

POSTFORMAL-INTEGRAL- PLANETARY SCHOLARSHIP

Insights from the Integral Futures Controversy

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ABSTRACT This article is a commentary on the Integral Futures controversy that arose between authors in two special editions of *Futures* (Vol. 40, No. 2, and Vol. 42, No. 2). The vitriolic rhetoric of the debate suggests the need for a new form of scholarship, which I call “postformal-integral-planetary scholarship.” Such scholarship would require creative altruism, nuanced theorizing, and recognition that we share something of uncommon value with our colleagues—a deep desire and willingness to work toward a more equitable, just, sustainable, and peaceful world. Postformal-integral-planetary scholarship has the potential to move our discourse beyond the personal ego and into a field where we can jointly address global crises.

KEY WORDS futures; Integral Futures; Integral Theory; postformal scholarship; scholarship

He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout,
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.
— *Edwin Markham* (1936, p. 67)

I begin with this poem, both to guide my analysis of the Integral Futures controversy and to alert readers to my preferred strategy: inclusivity arising from compassion, an approach stemming from my background in transpersonal psychology, integral studies, and the systems sciences.¹ The Integral Futures controversy is especially awkward, in that it arose between “postformal-integral-planetary” (Gidley, 2010) thinkers on an integral stage—that of Integral Futures.² Feelings of exclusion, misrepresentation, and marginalization were relayed in an issue of the journal *Futures*, “Epistemological Pluralism in Futures Studies” (2010), edited by Sohail Inayatullah, which was published as a rejoinder to an earlier issue, “Integral Futures” (2008), edited by Richard Slaughter.

Slaughter’s issue was an attempt to take a fresh view of futures studies and applied foresight from an integrally informed perspective. Slaughter sought to take the role of a “bridge” between some of the more accessible aspects of the integral perspective and others whose expertise lay elsewhere. Unfortunately, a number of authors in the rebuttal issue (Inayatullah, 2010) felt that he was attempting to “colonize” the future with one “brand” of integral (i.e., Integral Theory). Those allegations, including “hegemony,” are particularly disparaging considering that Slaughter and other contributors in the original issue (2008) clearly state their awareness and appreciation of forms of integral scholarship other than Ken Wilber’s Integral model.

Hayward (2008) opens the special issue by referencing “three of the greatest integral theorists of the twentieth century. . . Jean Gebser, Sri Aurobindo, and Rudolph Steiner” (p. 109); Stewart (2008) points out,

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“Australian futurists have been working with a *range of integral theories* over the past decade to inform new approaches to scenarios” [emphasis added] (p. 109); and Voros (2008) discusses “integral” in a general sense (i.e., without reference to Wilber’s Integral model) before acknowledging:

. . . Much of the ‘integral’ work reported in various domains of inquiry is based upon Wilber’s AQAL model—not because it is the *only* integral framework (for indeed there are many possible) but because of its broad scope and wide utility *as* an integral framework (p. 199)

While some authors in the rebuttal issue seem at times to have missed those words entirely (Inayatullah, 2010, p. 104), others fault the incompleteness of the contributors’ knowledge of a broader range of integral scholarship and lack of engagement with the actual writings of the theorists they do mention (Gidley, 2010, p. 126). Others find the issue to “feature a variety of perspectives which nonetheless privilege a Wilberian integral approach on the one hand and poststructuralist-postconventional/postformal reasoning and enactments on the other” (Hampson, 2010, p. 135).

But privileging Integral Theory only scratches the surface of the controversy, for one of the defining features of the controversy arose in reaction to Slaughter (2008) and Riedy’s (2008) applications/misapplications of Integral Theory to Causal Layered Analysis (CLA). In addition to Inayatullah, five authors in the rebuttal issue (Bussey, 2010; Hampson, 2010; Gidley, 2010; Russo, 2010; Barber, 2010) defend CLA from what is seen as Slaughter and Riedy’s attempts to “capture and tame CLA using integral” (Inayatullah, 2010, p. 108). While Slaughter, Riedy, and others may well have misrepresented CLA, should colleagues immediately conclude their intent was to take control of epistemology within the field of futures studies, rather than through honest misunderstanding or misinterpretation? The hostility of the rhetoric is a disheartening representation of postformal-integral-planetary consciousness. Rather than approaching the special issue (2008) in the spirit it was intended, as an opening up of *discourse* about the application of integral theories to futures studies, authors in the rebuttal issue (2010) focus on what they perceive as an attack on CLA and a closure of epistemological alternatives. In the process, Ken Wilber and Integral Theory became the “heretic, rebel, the thing to flout.” Rather than drawing the larger circle of epistemological pluralism, the rebuttal issue, while overtly stating a willingness to include Integral Theory, is so filled with vitriolic and condemnatory statements about Ken Wilber and Integral Theory that the message one receives is clearly “shut Integral out.”

Scholars do not generally consider it appropriate to assess the merit of a theory based on the merits of the theorist’s personal life. But in the rebuttal issue we find authors willing to tell us about Wilber’s meditation practice, his emotional culture, his humility or lack thereof (Bussey, 2008); about his vehemence toward California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) and those who create variations of his theory. We are even provided with websites where we can read negative opinions of him, as well as his own explanation of the CIIS controversy (Ramos, 2008, p. 118). In reading Wilber’s response to the CIIS controversy, I could not help but wonder if any one of the authors in the rebuttal issue would respond differently if they were told, by persons they respected, that a specific university disdained their research? Would, for example, Gidley, in clear conscience, send a student who wanted to study integral futures education to a university that scorned her substantial research in that area, particularly if the student had a stated interest in studying her work? I can only answer for myself. My research in the area of evolutionary guidance media is little known within academia, but if it were being thus scorned, I would hope to have the courage to be my own champion in the face of those who would disparage my life’s work.

More times than not Wilber is compared to a god, a guru, or the pope, as a means to comment about both his authoritative manner and his enthusiastic readership. In academia, every now and again “academic celebrities” arise (e.g., Stephen Hawking). It is not uncommon for such professors to “draw” students from all

over the world to their affiliated institution. Nor is it uncommon for students to wait several years to get into one of their classes, or to work with them on theses or dissertations. However, even with all the attention and praise, we seldom, if ever, hear the individual referred to as a guru (Inayatullah, 2008, p. 103) or compared to the pope (Judge, 2010, p. 160). Is Wilber's status "outside academia" a license for dispensing with standard discourse and reasoning?

Indeed, if we were theoretical physicists opposed to Hawking's theories, we would not set out to convince readers of its fallacy by stating that he is "colonizing" or "branding" space itself, nor would we malign his work through statements such as, "We are all brought together on the altar of Dark Matter." Yet in the rebuttal issue (2010) we find just such phrasing in reference to Wilber and Integral Theory, including "colonizing" and "branding" (Gidley, 2008, p. 126); "AQAL as a Borg" (Bussey, 2010, p. 111); and, "We are all brought to the altar of the Integral Operating System (IOS)" (Barber, 2010, p. 170).

We should think deeply before construing the success of Integral Theory as a "corporate turn" (Gidley, 2010, p. 125). If we consider this an appropriate assertion, we should first be willing to recognize our own employment at corporate institutions, some of which could be considered quite prestigious "brands" (e.g., Harvard, Oxford, Yale). Wilber supported his initial scholarly research, a theoretical study of Eastern and Western psychologies (i.e., *The Spectrum of Consciousness* [1993]), while working as a dishwasher. If one is to malign the success of Integral Theory and its extensions (i.e., the Integral Life online community; the graduate programs at John F. Kennedy and Fielding Universities; the Integral Theory Conference and Integral Spiritual Experience gathering), one should likewise hold in contempt funding received to support one's own continuing scholarship, as the vast majority would certainly be traced back to corporations.

Rather than feeling threatened by the success of Integral Theory, a truly postformal-integral-planetary discourse might celebrate it as representing a growing movement toward the reintegration of science and spirit, a part of what Joanna Macy (1998) refers to as the "Great Turning, an epochal shift from a self-destructive industrial growth society to a life-sustaining society" (p. 6). Instead, in the rebuttal issue Inayatullah (2010) says of Integral Theory:

Just such a hegemonic approach amid an ecology of alternatives echoes what the Islamic world is currently experiencing, wherein dissent is being narrowed and the official future "mullahized." (p. 108)

Anyone familiar with Integral Theory recognizes this comparison as completely upside-down. Furthermore, no one in the futures field has taken away anyone's right to dissent. On the contrary, the Integral Futures special issue led to a rebuttal issue devoted near exclusively to such dissent. The very idea that one theory could take over the entire field of futures studies is a strange proposition, one that appears to have arisen from that most partial of triumvirates: ego, anger, and fear.

Explaining the "Integral" in Integral Theory

In the midst of defending CLA and condemning Wilber, the rebuttal issue actually brings something important to light: recognition of the various meanings and interpretations of the word *integral* and their potential misunderstanding in terms of Integral Theory. It is certainly true that the word *integral* may be defined in various ways, and take on a plethora of meanings and implications, as Bussey (2010) explains in the opening of his essay, where he declares his distaste for the noun and adjective. For Bussey, the noun implies a "fore-closing on alternatives," while the adjective

...has similar connotations, carrying implicit within it a sense of singularity, unit as whole, linearity (the terminus of an evolutionary cycle), centre-periphery (the whole

heart—the incomplete inchoate periphery), distance (the integral gaze is not unlike the panopticon), and monotheism (you are either integral or incomplete). (p. 110)

Bussey’s distaste for the word *integral* is helpful, for it provides integral practitioners with an important and valuable insight from the first sentence of his opening paragraph onward (i.e., he reminds us that we too carry within us ready-made descriptions of various territories; descriptions that may or may not be pertinent to the terrain we intend to explore). Bussey’s definition suggests the importance of beginning any discussion involving the application of Integral Theory with an exploration of the term *integral* (i.e., the origin of the word, its various meanings and implications). And, in working with international groups, to likewise dialogue about the word’s various meanings in the languages of those present, discussing possible translations, and the ways the word has been used in science and culture throughout history.

When exploration of the word *integral* has run its course, an integral practitioner would do well to bring attention to the deepest theme permeating Wilber’s Integral Theory. However, as Gidley points out, Wilber “has not divulged where his use of the term [integral] arose” (2010, p. 127), but he has made it exceedingly clear that Integral Theory has nothing to do with the singular. The warp and weft of Integral Theory is *interdependence*. It begins with holons (i.e., whole/parts) and is neither singular nor whole:

Since reality is not composed of wholes, and since it has no parts—since there are only whole/parts—then this approach undercuts the traditional argument between atomism (all things are fundamentally isolated and individual wholes that interact only by chance) and wholism (all things are merely strands or parts of the larger web or whole). Both of those views are absolutely incorrect. There are no wholes, and there are no parts. There are only whole/parts. (Wilber, 1995, p. 35)

Wilber’s “Integral” is the interdependence of yin and yang; it requires recognition of the whole/part as existing in dynamic interrelationship. To miss this point is to read, describe, or apply Wilber’s work without understanding its deepest and most elemental context. Wilber’s Integral Theory is in fact antithetical to the notion “you are either integral or incomplete,” for the theory itself is predicated on whole/parts. One is not integral or incomplete; one is “integral/incomplete.” This open-endedness is not an arbitrary feature of Integral Theory, but rather an essential “beat” that holds “silence” as a necessary equal.

Wilber’s integral vision draws heavily upon the verb *integrating*, in that his theory brings together diverse theories from within and across multiple disciplines, such that knowledge-claims are made more readily accessible, analyzable, and perchance, more effectively applied (at least for some). In bringing together disparate whole/parts, Wilber sets no “evolutionary terminus,” either for the creation of new knowledge, or humanity’s further development. He states:

I haven’t actually mentioned the nature or the actual content of the mind’s omega point, its basic attractor, its end state toward which earlier stages are struggling to reach, because it is at this point that the story becomes truly fascinating. The mind’s omega point, *for each theorist*, is the context that they believe *cannot* be outcontexted, the context beyond which growth or expansion cannot or does not or should not proceed. . . . And a final Omega Point? That would imply a final Whole, and there is no such holon anywhere in manifest existence. (1995, pp. 77-78)

Just as the future is a bringing together of the past/present in a matrix of creative potentiality, Integral Theory brings together the whole/part in a matrix of creative potentiality. Wilber (1995) clearly states that

Integral Theory does not propose an end goal, but rather suggests the possibility that telos itself may be all there is: “Who knows, perhaps telos, perhaps Eros, moves the entire Kosmos, and God may indeed be an all-embracing chaotic Attractor, acting, as Whitehead said, throughout the world by gentle persuasion toward love” (p. 78). Bussey’s finds the word *integral* as “not unlike the panopticon,” but in Wilber’s Integral Theory, it is intended to provide individuals with more perspectives. It is aligned with emancipation, rather than restraint or restriction.

Envisioning “Postformal-Integral-Planetary” Scholarship

If we sincerely wish to promote “postformal-integral-planetary” futures, we must first engage at that level of scholarship. Keeping in mind the meaning of *integral* we’ve just explored, and the deep meanings associated with “postformal-integral-planetary,” the phrase Gidley (2010) coined as a method of “thinking these threads together as facets of the one emerging consciousness movement” (p. 131), we might ask ourselves how such scholarship could differ from what we have already discussed? What, we might ask, would the next issue exploring Integral Futures look like if we cast a wider circle from the beginning, perhaps if the issue were co-edited by Slaughter, Inayatullah, and Gidley? Such an issue might provide integral practitioners with a vivid example of conscious dialogue, or what we might call “postformal-integral-planetary scholarship,” capable of guiding today’s scholars as well as those of tomorrow.

I make this observation, pointing out what *ought* to be, in an effort to point out what *can* be, particularly among colleagues capable of postformal reasoning. The American psychologist and pioneer of the psychological study of creativity, Howard Gruber (1997), put it this way:

When we say that something *ought* to be the case, we must mean that it *could* be so. To insist on the oughtness of impossibility would not make sense. But what is possible?... We don’t know unless we extend ourselves to our maximum capacity, in the most creative ways possible. So *ought* implies *can*, and in the search for the possible *can* implies creative work. Therefore, to fulfill our highest moral obligations we really have to search for pathways to creative altruism. (p. 469)

Gruber (1997) describes creative altruism as “express[ing] the highest development of the individual and at the same time depend[ing] on cooperation and mutual understanding” (p. 471). What we need when exploring applications of integral theory—of any theorist(s)—to futures studies, or any other field, is the capacity to engage our colleagues at this level of creative moral scholarship.

In the rebuttal issue, Gidley (2010) presents a construct she calls “delicate theorising” that may well provide direction for such scholarship. She describes it as “consistently attending to the kindred theories that rub up against our cherished theories and methodologies,” such that “we keep them soft and alive rather than hard, rigid and mechanistic” as well as “creating ongoing dialogue—rather than debate—with kindred theoretic approaches” (p. 130). In essence, delicate theorizing is a reminder to attend to and recognize the Other. It speaks to an underlying wish within each of us, not merely to be included, but rather to be invited into the dialogue, to be given the opportunity to speak on our own behalf.

Postformal-integral-planetary scholarship would, however, require another crucial element: regarding colleagues as sharing something of uncommon value with us—a deep desire and willingness to work toward the co-creation a more equitable, just, sustainable, and peaceful world. Proffering such recognition is a form of deep intimacy. If we call upon it while critiquing the research of our colleagues, we will not think less critically, but perhaps be less harsh in our rhetoric. That is, if the achievement of shared goals is held above and beyond personal goals, we might look at the disparaging of our colleagues—whose lifework, values, and goals are so closely aligned with our own—as a most egregious error. If we seek to express our thoughts and

feelings in a manner that exemplifies the very ideals postformal-integral-planetary consciousness hopes to embody—Truth, Goodness, and Beauty—we may build bridges where none previously existed and potentially repair those that have cracked under strain.

No one, least of all Wilber, doubts that there are multiple ways of knowing. Integral Theory is nothing if not a plurality of epistemologies and methodologies; the future is vast enough for many theories and many ways to structure what we know, or think we know at any given time in history. We would do well to remember how quickly our knowledge evolves; in the grand scheme of evolution, just yesterday the Earth was the center of the solar system, and mere milliseconds ago Pluto was a planet! Perhaps we would do well to think of our postformal-integral-planetary theories as rare flowers: I submit the following vignette as a seed for thought. Once while in Madagascar, Darwin found a strange orchid:

An *Angraecum sesquipedale*, with waxy white star-shaped flowers and ‘a green whip-like nectary of astonishing length.’ The nectary was almost twelve inches long, and all of the nectary was in the bottom inch. Darwin hypothesized that there had to be an insect that could eat the unreachable nectar and at the same time fertilize the plant—otherwise the species couldn’t exist. Such an insect would have to have a complementarily strange shape. He wrote: ‘In Madagascar there must be moths with proboscis capable of extension to a length of between ten and twelve inches! This belief of mine has been ridiculed by some entomologists, but we now know from Fritz Muller that there is a sphinx-moth in South Brazil which has a proboscis of nearly sufficient length, for when dried it was between ten and eleven inches long. When not protruded the proboscis is coiled up into a spiral of at least twenty windings. . . . Some huge moth with a wonderfully long proboscis could drain the last drop of nectar. If such great moths were to become extinct in Madagascar, assuredly the *Angraecum* would become extinct.’ (Orlean, 2001, p. 7)

If every orchid has its moth, so might we each have an “integral” with which to reach the nectar of ego transcendence; nectar with which we might nourish our dialectic, moving it beyond a debate of self-interest and power plays to a space of cooperation where we compete, not against each other, but against the ever quickening pace of planetary destruction and social inequality.

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right doing,
there is a field. I’ll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase each other
doesn’t make any sense. (Rumi, 1995, p. 36)

If we admit that it *ought* to be possible to meet in that field, then we have already taken a step in that direction—if we keep walking, we might yet find ourselves capable of working together, not only in the field of futures, but on behalf of the future.

NOTES

¹ Within the confines of my own research, I refer to the strategy described in this poem as “drawing Markham’s circle” (Klisanin, 2005). My research is largely focused on exploring the underpinnings of conscious creativity, particularly as

related to the media (in the broadest sense of the word). I refer to this area as “evolutionary guidance media,” a broad area that is often referred to by one of the following terms: conscious media, pro-social media, green media, integral media, and/or transformative media.

In an effort toward greater transparency, I would like to share something of my background with readers. My interest in the “consciousness movement” dates to an early exploration of a variety of spiritual traditions (e.g., Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sufism, and various indigenous traditions, particularly Native American traditions), concurrent with an avid interest in the writings of Joseph Campbell, Edgar Cayce, Rudolf Steiner, Sri Aurobindo, G.I. Gurdjieff, J. Krishnamurti, A. Watts, and others. Only in my late twenties was I introduced to the field of “transpersonal psychology,” where I first learned of the writings of Ken Wilber. A few years later, as a graduate student, I was introduced to the “systems sciences” and the work of Gregory Bateson, Fritjof Capra, Ervin Laszlo, Bela H. Banathy, and others. I consider spiritual investigation, transpersonal studies, integral theories, and various forms of systems science as my strongest “academic” influences.

² I am using Gidley’s (2010) phrase, “postformal-integral-planetary,” to reference the emerging consciousness movement that, while utilizing diverse terminology, shares similar worldviews, interests, and pursuits. Gidley created the term based on “Morin’s complexity-based linguistic method,” and she notes that various strands emphasize specific areas (e.g., “planetary consciousness literature tends to emphasise the urgency of our planetary crisis”). Gidley’s philosophical interest is in “*thinking* these threads together as facets of the one emerging consciousness movement and, in particular, to pull through the educational imperatives of this emergence” (pp. 130-131).

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