

On the Use of the Term *Integral*

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On taking responsibility for the languages we use to understand ourselves

For rational creatures, Hegel thinks, we have a standing obligation—a commitment implicit in our very practice of giving and asking for reasons, hence of meaning or thinking anything—to make our practices reasonable.... Doing that means rationally reconstructing the tradition of applying our concepts in judgment and action and noting and resolving the inevitable resulting incompatibilities.... It is to select and arrange episodes of conceptual revision so that they take the form of a cumulative making explicit to ourselves [of our normative commitments]... Reason is the organ of semantic self-consciousness....

—Brandom, 2003 p. 562

Ken Wilber's (2006; 1999; 1995) work appears at the confluence of several complex cultural trends, both in the academy and in the broader marketplace of ideas that constitutes our post-modern public sphere and civil society. In the 1990's a polycentric movement began to emerge, catalyzed by Wilber's ever-expanding theoretical edifice and voluminous writings. Generally speaking this movement is hard to characterize because of its heterogeneity and decentralized modes of cultural production and activism. However, one might clarify the class of relevant actors and artifacts by noting their frequent and significant use of the term *Integral*. Yet the term *Integral* displays complex and multifarious term-use patterns, and is thus richly polysemic. The goal of this paper is to make explicit what is entailed by a few of the most common ways people use the term *Integral* with the goal of disentangling a few co-occurring yet logically incongruous term-use patterns.

In a series of prior publications I have positioned Wilber's work in the context of interdisciplinary studies (Stein, 2007; Stein, Connel, & Gardner, 2008), philosophical meta-theory (Stein, 2010), biomedical ethics (Stein, 2010a), developmental psychology (Stein, 2009), and educational neuroscience (Fischer & Stein, 2010). Along the way I have more or less never relied on the term *Integral*. Granted, some of this is due to mere rhetorical necessity; I've had to make moves in language games where the term is not commonly in play. But I've also consciously *avoided* the term because of the aforementioned ambiguities of term-usage across so many various academic and non-academic contexts. Thus, one of the sub-goals of this

chapter is to see if a certain specific and coherent way of using the term can be crafted. I'm working on the term to see if I can get the term to do some work for me.

It is also worth noting at the outset that for the past two years I've been involved in a research project aimed at building an understanding of how individuals use key concepts from Wilber's Integral Theory at different developmental levels. Although I will not be presenting the results of these efforts here (See: Stein, 2010b; Stein & Hiekkenein, 2010), I will be drawing on insights I have gained from formally analyzing dozens of responses to the Letical Integral Model Assessment (On the LIMA see: Stein & Hiekkenein, 2010). That, combined with over a decade of experience tracking a wide variety of "integrally-oriented" publications and media outlets, is enough to grant me the status of a deeply immersed participant observer. In light of what I have come to understand about how many people use the term *Integral*, I see this paper as attempting a kind of *terminological exorcism*. The term is magical in some user's mouths, containing richly numinous and almost religious semantic potentials.

This is in large part because the brief history of the term is populated by thinkers of a deeply religious bent. The great Indian freedom fighter and sage Sri Aurobindo (1916), the visionary philosopher and psychologist James Mark Baldwin (1906), the cryptic cultural seer and historian Jean Gebser (1984), and of course, Wilber, who has documented his life as a religious adept, practitioner, and pundit.¹ So association of the term *Integral* with terms from religious discourse is often warranted. However, the word-magic worth exorcizing occurs when the evaluative validity claims tied up in the term are not clearly differentiated from theoretical validity claims that are also tied up in the term. *Integral* is a kind of "thick concept" (Williams, 1985). That means it is used both as a descriptive term and an evaluative term. When we call something integral we often describe it and praise it at the same time. There are lots of words that work this way. For example, for Christians, *humility* is a thick concept, being simultaneously

¹ Other contemporaries using the term include: Thompson (2004); Lazlso (2004); & Esbjörn-Hargens, & Zimmerman (2009). Each evokes explicitly religious themes.

descriptive and evaluative. In general, these are the kinds of terms that make up our *languages of strong evaluation*—our vocabularies of praise—as Charles Taylor (1989) and Emerson (1982) have labeled ethical, philosophical, and religious languages.

So the use of the term *Integral* embodies both a set of theoretical commitments and a set of normative commitments. It is used as a theoretical term in developmental psychology and social-science to describe a certain stage or level of human development. It is also used as a normative term in meta-theory, epistemology, and ethics, as part of prescriptive offerings about what is preferable to do and be. In chat rooms, salons, and conference halls the term takes on both uses, with users often switching imperceptively between the two. Labeling a person or artifact as *Integral* is typically a move that both positions the person or artifact in terms of a developmental model and evaluates the person or artifact in light of set of agreed upon norms. Problems arise with this *de-differentiation* of descriptive quasi-scientific claims and evaluative claims about what is morally or spiritually praiseworthy.

Now, classically, the ecstatic *de-differentiation* of fact and value, subject and object, self and other, have been a hallmark of psychological descriptions of religious experience since Wundt first wrote on the subject over a century ago. As I explain below, these qualities led Baldwin to explicitly describe religious experience as a kind of *integral* consciousness, a comprehensively reconciliatory consciousness. He placed these experiences as the pinnacle of his complex meta-theory of human epistemological development, described them from a first-person perspective, valorized their merits, and championed their pursuit. And thus began the evolution of a term straddling the line between the theoretical descriptions that are a part of the human sciences and the normative commitments that are a part of our moral and religious traditions.

Habermas (1988; 2007) has suggested that in many cultural groups models from the human sciences have supplanted traditional (religious) languages of self-understanding. Unlike models in the physical sciences, which affect the lifeworld eventually mainly in the form of

technological innovation, the human sciences affect the lifeworld directly by shaping the action-orienting self-understandings of individuals. Habermas argues that those who produce knowledge in these fields should consider the fact that the scientific languages they create become available to function as resources for identity construction. For example, radically counterintuitive, fragmented, and reductionist scientific accounts are *irresponsible* (not just wrong) in so far as the likelihood of their being adopted as self-descriptors is high and the appropriateness of their serving this function is low. This is not an argument against bold hypothesis generation and materialist research programs in the human sciences, nor is it an argument against increasing the scientific understanding of human beings. It is an argument against a form of scientism that aims to systematically contradict deep-seated aspects of the self-understanding of the species. Irresponsible scientific generalizations run the risk of undermining the language games enabling autonomous ethical agency and human dignity (Habermas, 2007). The concerns Habermas expresses have to do with the premature conclusions and promissory notes of a burgeoning but still immature neuroscience. This is a field that has been remarkably attractive to the popular media. It is affecting legal discourse and practice, education, and marketing, while at the same time generally shaping the way large numbers of people understand their behaviors and relationships (Kagan, 2009; Stein, de le Chase, Fischer, Hinton, 2010).

Of course, neuroscience is not the only field where models are built that end up affecting how we understand ourselves. Psychology has been massively influential in changing broad cultural patterns of meaning-making at least since Freud. Before that, philosophy was the queen of the sciences and explicitly offered “comprehensive doctrines” (Rawls, 1996); totalizing belief systems that answer questions about humanity’s place in nature, the individual’s place in society, and the meaning of life. On the whole, theorizing aimed at affecting the self-understanding of the species is a perennial pursuit, even if it is, as Kant thought, one particularly susceptible to transcendental illusions.

Below I look at some of the key facets of Integral Theory with an eye toward what I will call *the growth-to-goodness assumptions*. This is a particular cluster of ideas having to do with the nature of human development and the trajectory of certain specific stage models. This is where the term appears most problematically as a thick concept. The term *Integral* is in fact deeply entwined with the growth-to-goodness assumptions. The term is used, with impressive historical precedence, to describe characteristic products of late-stage developmental processes across the board. In fact, the way the term is used by many theorists and activists only points to a limited set of late-stage products. It is used to praise worthy things that only sometimes reliably co-vary with higher-stage development. And so the word-magic appears, blurring the difference between statements about what is the case at the higher-stages and what *ought* to be the case “up there.”

I look at evidence demonstrating that highly-developed persons and theoretical models often do not deserve to be praised by being labeled *Integral*. The claim that higher stages are better than lower ones is true only in certain cases when “better” has been well specified. It is not true across the board. It is possible to be extremely developed along some parameters (complexity, perspective taking) and yet be deficient along others (honesty, sense of justice). Moreover, in some domains it is probable that very highly developed capabilities will err as much if not more than less developed ones. You can be very highly developed and make a mistake or simply be wrong. Not everything that is post-formal operational (a.k.a., vision-logic; 2nd tier)—not every thing “up there” warrants the predicate *Integral*. The term is about certain possible and preferable developmental outcomes, not about developmental outcomes that are necessarily probable, likely, or inevitable.

The big take away is that we should be as concerned about clarifying the normative function of *Integral*—reflecting on its use as a *prescriptive* term—as we are with applying the term as a descriptor. *Integral* already does important work as a normative term. Reflecting on *Integral* as indexing a set of *epistemic* and *ethical commitments* is akin to making explicit some

of what is implied in how the term is already used. So this is about admitting and embracing the normative function of the term *Integral*. Doing this requires clearly differentiating its use as a term wedded to certain theoretical models in the human sciences from its use as a term that is part of a broad language of strong evaluation. In essence, I am arguing that conflating these two uses of the term has led, on the one hand, to misunderstandings about what is the case with people who attain late-stage capabilities and dispositions, and on the other hand, to a kind of inarticulacy about our normative commitments. I suggest that we should begin to pay more attention to the normative issues at stake and shy away from using *Integral* as a term having to do with structure-stage development.

Growth-to-goodness from Baldwin to Wilber

The real considered as the possible, the undiscovered, the hoped-for is assumed or postulated. We accept a beyond both of truths and of goods, and bend our imaginations to depict its reality and anticipate its value. Suppositions arise as to the true, new ends come to supplement the good; in both these worlds, ideals hover over the body of actualities. We are ever prospecting, and it is only as this prospecting is successful that the store of actualities is enlarged in mass, defined in detail, and enriched in meaning.... The scientific imagination itself not only discovers the true, but also postulates the ideal of Truth. Much more is this the case with the moral imagination.... Consciousness seems thus to forget its realism, its actualism, and to become a moralist and idealist.... Reality is seen to be progressive, unfinished, dynamic, having an ideal meaning, but never achieving it in fact.... The facts are, of course, there, both the mental facts and the physical facts. But beyond them rises the end, sublime in its scorn of the fact; the "ought" dominates the "is."

—Baldwin, 1906 vol. 3 247-249

Wilber is one of those theorists who has taken the time to trace the development of their own theorizing through distinct stages. Interestingly, Baldwin (1926) is another, and their intellectual biographies display many similarities (and, of course, many differences as well). In Baldwin's autobiography, we find an account of a thinker who begins in the experimental-psych lab and ends up as a meta-theorist articulating a comprehensive evolutionary theory of reality. Moreover, Baldwin (1906) articulated a complex model of the developing human psyche, and effectively accounted for his meta-theoretical project in terms of this psychological model. He proposed that the highest stages of human development—stages he dubbed *trans-logical*—served primarily to reconcile and integrate the disparate outputs of various developmental

modes. The *telos* of development assures that later stages are characterized by increasingly adequate, increasingly integrative, and increasingly reconciliatory and redemptive cognitive and emotional processes. Baldwin's model unabashedly endorses the notion that higher is better and that evolution is a process of growth-to-goodness (Cahan, 2003).

The pre-history of Baldwin's *growth-to-goodness assumptions* go back to Spinoza, Schelling, and Kant, and especially the latter's 3rd *Critique*, that dark and cryptic cipher that spawned Romanticism. Of course, Baldwin was not alone, as most psychologists and philosophers who endorsed evolution toward the end of the 19th Century also endorsed a growth-to-goodness view (Faber, 1998). But Baldwin would influence most of the major developmental psychologists over the next century. While the effect of his initial commitment to a growth-to-goodness view would fade, it would never entirely wear off. Kohlberg often slid into a kind of imminent teleology and Neo-Aristotelianism (Habermas, 1993). Maslow (1971) and Loevinger (1976) would offer models where the characteristics of the highest levels were overtly both valuable and inevitable. And all three posit that the highest levels are best described as integrative, liberating, wholesome, and healthy—fundamentally *worth* striving for.

More recently, Wilber and a host of others have used these models and their assumptions about the higher levels in the context of a broad discourse about human potential, transformation, and meaning-making. I say *assumptions* because all existing models that address "the farther reaches of human nature" are based on scant empirical evidence and lots of speculation (as nearly all of the above mentioned theorists admit in print, see Wilber, 1999). Current discussions in Wilber's wake deploy the term *Integral* to signify the quality of the transformations that occur in late stage development. The momentous leap to 2nd tier values, the synthesizing power of vision-logic, and post-conventional morality are all considered indices of a deeper *integral consciousness*. This new emerging form of consciousness is tetra-located in individuals, cultural movements, and their respective biological, economic, and institutional configurations. This brings psychological models into contact with those from anthropology and

cultural history that also view *Integral* structures as the latest complex emerging evolutionary meta-trend (Gebser, 1984; Thompson, 2004; 2009). It is as if the *telos* of evolution assures us an *Integral* future. And so the story goes that higher is better because *Integral* is higher.

The growth to goodness assumptions should not be confused with Wilber's account, which is poly-vocal and rich with footnotes and caveats. The growth to goodness assumptions are simply in the *Zeitgeist*, they involve (but are not limited to) the following ideas: 1) the higher stages are intrinsically more valuable than lower ones; 2) the higher stages can be characterized as *Integral* across the board; 3) the *whole person* transforms while attaining these levels; and 4) the emergence of this valuable integral consciousness has some degree of inevitability, being *the next big thing* on the evolutionary itinerary. Few of the theorists mentioned above admit being committed to these assumptions in any kind of unqualified or simple way. And yet it is hard to find in their works rich descriptions of the higher-levels that don't unduly emphasize their positive attributes. They paint inspiring pictures of the higher-levels, and in this respect their works serve an important ennobling function, a kind of provocative normative function, egging us on by quasi-scientifically describing a realm of deeply admirable human potentials.

However, below I will show that the higher levels don't always look so good. Many products of late stage development are not worthy of being dubbed *Integral* when we consider the term's normative uses. This means that the use of *Integral* as a catch-all category for late stage capabilities, dispositions, and related artifacts, is both inaccurate and at variance with its normative use. As mentioned at the outset, we are dealing with a thick concept here, and its dual-use affordances make it both powerful and problematic. So what to do with this slippery term? I don't think current use of the term easily lends itself to reforms wherein in the things we dub *Integral* are *no longer* also the things we prefer. *Integral* appears best fit to serve a normative function.

The farther reaches of human nature: What do they really look like?

"This is all an intrapersonal problem for me. How to put together the artist in me and the scientist? The mystical with the sober? Somebody wrote me recently admiring me for managing to live simultaneously in the conventional world and in the far out, unconventional world. So can I be in the D[eficiency]-realm, with good reality testing, and in the B[eing]-realm, contemplating eternal B-values? In and out of the world. Matter-of-fact and also awed by the sacredness and mystery....Very paradoxical.... my troubles and conflict over my role....Then it dawned on me that what this meant was a redefinition of happiness and of the good life. All of my conflicts and emotions and bad dreams...they are happiness. Happiness will have to be defined as being pained and troubled in a good cause! The good life is to have good-real-worthwhile worries and anxieties....It's all an extension of my hierarchy of grumbles. The good life is to have meta-grumbles instead of low grumbles."

—Abraham Maslow, 1982 p. 108

Wilber (2006) has claimed that according to some measures, the vast majority of humans on the planet are below the critical capability-levels that enable worldcentric identity formation and reflective democratic civic participation. To put it bluntly, in relation to some scales the majority of the world is ethnocentric. Wilber then raises the specter of Nazism, which was an unholy mixture of technology and ethnocentrism. He argues for the kinds of reforms that would enable the transformation of human capabilities across a wide array of important lines and insure that worldcentric perspectives are available to all. These calls for the liberation of human capability and experience, transcending but including calls for economic welfare and equality, set Wilber in league with Sen, Nussbaum, Habermas, and West.

But notice that on one reading, Wilber's account presents a developmental spectrum in which Nazis are at the bottom and Global Peace Facilitators are at the top. The broad argument leans heavily, but not explicitly (or necessarily), on the growth-to-goodness assumptions. It may be that on most scales many Nazis would score very low, but they would not score any lower than most of the "good guys" fighting against them in the 1940s. Moreover, and to the point, what about Hitler and the dozens of PhDs on his staff? Accounts of decision-making processes surrounding the final solution are convincing evidence that post-formal operational capabilities can be deployed for dreadful purposes (Goldhagen, 1996). Comparable evidence is ready at hand. Bernie Madoff and our most recent breed of knowledge economy robber-barons are

clearly capable of meta-systemic perspectival coordinations. Organized crime, multi-national terrorist organizations, and modern totalitarian states all entail cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal tasks that make very complex demands on individuals. Success in these realms is a remarkable—if a-typical—developmental accomplishment in many respects.

But personalities from history are not the best source of evidence about what the higher stages look like. Current research on adult development—covering up to the first of the post-formal stages—presents more relevant data culled from carefully controlled observation and analysis (Fischer & Bidell, 2006; Basseches & Mascolo, 2010). Of particular relevance are studies done on the *variability* of adults across contexts and domains and the *a-typical developmental pathways* that result from a-typical socialization contexts (e.g., abuse; neglect). Unless late-stage transformations are so radical that they reconfigure the basic structures of the body-mind—which there is no evidence for—we can reasonably assume that the dynamics of development evident in this data will remain in play all the way up.

Figure 1 is a picture worth more than 1,000 words (see Mascolo & Fischer, 2010 for more details, especially concerning methods). It is a complex diachronic psychograph tracking a woman acting as a client in a psychotherapeutic dyad over the course of 188 conversational exchanges. The “beaded strings” near the top of the figure are indexes of variations in emotional valiance, while the jagged lines near the bottom track variations in developmental level (upper-line) and in the number conceptual elements (lower-line). The developmental levels are also called complexity levels or skill levels (Fischer, 1980), with levels 9, 10, 11, and 12 being Single Abstractions, Abstract Mapping, Abstract Systems, and Single Principles. In the parlance of Wilber’s (1999) meta-theoretical model, spoken in the *lingua-Piagetian*, that is Late Concrete Operations, Early Formal Operational, Late Formal Operations, and Early Post-Formal, a.k.a., Amber, Orange, Green, and Teal.

The names of the levels—indeed the levels themselves—are not as important as the micro-developmental dynamics being tracked. This psychograph reveals complex patterns of

co-variation between developmental level, conceptual content, and emotion. Granted, this data only represents a sample of one, but one that does not seem to speak against it. In dynamics systems research (van Geert, 1994), as well as in use of case study methods (George & Bennett, 2005), the examination of a single exemplary instance can be rigorously used as fodder for model building. This is a kind of science that is more abductive than inductive, relying less on statistical inference and more on the detailed representation of particular instances, representations frequently taking the shape of figures, graphs, and other iconic representational devices (Lewin, 1936; Peirce, 1933).

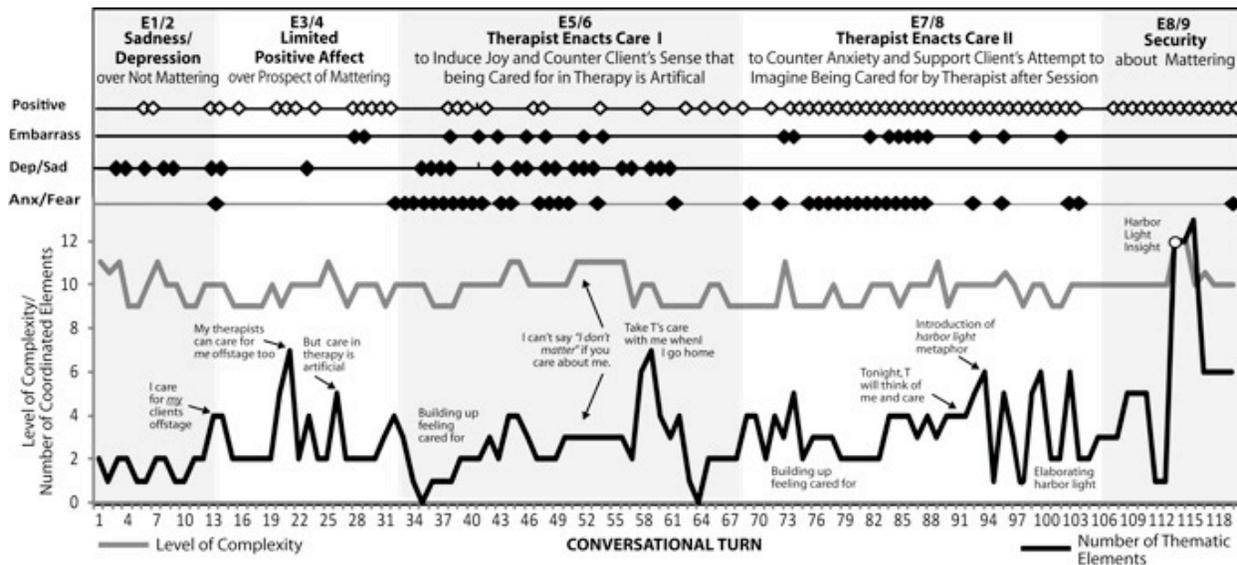


Figure 1: from Moscolo & Fischer, 2010; with permission. A diachronic psychograph tracking a woman engaged as a client in a psychotherapeutic dyad over the course of 188 conversational exchanges.

I want to point out a single moment in the figure, from the many possible moments of interest (See: Moscolo & Fischer, 2010 for more). The climax of the exchange, the Harbor Light Insight, comes at the end where the participant functions at level 12 for several exchanges and brings together almost twice as many conceptual elements all at once, while experiencing unique levels of positive affect. Note that there are fluctuations in developmental level throughout, which occur in a range between 9 and 11. However, as it all comes together toward

the end of the exchange, a kind of phase shift occurs in the system, and post-formal operational capabilities are recruited during a moment of insight. These higher-stage capabilities are gone as quick as they set in. Yet the insight provided proved to be an enduring therapeutic gain and kind of pivot-point for a change in the life-trajectory of the patient (Bassecehs & Mascolo, 2010).

These findings suggest that late-stage capabilities are fragile, domain specific, and context-sensitive accomplishments, which can be stabilized over time, but are likely to remain transient optimal-level performances that are heavily dependent on social and environmental scaffolding. (Note that this is what we should expect if we think capabilities tetra-arise.) Moreover, everyone shows up differently beyond formal operations, even if it is true that certain universal deep structural properties set the range of what is possible at these levels. In fact, in many domains, there is a greater diversity of developmental pathways toward and through the higher stages than there are for the lower ones. Individuals suffering from clinical depression show unique configurations of emotion and cognition during late-stage growth, which dramatically affect their communication styles and self-understandings (Mascolo & Fischer, 2010). Forms of highly reflective existential *ennui* require late-stage capabilities, as do the ironic and cynical forms of detachment that enable self-interested strategists to be successfully manipulative (both points made by Wilber (1995)). People are not always admirable just because they are highly developed along certain important parameters. And just because someone has shown up in one context as very developed does not mean they will show up in all contexts that same way. Evidence suggests that the farther reaches of human development are as messy and complex as the rest.

It is also not true that the artifacts produced at the higher levels are uniquely prone to be valuable. For example, trans-disciplinary meta-theories are frequently cited as artifact-types clearly requiring the development of post-formal capabilities. But many of these kinds of sophisticated meta-theories are deeply flawed or radically partial or both. From Wolfram (2002)

and Kaufmann (1993) to Churchland (1996) and Wilson (1975), highly complex theoretical edifices can be extremely reductionistic. And as recent advances across a whole range of fields have demonstrated (Kagan, 2009), even the most developed and complex theories can be seriously mistaken, or just plain *wrong*.

There is nothing that is inevitably *Integral* about the higher stages of human development. The term is not doing good work when it is deployed to serve a descriptive function tied to developmental models. Rather, as I will explain, when the term *Integral* is disentangled from the growth-to-goodness assumptions its function as a *normative* term comes into view. It is not a term that is best used to *describe* the capabilities and artifacts associated with late-stage development. It is a term best used to *evaluate* capabilities and artifacts at any level and to make *prescriptions* about preferable developmental trajectories based on a specific set of ethical and epistemic commitments. This makes *integral* a term about what we *value* not about what we believe is the case regarding the highest levels of human development.

Utopian language games and the normative function of *Integral*

As soil is to an agricultural society, consciousness is to ours. Some groups seek to mine it like coal, and they tend to create the smog in the noosphere that now surrounds the planet Earth with bad movies and worse TV. Other groups seek to parasitize it and feed off the sex and violence as Homeric gods hovering over the odors of burnt sacrifice. And a few techno-mystic souls imagine that some quantum shift is at hand...as we evolve out of biology and into technology. We probably won't have to wait long to find out. The new electronic media have sped things up and made the old normalcy of objective reality nonviable. They have pushed us into an "up or out" scenario in which we either shift upward to a new culture of higher spirituality, turning our electronic technologies into new cathedrals of light, or slide downward into darkness and an abyss of cultural entropy, fighting it out in a final war of all against all. As H.G. Well warned during the beginning of this period of Planetization: "The future is a race between catastrophe and education."

—Thompson, 2009 p. 29-30

I just briefly covered some of the evidence against the growth to goodness assumptions. But the main goal here is not to revise views about the higher levels of development (although that is a sub-goal). The main goal is to revise views about how we should understand the use of one of our most basic *terms of art*—the term *integral*. As explained above, one form of common

usage entangles this term with discourses about the higher levels. But these ways of deploying the term *integral*—where it is used as a descriptive term—are liability prone, and land us in confusions about what the higher stages are really like. Using the term as a catch-all for characterizing properties and products of late-stage development blinds us to the heterogeneity of what shows up beyond formal operations and the non-obvious value thereof.

I think that evidence undermining the growth to goodness assumptions suggests that the term *Integral* should not be *unreflectively* used as a descriptor in developmental psychology. Given the aforementioned diversity of how higher level capabilities manifest, it is more accurate to take *Integral* as a term used with reference to a specific sub-set of high level capabilities, dispositions, and artifacts. These would be those that are taken as valuable, admirable, and worthy of pursuit. That is, out of all that becomes possible beyond formal operations, *Integral* is used as a label for what is preferable. This makes *Integral* a term where normative parameters set descriptive use patterns. In general, normative terms have different affordances and baggage than descriptive terms (Brandom, 1994; Sellars, 2005). In particular, while descriptive terms entail commitments about *what is the case*, normative terms entail commitments about *what ought to be the case*. That means when we apply the term *Integral* in characterizing a person or artifact we are actually making a value judgment, and not merely a judgment about what is the case.

Importantly, I'm not suggesting that we should start using *Integral* some new way; I'm arguing that we misunderstand how we are already using the term. Aside from its use as a term wedded to certain developmental models—a questionable form of usage, as just explained—its most common use is in the context of judgments of value. The term occupies a privileged position in our languages of evaluation and vocabularies of praise. But this means that when we wield the term, it is not against a backdrop of certain models and theories—as is the common assumption, where the term just functions to *locate* a person or artifact relative to a model—

rather, the term is used against a backdrop of certain ethical and epistemic commitments, commitments as to what people and knowledge *ought* to be like.

A host of *evaluative commitments* are implied by the normative use of the term *Integral* (Wilber, 2006; 1999; 1995). The term summarizes a complex network of epistemic commitments concerning the value of knowledge production processes that are comprehensive, non-reductionistic, multi-perspectival, and full spectrum. It also implies a related set of ethical commitments concerning the value of human transformation, wholeness, integrity, authenticity, and openness, and the rearticulating of certain basic moral imperatives in light of evolution. As noted by others (Crittenden, 1997), it is precisely these commitments that enable the *critical* and *constructive* function of the broad theory, allowing integral theorizing to be understood as a kind of critical theorizing. These associations between integral theory and critical theory position things in terms of post-modern scholarship and the “culture of late capitalism” (Jameson, 1991).

It is well known that Wilber (1995) sides with Habermas and Taylor in denigrating deconstructive post-modernism. The most often cited knock-down-drag-out argument has to do with the so-called “performative contradictions” that entangle most radical post-modern forms of antinomianism and socio-epistemic criticism (e.g., Foucault, 1972). But there is another argument that all three bring up, and on which Habermas lingers, which has to do with the *crypto-normative* character of this po-mo chatter. That is, all criticism implies some normative framework, some language of evaluation or vocabulary of praise, some model of what is preferable. And yet these po-mo critics never surface their evaluative commitments. Thus there is not a discourse about what is worth striving for and is worthy of human dignity and value. There is only a discourse about what is condemnable and worthy of complaint or protest. This kind of inarticulacy about the shape of a life that has *not* been misspent, warped, or damaged is problematic. Truly *critical theories*—tracing their lineage to Kant via Habermas, Adorno, Marx, and Hegel—have both a diagnostic moment, wherein present realities are disclosed as

problematic, and a utopian moment, wherein the shape of preferable futures is envisioned (Benhabib, 1986).

Wilber's various models have often been described as maps of human potential, charting what is possible and preferable concerning the future of human evolution. In this respect they are offered as an antidote to the lopsided and fragmented negativism of much that is dubbed progressive post-modern scholarship and activism. It would seem that we have, in Integral Theory, a language with unique utopian affordances, as it were, birthed from the belly of the human potential movement and humanistic/existential psychology. And yet, as I have been discussing here, a kind of *descriptivism* has us smuggling our evaluative commitments in through the back door. We have our own brand of crypto-normative value-discourse avoidance. It relies on the unreflective use of the term *Integral* as a descriptor in reference to late-stage psychological growth and contemporary evolutionary patterns in society and culture. As I explained, the growth-to-goodness assumptions enable a kind of inarticulacy because they allow us to say simply that higher stages are better because higher stages are *Integral* and vice versa. This is that word-magic I have been aiming to cast out.

I claim that to avoid this circularity we need to admit that the term *Integral* should serve mainly a normative function. This would release us from allegiance to specific developmental models with their claims and assumptions. As Kohlberg (1981) glimpses, and Habermas (1990) emphasizes, the way development *ought* to unfold does not necessarily follow those paths that researchers have found are most commonly the case. The models we use to understand ourselves should not stifle our discourse about the qualities of a life worth living. Disentangling our languages of praise from the limited set of developmental models currently in use is a good idea, if only because it will liberate our conversations about what matters most.

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