

THE INTEGRAL FUTURES CONTROVERSY

An Introduction

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Knowledge brings power and light but does not necessarily bring wisdom or happiness. It can be a blessing but can also be hoarded and used to cause harm. Much of what we know and believe is hearsay and mass-minded falsehood. Even accurate information can be like barnacles and cholesterol—it can harden, build up and block the flow. It can cramp our lives and become a cause of ignorance and illness. The search for knowledge has a great and noble history and a dark and destructive one. Knowledge requires care.

– Michael Leunig (2010)

In 2007, several colleagues and I started thinking about a special issue on Integral Futures methodologies. It did not occur to us that what we were proposing was in any way remarkable or likely to attract much attention. I had edited other special issues on a range of topics and the usual response was quite limited—a few comments here and there, the occasional request for a particular paper, some brief dialogue, and that was that. A special issue of *Futures* can, however, become a symbolic marker indicating that something new and of possible interest has emerged. It then becomes part of the landscape of the discipline and even a starting point for later books or projects.¹

We felt quietly positive about what we were doing. I believe I am correct in saying that all the contributors shared a sense that we were opening what might be called a “new virtual space” in the broad arena of futures studies and applied foresight.² While I am credited with introducing aspects of integral thinking into futures studies during my years at the Australian Foresight Institute (AFI), even a cursory glance at the body of my work should make two things obvious. First, that this has never been some sort of personal crusade but, rather, a slowly unfolding process of understanding. Second, that it is only one of many perspectives that I have traversed over the years.³ I am also far from the only one to have sought to understand, critique, and apply integral ideas (Collins & Hines, 2010). There have always been critical responses from many different communities of enquiry and practice, some of them constructive and helpful, others shrill and hostile. Many of those working in futures and applied foresight, and who made the effort to give the concepts, tools, and evolving frameworks careful consideration, tended to find them useful. There are those, such as Mark Edwards, who took exception to some early work (e.g., regarding holon theory), communicated this fact widely, and evolved their own accounts. Others, such as Peter Hayward and Josh Floyd, took up aspects of the perspective and applied them productively in their work. Still others simply did not want to know. Sohail Inayatullah was one of these. I have a message from him that simply says: “I’m just not interested” (personal communication, February 21, 2007). At the time it seemed an odd response from someone involved in editing a futures journal.⁴ But the implications were not to emerge until later.

The first Ken Wilber book I came across was *No Boundary* (1981), and I considered it a breath of fresh air. I subsequently read others, but two in particular had the strongest influence: *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* (1995) and the “excerpts” from a projected volume in which Wilber introduced what he called Integral Post-

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Metaphysics and Integral Methodological Pluralism (Wilber, 2002). As the latter emerged I was also at work on a book of my own, *Futures Beyond Dystopia: Creating Social Foresight* (Slaughter, 2004a), to which Wilber graciously contributed a Foreword. Since then I have often reflected on how reading these works in depth does take one into new territory. I felt that *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* not only contributed new insights, but also manifestly brought with it new sources of inspiration and renewed energy. I saw these not as a basis for “fervour” or exceptionalism but as rare and valuable gifts. With the later extracts in particular there was a sense of expanded possibility, of seeing the everyday with fresh eyes. That’s all very well for those who are ready and willing to take the journey. But for those who are not, we have seen how difficulties can arise. It is then not very long before derogatory terms such as “messianic fervour,” “Wilber fan,” or “Wilber cult” began to be heard. While these may be projections generated by an unwillingness to engage or understand, they create their own kind of mimetic negativity that, in turn, generates hostility and rejection—a process that, in the absence of dialogue, can get out of hand, as it appears to have done here.⁵

Being aware of this from quite early on, I have repeatedly sought to emphasize that integral perspectives of any kind—and there are many—should not be reified, not made special, and certainly not be seen as constituting some sort of overarching orthodoxy. Hence the charge leveled at our special issue that we were promoting a single version or vision of integral thought that was, in some sense, “hegemonic” lacks credibility. Back in 2004 in a review of the AFI program, I attempted to be clear about the role and status of integral thinking within it. I wrote: “AFI began by exploring ‘critical’ approaches to futures tasks. It then moved on to an even broader canvas summed up by the term ‘Integral Futures’.” I added that:

This does not mean, however, that we are pursuing any one approach or focus. Rather, a core feature of everything we do is to encourage students to move fluidly between multiple models, paradigms and frames of reference. It is our view that “every model both reveals and conceals” aspects of reality at the same time. Hence we attempt not to privilege any single one. (Slaughter, 2004b, pp. 841-842)

If such words are to be believed, there is little evidence of “hegemonic tendencies” here or later.⁶ My policy and practice has long been to remain skeptical, to take from any source that which is useful and withhold premature judgement.

So the special issue was sent out into the world with no great fanfare but with the hope that it would be of interest and stimulate some useful comment. In February of 2007 I sent an e-mail addressed to “colleagues and friends” that in part read:

As you may know, the next issue of *Futures* (Vol. 40, No. 2) was put together by myself, with Peter Hayward and Joseph Voros. It also contains several other papers mainly by graduates of the AFI program. The special issue is among the first published evidence of the viability of the emerging Integral perspective as applied to futures methods. *Please bear in mind, however, that this is merely a beginning.* There is a long way to go... [emphasis added] (personal communication, February 20, 2007)

That issue was specifically intended as a “first pass” look at some of the possible implications for futures studies of the variety of integral perspectives that each of the authors were working from and with. It was not focused on any one individual or method. There was no “orthodox view,” no “approved version,” and certainly no “brand” as Jennifer Gidley, in particular, asserted in the rebuttal issue. It may be a surprise to some, but I did not necessarily agree myself with everything that each contributor wrote. Yet it was not my

task as an editor to censor their work. Even a cursory look at the special issue demonstrates quite clearly that, while each of the authors have interests in integral perspectives, their overall views are wider and their uses of it are markedly different.

By contrast, the rebuttal issue of *Futures* that appeared in March 2010 was of an entirely different character. As Morgan (2011) notes in his response in this issue, it contains “destructive, disingenuous criticism that resorts to ad hominem attacks, negative stereotype portrayals, caricatures, scare tactics, and straw man arguments” (p. 119). It was undoubtedly the most toxic issue ever produced of a normally august journal (Inayatullah, 2010). Now in its 43rd year and long regarded as the flagship publication of the field, *Futures* has an enviable reputation for quality, originality, and relevance to a broad international readership. The 2010 issue was distinctive in that its *raison d’être* was to undermine the issue I edited (Slaughter et al., 2008). While occasional controversies and differences of opinion penned by contending writers had appeared in various issues of *Futures*, this was the first time that two such appeared pitted one against the other.

Some of the writers in the rebuttal issue took myself and other authors to task for various misinterpretations, oversights, and errors but on the basis of very little evidence. Significantly, however, what they also overlooked—or chose to ignore—is “where we were coming from.” No one sought to acknowledge or empathize with the motivations, values, and purposes that were quite obviously central to our efforts. No one contacted us to discuss anything. Instead, the respondents were briefed to adopt an oppositional stance and, in some cases, blisteringly hostile forms of rhetoric and misrepresentation. One, in particular, invested heroic efforts to employ a later and more in-depth understanding of integral to attack earlier and more tentative work.⁷ This was, in other words, a world away either from constructive critique or mutually respectful dialogue. It was more like open warfare, “duel by journal.”

Inayatullah’s initial response had been cordial and measured.⁸ A few days later I received an angry tirade that mounted a number of pointed accusations followed by a somewhat disingenuous “thanks” for past acts of assistance, followed by a declaration that, following my “betrayal” he was breaking off all further contact.⁹ I wrote back several times arguing that, as two leaders in the small community of Australian futurists, we had “a shared responsibility.” We ought not to let things get out of hand. We should get back to our previously productive dialogue and work things out.¹⁰ But it was not to be—the separation was to be permanent. This, in other words, is the soil from which the rebuttal issue was conceived. It was an enterprise born from anger and, as I pointed out at the time, could not *but* bear bitter fruit. This was unfortunate in a number of ways, but I will just mention two.

First, most of the writers were well known to me. I had worked with, mentored, or enjoyed good professional relations with them over some years. To draw them into a negative enterprise of this kind, however, was a backward step with real costs, as it has strained or broken entirely—at least for the time being—the flow of mutual influence, support, and appreciation that had existed previously. In place of trust and acceptance, there was now barely-concealed hostility, judgement, and exclusion. Second, and perhaps rather more seriously, at around this time the Australian futures/foresight community had suffered a setback from which it has still not recovered. During several years previously, a number of dedicated individuals (many of whom were AFI graduates) had come together to set up the Australian Foresight and Futures Association (AFFA). Two stimulating and successful conferences had been held, one in Sydney and the other in Melbourne. A decision was then taken—unwisely, as it turned out—to merge AFFA with another organization, a newly reconstituted Futures Foundation.⁸ Unfortunately, the latter was plagued with management issues and proved to be financially unsound. Matters came to a head and the newly merged AFFA/Futures Foundation was declared bankrupt. A great deal of personal commitment and effort on the part of many people trickled away like water in the desert. It was a dispiriting moment. This was, in other words, a very poor time to open yet another fissure in this already compromised social holon. What it needed was nourishment and leadership. What it got was further dissonance and division.

Needless to say, I found all this frustrating while at the same time feeling that it had a “storm in a teacup” aspect that would subside. While some might feel that we had been roundly abused and dishonored by former friends and colleagues, the wider world, of course, knew nothing of this. So it was essential to keep a sense of perspective. Some of the authors, indeed, chose not to respond at all. For them the “controversy” was something that they wanted to stand apart from, and I respected that.

On the other hand, as one who was centrally involved I found myself in a difficult position. What to make of it? Should I dive in and defend our work? Should I try to influence others to do so? Should I just walk away? The heavy-handed criticism seemed misplaced for a number of reasons, but also partly because in my own contribution I had subjected my own earlier work to exactly the same evaluative criteria that I had applied to that of others. It was not as though we were standing at some mythical Integral Archimedean point and saying to the heathen multitude, “Look thou upon this perspective and tremble!” The artifacts (articles) are there for anyone to see and, indeed, I hope others will indeed look some of them up and consider—perhaps more clearly than we could—just what was taking place in the two issues.⁹ My interim solution was pragmatic. Rather than divert my energy and attention to the controversy, I re-focused it on a new book (Slaughter, 2010, reviewed in this issue of JITP). There was an extensive history and I could not re-evaluate it in the presence of so much negativity. That task lay ahead, and still does. So here I will provide just the briefest sketch.

I had known Inayatullah for over a quarter of a century. He was and is one of the most fascinating and productive graduates ever to have emerged from Jim Dator’s Hawaii School of Futures Studies at Manoa. Our first meeting occurred when I was *en route* to Australia in 1986 and his first words were memorably appreciative. Regarding a paper of mine that had appeared in the *Futures Bulletin* of the World Future Society, he said: “We all wished we’d written that paper” (Slaughter, 1984). Thus was established a long-term association and an on-and-off kind of friendship. Of course there were differences—there always are—but on the whole we got along well, collaborated on various projects, and worked together in several countries. A pivotal moment occurred following a presentation that I gave in Budapest in 1990. It brought him to the podium with shining eyes. He had seen how a layered account of futures work that I had put together from a number of sources could be used as a method. This was an early step in the development of what became his signature method (Ramos, 2003, p. 47). Yet as time went by, I found it increasingly difficult to gain his attention. Even when I drove to an event near his home, he could not find the time for us to talk. When the special issue duly arrived, our past association counted for little.

Now, however, the question is, are there ways forward? I believe there are. Starting points can be found in the three very different responses following this introduction. One, by Dennis Morgan, turns the critique of integral back on some of the authors of the rebuttal issue. He looks in detail at the nature of the criticisms offered and finds most of them wanting. He also subjects the claim that postmodernism can support epistemological pluralism in futures to careful evaluation. While rejecting the kind of postmodernism employed in the rebuttal issue, Morgan finds that there is room for further dialogue about how its more helpful and constructive aspects have their uses. Chris Riedy, on the other hand, takes a deeply personal, profoundly honest, and conciliatory approach. He suggests ways of working more closely together to identify common cause and common ground. Since he is willing to further trial some of the disputed methods and to share the results, I very much hope that some of the authors in the rebuttal issue will respond appropriately.

Dana Klisanin then brings to bear a marvelously lucid integral view that, in a sense, can be said to “transcend and include” both of the above. I breathed more easily when I read her first draft because standing at a distance, but with enviable clarity, she has been more able than any of us, perhaps, to understand what this is all about. She opens the piece with a finely judged quote evoking wider realities and more encompassing values. Later she suggests how some of the erstwhile “protagonists” might contribute toward some sort of synthesis—such as a further special issue. If one sets aside the aggression and abusiveness and views the

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two issues as a “thesis” followed by an “antithesis,” then the possibility of a broader synthesis makes some sense. Those who feel most strongly about what has happened may be willing to let down their defenses long enough to consider the options for common cause. One of the key issues that should be tackled is, indeed, the question of what it is about integral thinking that causes some people to stereotype and reject it so angrily and vociferously.¹⁰

Why have I not added a more in-depth piece of my own? For now this introduction will have to do, as I am still not sure how ready I am to dive into the deep end and write at length about this episode. I do, however, concur with two points that Inayatullah made. First, that within the broad field of futures studies and applied foresight a commitment to singular perspectives is unnecessary. Second, it follows that futures studies does indeed require multiple spaces, epistemologies, and so on. Overall, we should try to remove some of the heat from this controversy. One way to do so is to remember that, if we are honest with each other, we can all recognize that even our best efforts may be like dust motes in an infinite sky. We do what we can but are never in a position to assess the ultimate value of our own work, let alone that of others.

What this controversy also reminds us is the often-observed fact that what one person says (or writes) is by no means necessarily the same as that which others hear (or read). So it is significant that in early 2009, and in stark contrast to the views expressed in the rebuttal issue, the Association of Professional Futurists rated our special issue on Integral Futures as one of “three most important futures works of 2008.”¹¹ Then in 2010, a “Review of the Evolution of Integral Futures” closed with a statement that I think sums up the state of play rather well:

Integral Futures has now reached an exciting time in its evolution. It has gotten the attention of the futures community and is now being put to the test of peer review. Critiques are a healthy part of the development of new thinking. The hope is that the criticism will be constructive and presented in a way that participants can learn from. (Collins & Hines, 2020, p. 13)

I will finish with three suggestions indicative of the kind of constructive work that will hopefully begin to emerge. They are framed around three questions:

- What are the main differences between legitimate and illegitimate criticism?
- In what ways can postmodern theory be said to be useful and in what ways can it be diversionary and destructive?
- In relation to the further development of Integral Futures, what areas of common ground can be identified where some of the former protagonists can meet and work together in mutual respect?

NOTES

¹ For example, in 1993 I edited a special issue on “The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies” that subsequently became the basis for a series on that subject.

² But not prone to overstatement or overclaiming.

³ Many perspectives have helped to shape my view of the world. Some early ones include those associated with Henry David Thoreau, Rachel Carson, Hermann Hesse, Lewis Mumford, Herbert Marcuse, Theodore Roszak, Morris Berman, Aldous Huxley, Hanna Arendt, E.F. Schumacher, and Jürgen Habermas, to name but a few. Later ones include Elise Boulding, Robert Jungk, Naomi Klein, Wendell Bell, Jared Diamond, Bill Joy, Joanna Macy, Dennis and Donella Meadows, and Ken Wilber.

⁴ The *Journal of Futures Studies*, Tamkang University, Taiwan (1996–Present). I would expect any such editor to have a working familiarity with emerging perspectives regardless of personal preferences. Yet Inayatullah was both adamant and somewhat confused. In part response to a message of mine he wrote that:

I am really not interested! I am interested in people, their outer and inner lives, not in the ideologies, theories and methods they believe in. With friends, I don't even like to discuss this stuff. I prefer the inner stuff, otherwise, it is just boring for me. Thus for me, integral has no particular interest. (personal communication, February 21, 2007)

⁵ Collins and Hines (2010) write:

The debate about Integral Futures clearly gained focus with the 2008 Special Issue. As practitioners were exposed to this collection of ideas, they raised questions about them. For instance, is Integral Futures guilty of some of the errors it purports to address? A perception arose that Integral Futures has the potential to become *a new orthodoxy* to which other methods must conform. This was driven by what has been perceived by some as an *evangelical fervor* among its more enthusiastic proponents, who consider Integral methods part of the new wave of futures studies at a more advanced or “higher” level than existing futures methods. [emphasis added] (pp. 12-13)

The fact that I had warned against just such concerns did not prevent them being repeated. It is disappointing that the writers chose to reinforce these stereotypes in an otherwise balanced piece. As indicated below, the underlying point, perhaps, is to acknowledge and understand the “symbolic threat” that integral perspectives are sometimes endowed with.

⁶ For example, in 2005 I wrote that: “While new metaperspectives are welcome, they should not be elevated into new orthodoxies... they should each be used for what they reveal and set aside when their inevitable limits are reached” (Slaughter, 2005a, p. 13). In another piece I quote Voros:

Integral Futures, thus, does not take a singular perspective; rather it recognises a plurality of perspectives. It is not confined to a single tool or methodology; rather it is aware of the existence of an entire (indeed, infinite) tool kit. It recognises that there are many ways of knowing—many paradigms, practices and methodologies of knowledge seeking—and that no single paradigm can be assigned pre-eminence... (Slaughter, 2005b, p. 287)

⁷ Clearly, the thought did not arise that using one version of “integral” to attack an earlier one might be an unwise and even self-contradictory position to adopt. To do so involves drawing a veil over the writer’s motivations and similarly ignoring those of the intended target. I am still puzzled at how such pointed and aggressive work made it through a usually credible review process.

⁸ This was not the Futures Foundation that was set up in Sydney by Jan Lee Martin and operated there for over a decade. The “new” foundation was an offspring of the Melbourne-based Future of Work Foundation chaired by Charles Brass.

⁹ Morgan, however, was clear from the beginning. He wrote, in part, that:

I almost laughed when I read how you were accused of falling into some kind of “modernist” trap, which is exactly the kind of rhetoric that postmodernism employs, and at the same time, by equating Integral Theory with modernism, shows that the author doesn't really understand integral philosophy. He's fighting phantoms of his own mind by using the same style of argument that postmodernism uses to elevate itself beyond modernism, so he obviously doesn't understand the difference between integral philosophy and modern thought.

He added:

One of the biggest flaws is that postmodernism cannot go beyond critique: that's mostly what it is, in a nutshell. However, critique alone will not point the direction to the future. Even Fredrich Polak understood that when he wrote that the essential task of the utopist is twofold:

social critique and reconstruction. As far as I'm concerned, postmodernism is about social critique and Integral Futures is about the reconstruction of the image of the future. (personal communication, April 6, 2010)

¹⁰ In my experience, it seems to be those who have worked most diligently to create their own unique worldview and personal *modus operandi* who appear to have the greatest difficulty in coming to terms with integral thinking and perspectives.

¹¹ See Hines (2009). The full citation can be found at <http://www.richardslaughter.com.au>.

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