways that encourage an optimal flow of energy and information. The goal of providing such a clear structure is to potentiate the growth of human understanding as a whole as well as to cross-fertilize the information held in specialized areas of knowledge. By applying the Integral Model we may examine any phenomena in a holistic way without reducing our perspective to the insights of any one position or theory. As such, it serves as an antidote to the universal human tendency to think about problems from the reified assumptions of one particular knowledge base.

Quadrants

Wilber began developing his theory from the position that everyone has a piece of the truth. No perspective, theory or philosophy is "wrong". From his perspective, the important thing is to map the underlying assumptions and trace the data stream that is informing a particular conclusion. The search for "truth" is a relative endeavor that yields greater results as we are able to integrate more complete streams of information. Thus the blind man who, after feeling an elephants trunk, describes an elephant as a sinuous creature like a snake with two blow holes at its extremity, is absolutely correct within the limitations of the information that is available to him.

As we ascend the ladder of human knowledge to greater heights, our inquiry into phenomena begins to group itself into categories. By practicing the perspective of the observer with greater degrees of subtlety, we learn to avoid the reductionism of our unexamined assumptions. By examining each of the major historical fields of inquiry and integrating the information that is available in each field, we can create a more complete picture of the most up to date, human understanding of any problem.

Wilber begins by observing that the history of philosophy is divided into the fields of Aesthetics, Ethics and Science. Another way of talking about this is the inquiry into the Beautiful, the True, and the Good. Aesthetics has to do with deepening our understanding of our subjective responses to outer and inner events. Ethics has to do with developing the most skillful approach to relationships between people. Science has to do with the objective measurement of phenomena.

Out of these basic observations, Wilber developed his first structure. He calls this the Quadrants. This translates into the subjective, the inter-subjective, the objective and the inter-objective dimensions of phenomena. To make this easier to understand, Wilber uses the perspective of four pronouns: I, We, It, and Its. We may notice here that Wilber has taken the quadrant of science, objective truth, and split it in two. The reason for this is to discriminate between the study of objects in themselves' and the interrelationships of systems of objects.

Let us go a little deeper into this idea of the four quadrants as they exist in human beings.

The first quadrant of subjectivity is focused on the study of our psychological self and the phenomena of consciousness itself. This is the world of our inner intentions and deep interiority. This world has objective scientific correlates in the study of our neurobiology, however it can never be reduced to chemistry. In other words simply replicating the neurobiological state of the Dalai Lama will not give you the philosophical depth and compassion of the Dalai Lama.

The second quadrant of inter-subjectivity, refers to the study of culture and world view. The culture and world view of a particular society is composed of the collective experience of many people. The culture and world view of a particular society is ruled by certain fundamental assumptions and norms that form the atmosphere of that society. For example the fundamental assumptions of a shamanistic culture are profoundly different than the assumptions of a rational-scientific culture. A shaman's perspective on illness will be radically different than a M.D.'s. The world view, or cultural lens through which we view "reality", has tremendous implications both on what we are actually able to see and the choices that we make in terms of how we interact with our environment.

The third quadrant of objectivity refers to the scientific study of our biology and the various organic states of wellness and disease, etc. This quadrant has been deeply celebrated by modern science. In some scientific circles there is a temptation to reduce the truths of both the subjective and the inter-subjective quadrants to the truths of science. This type of reductionism is an error which is extremely important to avoid. (Reductionism is the tendency to reduce differences in theories and ideas to a single unifying principle.) Although it is very clear that all subjective states have objective correlates, they are clearly describing different dimensions of the same phenomena and one is not equivalent to the other. For example, observing the chemical correlates for depression in someone's brain will tell you nothing about the life experience of that person.

The fourth quadrant, of inter-objectivity refers to the objective study of the social and behavioral systems that support a culture. For example the inter-objective systems of an agrarian society are extremely different than the inter-objective systems of an industrial society or an informational society. These quantum leaps in the way that human beings organize themselves and survive collectively have tremendous ramifications on all

dimensions of our experience. One need only imagine what our world would be like without electricity or telephones or a democratic government to understand the powerful ramifications of the inter-objective quadrant on humanity.

Applying this structure, we learn to observe every phenomena from its' subjectivity, the pronoun "I", its inter-subjectivity, the pronoun "We", its objective dimension as a separate thing in itself (It), and its inter-objective dimension as a thing that lives in the context of other things (Its). Let us very briefly look at two phenomena in human beings to make this more real.

The first phenomena is cancer. A major illness such as cancer is at once a subjective experience, an inter-subjective experience that is interpreted through he world view of a particular culture, an objective experience that exists inside of an individual human system, and an inter-objective experience that exists in the context of many social systems (medical hospitals, social services, information technologies, toxic industrial waste dumps, public policy debate, etc.). Each of these perspectives holds a facet of the "truth" of the phenomena we call "cancer". No one of these perspectives holds the "whole truth". Indeed, inside of each quadrant we will experience the same phenomena in a radically different way. By looking at each of these dimensions without reductionism, we gain a rounder, more complete understanding.

Another example is the experience of anxiety. Again, it is easy, though perhaps not immediately apparent, that anxiety is a subjective experience, an inter-subjective experience influenced by someone's world view and cultural norms, an objective neurobiological state, and an inter-objective phenomena that is affected by the social systems that support our lives. If we reduce anxiety to any one of these dimensions we will have a limited view of it as a phenomena.

Because anxiety is one of the phenomena that SCT is extremely interested in treating, let us look a little deeper into how anxiety shows up in each of the four quadrants. Looking at anxiety in this way can help us to discover a blind spot in the way that SCT treats anxiety.

Thinking about anxiety as it appears in each of these quadrants helps us to intervene appropriately. SCT recognizes this when it encourages

someone to undo the cognitive distortions that may be the source of anxiety (subjective), to undo a mind read that may be causing anxiety (inter-subjective), or to undo the anxious tension (biological –objective quadrant) that may be covering over a deeper emotional experience, and to reality test the resources of our social systems (inter-objective). SCT might extend its understanding of anxiety in the objective quadrant by discriminating between anxiety that has a primarily neurological origin, as in the case of panic disorder, which cannot be easily modified by non-medical, cognitive, or behavioral interventions, and other forms of anxiety. Because our attention is so trained on what we already know about anxiety, and because we are so often effective in treating anxiety with the tools that we have, we can miss this critical discrimination.

In a panic disorder, current scientific research indicates that the biological underpinnings of this experience are an unpredictable firing of the amygdala which then creates a whole cascade of neurobiological events. (Gorman, Kent, Sullivan & Coplan, 2000) This firing can often be traced to some traumatic event, but once it begins, it can continue without apparent external environmental triggers. It can also be caused by exhaustion, hormonal imbalances, malnutrition and other purely biological factors. (Ross, 2002) This experience is not so easily modified by undoing one's negative predictions, relaxing one's tension, or sitting at the edge of the unknown with curiousity and apprehension. Although these practices can certainly help someone to master the experience of panic, medication, supplements, herbs, acupuncture and other biological interventions to balance and strengthen the nervous system may be critical in helping a patient to regain a sense of emotional well being. The common error that we have made is that when all that we have is a hammer, every problem can begin to look like a nail. This is of course equally true when a medical doctor tries to find a biological solution to anxiety which has a primarily psychological or behavioral in origin.

One last thing about the quadrants before we move on. From a Systems Centered perspective, the location of the boundaries that separate one thing from another is to some degree arbitrary. This is a crucial understanding in SCT which is also resonant with Wilber's model. "Everything exists in the context of the system of above it and is the context for the system below it." (Agazarian) Where we draw a boundary around a phenomena is determined by the goal of our inquiry and which level of the hierarchy of systems we are focusing our intervention.. Both SCT and

Wilber call this the principle of hierarchy. Interestingly, Wilber's philosophy also subscribes to the General Systems Theory principal of isomorphy, which he calls the *holographic nature of reality*. (Wilber, 1996, 1982)

Lines of Development

The next observation that Wilber made is that within each of these quadrants exist lines of development. Lines of development exist both for the quadrant-as-a-whole and for individual human beings as they show up inside the context of each quadrant. Lines of development for individuals' form that individuals' "psychograph" which can be tracked inside of the context of each of the quadrants. Some examples of lines of development in individuals are cognitive, social, emotional, biological and moral development. Lines of development for the quadrant-as-a-whole form the context inside of which each individual line develops.

Wilber has spent a great deal of time studying maps of the lines of development for each quadrant-as-a-whole. Because this study is quite complex, in this article I will only mark these maps in the broadest of brush strokes.

In the first quadrant of Consciousness and Self (the perspective of "I"), Wilber maps a line of development that moves from the archaic and instinctual level of consciousness through the transpersonal level. Wilber tracks seven levels or stages in this line of development that form the broad context for each individual's development. Wilber defines these levels of individual development, from simplest to most complex, as archaic/instinctual, egocentric/magical, conformist/mythic, rational/formal, pluralistic, integral and transpersonal. (Wilber, 2005) For example, an individual may be living at a rational level of development in terms of his or her consciousness as a whole and inside of that have different levels of development in the lines of moral, cognitive, athletic, creative or emotional development.

The second quadrant of Culture and Worldview (the perspective of "We") tracks the same stages of consciousness as they map onto the worldview of an entire culture. It is possible that an individual might have a higher or lower level of development then the dominant culture that he is living in. It is also possible that broad sections of a society may be living at

different stages of cultural development. Wilber defines the stages of cultural development, from simplest to most complex, as archaic, mythic, rational/scientific, pluralistic, integral and transpersonal. (Wilber, 2005) For example, currently in our society, there is a "culture war" between people who hold a basically mythic worldview, which might be represented by religious fundamentalism, and those that hold a rational/ scientific worldview.

Cultures may also have different levels of development in different lines. For example a particular culture might emphasize musical development, another mathematical development, and another the line of athleticism. This forms the "psychograph" of the culture.

The third quadrant, Brain and Organism, maps the development of various organic states and the neurobiological structures that undergird human development in an objective, scientific way. Each particular line of development (cognitive, moral, creative etc.) has correlates within this quadrant. We are also learning how to track the stages of consciousness development from the archaic and instinctual to the transpersonal in this quadrant. Without the basic neurobiological development to support different lines of development, individual human beings and groups of human beings will face tremendous challenges. Solving human problems often entails a deep technical and medical understanding of the inter-relationships between a challenge in a particular line of development as it appears in quadrant one or two and its correlates in quadrant three.

The fourth quadrant, the Social System and Environment, tracks the development of the various social systems as they develop through the stages of foraging, horticultural, agrarian, industrial, and informational societies. The development of each of these social systems form the larger support network for the lines of development in individuals and cultures.

Now let us look at the lines of development as they exist in individuals. Wilber calls the overall picture of a given individual's developmental lines, their individual "psychograph". An individual may be highly developed in certain lines and very undeveloped in others.

For the purposes of illustration, let us look at the line of moral development using Carol Gilligan's research into the development of our capacity to care. (Gilligan, 1982) Gilligan, noticed that our capacity to care

develops in three distinct stages. The first is our capacity to care for our individual concerns and goals, the second is our capacity to care for our family, ethnic or cultural group, and the third is our capacity for universal care, i.e. to care for the highest good of all concerned. These three stages can also be tracked within each of the quadrants. For example, at present, Dan Siegel is studying the neurobiological dimensions of care and compassion. (Siegel, 2007).

It is interesting to notice that this progression in our capacity to care requires a certain level of cognitive development, as it is impossible to reach either the second or third level of care without being able to think symbolically. We can also notice that it takes a greater capacity for abstract thinking to reach the third stage then it does the second, as our care for our immediate group can be a rather visceral experience. However, it is fascinating to notice that the interdependence of these two lines does not extend in the other direction. In other words, a person can achieve a very high level of cognitive development and have a capacity for care that is deeply stuck in stage two, or possibly even in stage one. For example, a terrorist might have the cognitive capacity to create an atomic bomb! This observation clearly has tremendous ramifications for our current world conflicts.

The interdependence of some lines of development on each other and the relative autonomy of many others, can help us understand a great deal about human behavior. It is fairly commonplace to observe in others and in ourselves a high degree of development in one line and a low degree in another. A professional ice skater may be greatly challenged in her capacity to understand higher mathematics. A person with great emotional empathy may be under developed musically. A spiritual teacher may not know the first thing about changing the oil in her car.

To some degree, this unevenness in development is normal and may even stem from genetic and biological tendencies. However, if there is too great a discrepancy in development between lines, it may limit our potential in significant ways. Knowing which line is undeveloped in an individual, a group, or society can help one to intervene appropriately to release the innate exploratory drive in that particular direction.

A somewhat commonplace example of this is the highly competitive CEO who has tremendous leadership capacity but a poorly developed

capacity for empathy. Such a person might call upon a consultant to help him understand why morale in his company has fallen and what he can do to create a sense of trust and loyalty amongst his employees. This would involve helping him to develop his emotional intelligence to balance out his overly developed drive and ambition.

Placing a line of development inside each of the four quadrants deepens our understanding of the particular impasse that is being worked through and may yield insights about the particular intervention strategy that will be most effective. For example delayed development in someone's emotional intelligence may have a subjective, inter-subjective, objective or inter-objective cause, or major roots in only two quadrants and only minor roots in the other two. The question is always what is the most skillful intervention that will release the flow of energy and information so that the life force can move forward. In other words, what is the most direct path to the goal.

Stages

A further discrimination which Wilber makes in his discussion of lines of development are the stages of development that exist within each line. This concept has been implicit in our previous discussion. Wilber defines a stage as a developmental movement within a line that creates a permanent shift inside of that line. Each stage of development is absolutely dependant on the stage before it. We cannot skip stages. We may have glimpses of a higher stage then our own, but before we can stabilize ourselves at the new level, we must master the level before it.

A relatively clear illustration of this idea can be found in language development. Before we can form a word we have to master the capacity to speak the particular syllables that form the basic building blocks of the word. Before we can speak a sentence we must be able to speak the words that comprise the building blocks of the sentence. Before we can speak a paragraph we must be able to string together the sentences in a way that is coherent. This developmental process can never go in the opposite direction. Each stage is absolutely dependant on the stage that comes before it. SCT recognizes this phenomena in groups when it delineates the three phases of systems development. Phenomenologically, SCT has observed that the third stage of Love, Work and Play, will never preceed the first stage of the Authority Issue.

Three States, Three "Bodies"

Wilber distinguishes Stages of development from States of awareness. Wilber observes that all of the great mystical traditions divide human awareness into three great states. Many traditions subdivide these states, however for the purposes of simplicity, he has found it useful to stick to three.

The three states are waking, which correlates with our physical bodies, dreaming, which correlates with our subtle or energetic bodies, and deep dreamless sleep, which correlates with the experience of pure, contentless presence. All human experience occurs in one of these three great states. In many spiritual practices, these three states are literally seen as three separate bodies, each holding a different dimension of human awareness.

These three states are experienced all of the time regardless of how developed a human being is and at every stage of every line of development. However, the subjective interpretation of any one of these states is totally dependant on the particular level of a person's or a society's development in the quadrant of culture and world view. In other words our assumptions about the nature of reality create a radically different interpretation of our experiences in each of these states. Let us examine this idea a little more deeply.

Many sociologists and anthropologists have studied the development of culture and world view. Without going into the way that different theorists talk about the stages of cultural development in depth, let us focus on two particular stages that are relevant for our cultural development in modern times, and look at how a spiritual experience might be interpreted from each of these stages. The spiritual experience itself might originate in any of the three great states. The first world view, originating in a mythic understanding of reality, will interpret spiritual experiences in a literal way. The second world view originating in a rational-scientific world view, will interpret these same experiences metaphorically.

The scriptures of all of the world's major religions are a record of powerful spiritual experiences. For example, a mythic perspective on the book of Genesis would lead to an understanding that God literally created

the universe in six days. A rational scientific interpretation would lead to a metaphorical interpretation that each of these six days represents vast epochs of archeological time. The gulf between these two world views is immense and the ramifications of the culture war between them is huge.

Non-Dual Awareness

There is also a fourth state that Wilber emphasizes, which is really a combination of the first three. This is the state of non-dual awareness.

Non-dual awareness (literally meaning not two) is the state in which we overcome the subject-object structure of consciousness altogether and experience life as a continuous stream of awareness that moves through all three states without any breaks. The progression towards this state is generally made by deeply cultivating the *inner witness*. As the inner witness unblends from all of the identifications and conditioning that has formed the roles and strategies that we have used to master our life experience, consciousness begins to stabilize in an individuated position of pure awareness or pure presence. This is essentially the same as the experience that we all have in deep dreamless sleep, with a crucial difference: we are not unconscious! Our bodies may be asleep, (or not) however, our consciousness is fully awake and present, with no content, no subject, and no object.

But this is not the end of the story. In the final phase, we return to everything that we normally experience in the subject/object world. The difference is that we are not attached to any of the roles or strategies that formerly have made up what we call our identity. All of these strategies and patterns are still available to us, however we use them only when they are adaptive to a particular situation and without any trace of compulsion, habit or attachment. In this state our exploratory drive is totally free from conditioning. We have radically overcome our self-centeredness and feel at one with the evolutionary movement of the life force as it is expressing itself in whatever context we find ourselves. In this state we work unselfishly to fulfill these evolutionary goals without blocks.   The classic formula in Taoism to describe this development of consciousness is that we cultivate our physical vitality, sexual energy, or Jing, into Ch'i or the energy of relationship and exchange, which we then cultivate into spirit (Shen) the energy of pure presence, emptiness or the void, and then we shatter the void and return to the Tao (all that is). Other traditions have different ways of

describing this development of consciousness. In other words to truly live in a state of non-dual awareness we have to give up our attachment to everything, including the non-dual state itself!

The state of non-dual awareness is particularly relevant for SCT as it delineates, in different language, a developmental goal that is implicit in systems centered practice. This is a deep and radical transformation of the root of suffering, which in systems centered practice is self-centeredness. (Agazarian, 1997) As we overcome self-centeredness, we dis-identify from our maladaptive roles, and with freedom and great access to life force and creativity, take up adaptive roles in the service of the goals of the present context.

Types

There is one final category in Wilber's Integral Model. This is the category of Types. All types originate in the movement of consciousness from pure undifferentiated life force, into some form of individuation. The first movement, is therefore the movement into the fundamental types of male and female. Without this fundamental polarity, there is no creation, no vital charge that perpetuates the human race. From these fundamental two types, or yin and yang, come all of the other types, strategies or roles that we have developed as human beings. In SCT, types are equivalent to the roles that emerge out of the undifferentiated life force as soon as we become a member of any context.

There are many "typing" systems that have contributed relevant information to our understanding of human identity. Some examples are the Enneagram, Meyers Briggs, Carl Jung's Archetypes and the DSM IV. Again, SCT would understand types as the various roles that emerge in response to the different contexts of our lives. Similar to SCT, Wilber is concerned that types are not acted out compulsively, unconsciously or maladaptively. SCT understands a maladaptive role as an imported strategy from the past that is a restraining force to the goals of the present context. One of the major goals of Wilber's model, as it applies to human beings, is to create a balanced and integral approach to liberation and the harmonious functioning of individuals, families, groups, organizations, and human society as a whole. This liberation necessarily involves transcending the limitations of acting out our 'types' unconsciously. Towards these goals, a deep and comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of types is an

essential tool in modifying the compulsive strategies that cause human beings to repeat patterns that lead to unnecessary suffering.

The examination of different typing systems is extremely relevant to SCT as we deepen our understanding of roles and widen our potential for modifying maladaptive, redundant roles.

An Invitation

There is not space in this context to fully explore what a systems-centered, integrally informed, intervention strategy might look like. Suffice it to say, that one would want to look at any problem from the perspective of each of the Quadrants, the relevant Lines of development, the particular Stage of the relevant lines of development, examine how the Three States of awareness are interpreted, look at the capacity for Non-Dual awareness that exists in the system, and look at what Types are getting acted out unconsciously and maladaptively relative to the goals of the context. Interventions into each of these areas could be developed using systems centered theory and methods. In the next couple of weeks I would like to invite you to think of a professional problem using the Integral Model in combination with the Theory of Living Human Systems and see if it helps you to develop any surprising and useful intervention strategies or insights. If it does, or if it doesn't (!), I invite you to e-mail me so that we can all learn together about how to apply more and more complete streams of energy and information to the issues that our clients present and help hem to find the most effective path to their goals.

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