# Integral Theory: A Broadened Epistemology?

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**Abstract:**

The increasing specialization of academic disciplines and a plurality of research methodologies and perspectives has fragmented the knowledge quest. Among the recent attempts at bridging these difficulties Integral Theory has emerged as one attempt at unifying these epistemological dilemmas. This article provides an introductory, yet critical attempt to describe the Integral approach to epistemology, while giving guidance to researchers and their potential utilization of an Integral vantage point.

For much of the western intellectual heritage a Cartesian approach to the knowledge quest has governed the pathways to knowing. Within the broad domains of knowledge including the physical sciences, social sciences, as well as fields such as history, philosophy, and theology, a richness of content and process has evolved, but increasingly in self-contained domains. Most domains strengthened their internal claims for knowledge with ever greater rigor and methodological sophistication. However, alongside this deeper grounding within multiple disciplines there emerged an increasing inability to speak to or understand the legitimate claims of knowledge from other fields of inquiry.

Increasing methodological specialization has forced most every mode of human inquiry into narrower and narrower vertical silos. This is not to say that the wide sweep of inquiry has shrunk. If anything, the domains of knowing have exploded in most fields, never mind the accelerating effects of technology with increasing waves of data washing over most any contemporary arena of inquiry.

But the sheer volume of information from manifest forms of content, including their meta-data capacities, seem to have resulted in increasing difficulty in understanding increasingly narrow fields of inquiry, even as new sub-disciplines are hatched, often seemingly unrelated to their prior inheritance.

As we search for bridging concepts and possibilities, one must remain aware of the likely permanent collapse of grand unifying claims, whether philosophical, theological/spiritual, historical/cultural, as well as scientific/empirical. These expressions of modernity and postmodernity must be recognized for their vital role in deconstruction, of not so much uncovering false claims, but perhaps attempting to reign in the persistent impulse to claim too much. This temptation will surface even in the Integral proposals I am about to offer. While still seeking to reaffirm the necessary cautions around grand claims, I hope to offer some modest suggestions toward the possibility of contemporary integrative approaches.

In the last 15 years or so the field of Integral Studies has emerged as a fresh resource in framing new possibilities for methodological inquiry. This development has contributed to a methodological expansion within a mode of inquiry that is broadly called "Integral Theory." (Esbjorn-Hargens, Wilber, 2006, p.524). It situates itself as a comprehensive attempt to offer integrative perspectives on four fundamental modes of inquiry, namely, objectivity, interobjectivity, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity. It does so by relying on a four quadrant methodology called (AQAL) (all quadrant all level) which is further amplification as Integral Methodological Pluralism (IMP). This approach hopes to avoid the metaphysical and ontological complications of earlier unitive eras that have plagued the knowledge quest, often by imposing pre-existing unities onto reality.

It will remain to be seen whether Integral Theory can avoid these temptations and thus overcome the epistemological and ontological challenges that come with broad pluralism.

While many readers may have a modicum of knowledge of Integral perspectives I will provide unacquainted readers at least a brief introductory overview of its broad assumptions and conclusions. Key terms utilized in Integral theory's approach are that all four quadrants (AQAL) are discernable through recognizable and confirmable patterns of reality. Within these four quadrants there are recognizable lines of development, states of consciousness, and modes of inquiry by which the realities of a particular quadrant manifests itself. In other words all quadrants reveal all levels of development, all types of development, and all lines of development (Esbjorn-Hargens, 2010).

**Table 1**

**Four Quadrant (AQAL)**

|  | **Interiors** | **Exteriors** |
|---|---|---|
| **INdIVIDual** | Intentional<br>"I"<br>Upper Left (UL) | Behavioral<br>"IT"<br>Upper right (UR) |
| **Collective** | Cultural<br><br>"WE"<br>Lower Left (LL) | Systemic<br><br>"ITS"<br>Lower Right (LR) |

Adapted from: Johanson and Forman, 2006, p.114

While the right hand quadrants are represented by objectivity and the left-hand quadrants by subjectivity, they all have a discernable integrity and validity in their own spheres. Each quadrant exists authentically in its predominant mode which one can call "I" (UL), "WE" (LL), "IT" (UR) and "ITS" (LR). These domains can also be represented by their respective linguistic and pronoun manifestations such as first person, second person, and third person (I/WE/IT/ITS) (Wilber, 2006, p.37). Integral theory also presents the spheres as fully visible via the comprehensive reality patterns visible in aesthetics (the beautiful, predominantly reflected in first person); the moral (the good, predominantly reflected in second person); the true (science/nature, predominantly reflected in third person).

Any Integral researcher will argue against any reductionism of any of the spheres. This does not mean that reductionism does not remain a threat for any sphere. Wilber's concern, broadly understood, cautions against what he calls "flatland" (Wilber, 2000. P. 70). His concern arises through attempts at either seeing reality only empirically understood, namely, relying only upon exteriors (objective analysis only). Or, conversely, there can be a reductionism that exclusively values personal subjectivity, while negating the subjectivity of intersubjective realities as they appear in their objective forms (e.g. as in reductionistic ignoring of shared values). In both instances first and second person experience is eliminated or seriously devalued.

**Table 2**

| **Interior Individual** | **Exteriors** |
|---|---|
| **"I"** | |
| First person perspective | **"IT/ITS"** |
| Aesthetics | |
| Plato's (The Beautiful) | Third Person perspective |
| Kant's (Critique of Judgement) | |
| Habermas' (Truthfulness) | Science |
| | |
| | Nature |
| **Collective** | |
| | Plato's (The True) |
| **"WE"** | |
| | Kant's (Critique of Pure Reason) |
| Second person perspectives | |
| Morals | Habermas' (Truth) |
| Culture | |
| Plato's (The Good) | |
| Kant's (Critique of Practical Judgement) | |
| Habermas' (Rightness) | |

Adapted from:  Esbjorn-Hargens, 2010, p. 33

**Integral Methodological Pluralism (IMP)**

To begin to understand the potential epistemological benefits of an integral approach to knowledge pathways, we must grasp the three fundamental principles the theory espouses.  The first claim that IMP makes is that "everyone is partially right" (Esbjorns-Hargens, Wilber, 2006. P.529). This is not intended to be a cute evasive maneuver, but rather provides three very vital principles that guide all perspectives.  This first principle is one of "non-exclusion," namely, that truth claims must be allowed to pass the validity tests of their own fields of inquiry in any paradigms within their essential frames of reference.

Secondly, IMP claims that some practices within their respective domains are more inclusive and comprehensive than others, namely, they reflect the principle of "enfoldment," suggesting furthermore that there are some practices that are more inclusive or comprehensive than others in their domain.  Thirdly, IMP holds that different paths of inquiry reveal diverse phenomena depending on the particular developmental "position," i.e. the levels, lines, states, of the inquirer.  There is therefore a range of capacity for comprehension in any given arena, based on the range of awareness a particular observer might have. [1]

This third principle called "enactment" speaks to the degree or capacity of the observer/participant to appropriate the range of practices and paradigms that are disclosed in any domain of human inquiry.  No one, the integral theorists say, is 100% correct, nor conversely, is anyone 100% wrong.

> This inclusion of various methodologies and perspectives is based on the idea that no human mind can be 100% wrong…   And this means, when it comes to deciding which approaches, methodologies, epistemologies or ways of knowing are "correct", the answer can only be "all of them" (Esbjorn-Hargens; Wilber, 2016, p.529).

There is therefore a kind of "democratization" of epistemology evident here which at first glance seems to lead to an inevitable sloppiness or "anything goes" mentality.  This would be a faulty conclusion since rigorous standards of evidence and methodology must still be applied.

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[1] If I would direct the reader who is largely unacquainted with Ken Wilber's work to consider the analysis offered in **Integral Spirituality,** 2006, pages 50-92, as a necessary introduction.

It is very important to note, however, that embedded in these three main principles within the four quadrants, are two fundamental types of methodologies. These types are absolutely central to understanding any integrative position, namely, that there are "inside" aspects of every quadrant and, as well as an "outside" vantage point, with each producing the particular insights and reproducible knowledge of that quadrant.

In recognizing that there are interior and exterior vantage points we can begin to claim the diverse methodological directions that research can take to be true to the insights available on any given path of inquiry. For Wilber and most Integral researchers there are eight identified fundamental methods that have emerged out of the grand sweep of human exploration (Esbjorn-Hargens; Ken Wilber, 2006). This range includes:

> Phenomenology: direct human interiority
> Structuralism: direct structural exteriors
> Autopoiesis: interior patterned exteriors (self-regulating behaviors)
>
> Empiricism: observable exteriors
> Social Autopoiesis: self-regulating patterns in social systems
> Systems theory: exterior manifestations of collective patterns
> Hermeneutics: intersubjective interiors of communities' of meaning-making
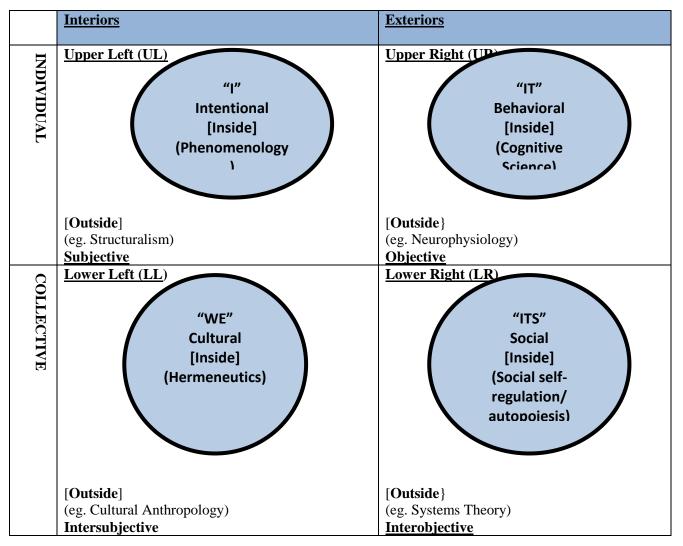> Ethnography: exterior patterns of understanding gained collectively.

### Table 3      Four Quadrant (AQAL)

| | **Interiors** | **Exteriors** |
|---|---|---|
| **INDIVIDUAL** | **Upper Left (UL)**<br><br>"I"<br>Intentional<br>[Inside]<br>(Phenomenology)<br><br>[**Outside**]<br>(eg. Structuralism)<br>**Subjective** | **Upper Right (UR)**<br><br>"IT"<br>Behavioral<br>[Inside]<br>(Cognitive Science)<br><br>[**Outside**}<br>(eg. Neurophysiology)<br>**Objective** |
| **COLLECTIVE** | **Lower Left (LL)**<br><br>"WE"<br>Cultural<br>[Inside]<br>(Hermeneutics)<br><br>[**Outside**]<br>(eg. Cultural Anthropology)<br>**Intersubjective** | **Lower Right (LR)**<br><br>"ITS"<br>Social<br>[Inside]<br>(Social self-regulation/ autopoiesis)<br><br>[**Outside**}<br>(eg. Systems Theory)<br>**Interobjective** |

Adapted from: Wilber, 2006, p. 36-37

It must be noted however, that as comprehensive as this pluralistic list seems, it may not meet broad academic recognition, including within the Integral community itself. Jeffrey Martin, for instance, challenges Wilber's eight broad and sweeping "primordial" methodological perspectives as likely finding unwilling collaborators within many academic communities (Martin, 2008, p.156).

The problems he notes certainly preceded IMP and these tensions have historically clustered, broadly speaking, around the quantitative verses qualitative legitimization. The issues raised between the quantitative verses qualitative tensions are real and profound, and are not solved by restricting the typologies so narrowly that the benefits of integral methods are lost. A split between quantitative and qualitative approaches will certainly not resolve the cross-fertilization that contemporary knowledge claims seem to require. We should retain the hope that affirming the full freedom to explore the best tools/methods available in any given question would serve any particular quadrant and its questions in the most validation-possible way.

Integral contributors offer different groupings of disciplines, while retaining the four quadrant model. Kurt Koller, for example, sees certain scientific disciplines appearing in multiple quadrants such as anthropology, which has physical, cultural, social, and archeological branches (Koller, 2005, p.11). While the so-called Life Sciences are predominantly reflecting upper right and lower right knowledge patterns, fields like psychology could legitimately be seen as present in all quadrants.

A further important insight that governs methodological integrity involves the procedural methods that a guide the knowledge quest. The truth claims one ultimately makes are built upon three central elements, namely, (1) injunctions; (2) experiences; and (3) communal confirmation(s) or rejection(s) (Wilber, 2006, p. 267). An injunction is a directive in which an observer/participant must apply in activity, process, event, or experiment with the goal being: "if you want to know this, do this!" An <u>experience</u> follows the action undertaken by the <u>injunction</u>, which offers the awareness or data generated by the action. Finally, <u>communal confirmation or rejection</u> of the practiced event confirms or rejects the data and insights generated by the event. These three phases of knowledge acquisition involve the judgments that build upon all layers of data gathering of all disciplines and sub-disciplines.

**Engaging methodological complexity**

Because methodological rigor is so vital for legitimacy including the requirements of verifiability, the great divide between quantitative verses qualitative perspectives has deepened in recent decades as a serious problem for broad methodological research. However, a potential remedy has emerged, especially within the empirical research community, namely to affirm both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, and furthermore to affirm <u>mixed methods</u> as a vital and necessary additional integrative perspective. Jeffrey Martin, among others, sees great integrative potential to mixed methods, certainly within individual quadrants, but also across quadrants. Not only can statistical analysis operate across all zones, he suggests that qualitative contributions such as narrative and metaphor can also operate across all zones providing additional meaning-making capability (Martin, 2008, p.158).

Martin's affirmations notwithstanding, researchers are quite aware of the complexities embedded in broadening methodological frameworks. Even within disciplines and sub-disciplines, one must acknowledge the linguistic, historical, geographic, and contextual realities that shape potential knowledge claims. Even as one affirms IMP's attempt at forging bridging frameworks, there are parallel developments at work within broad research inquiry that seeks similar goals to Integral Studies, but operate using different yet recognizable nomenclature. These include: multi-disciplinary; pluri-disciplinary; cross-disciplinary; inter-disciplinary; and trans-disciplinary as key examples (Zachery Stein, 2007, p. 91). They do not all mean the same thing, yet their overall objectives may be mutually supportive.

Given the concerns I am raising in this paper about claiming too much and risking collapse of the entire enterprise, I would affirm the following important commitments. No research enterprise should precede without claiming its <u>perspectival vantage points</u>. Even relying on mixed methods does not lift the burden of perspectival ownership from the researcher. Assumptions must be named, and a willingness to claim one's assumptive roots should be a prerequisite for proceeding with any inquiry.

Secondly, any research endeavor should be identified in its <u>contextual frame</u>. This should include an awareness of the sources of the questions being explored. The sources could be broadly historical, social, cultural, religious, etc., essentially a naming of the embedded roots found within any set of contextual assumptions.

Thirdly, a researcher must be willing to offer reasoned reflections on "implications arising" out of the completed research effort. Most researchers do seek to offer implications for further research, but often shrink back from stating their own first person ownership of the conclusions drawn. Perhaps it is too much to ask of researchers to critique their own conclusions for fear of revealing embedded bias, or being accused that their work is contaminated by being "too close to home." In my estimation such ownership would not disqualify one's work from its "objectivity." I would propose in contrast, that one's personal perspective offered in a post-conclusion way, is more useful grist for the mill, giving subsequent researchers more leeway and freedom to grapple with the inevitable next questions.

**Claiming one's Vantage Point**

Central to the task of ownership is the perspectival question of one's view, namely whether we seek to gain a perspective from the outside or inside. All perspectives can be viewed from either vantage point. A first person "I" event can observed when I see myself as an observer in an objective "from the outside" mode. When one intends to grasp one's observing ego for instance, within self-reflection, one is claiming this outside gaze upon oneself. Similarly, this observational stance could operate if the one tries to see oneself as other see us. Numerous spiritual practices can reflect this double perspective.

In other words, Spiritual and psychological practices can be looked at from the inside (using various modes of phenomenology), and the same time seeing it from outside, namely, to seek how others experience their spiritual praxis patterns (as in structuralism). In other word, we can operate from an "I" position in an outside 2nd person way, by trying to study how others' experience their "I". There is also an inside and an outside "We" position when two parties attempt to engage each other via mutual understanding. The "we" position is found via shared recognition and could be described as a journey of interpretation, mutually seeking and crafting meanings, namely, hermeneutics.

In addition to the language of inside and outside, it is helpful to consider the lens of "experience-near" and "experience-distant" perspectives. An experience-near event refers to direct encounter in which phenomena are encountered in all their immediacy and layered awareness. Case studies in their full phenomenological sense can be engaged in their contextual "thick" description, which provides texture and depth to potential insights, affirmations, and conclusions.

Experience-distant modes of perception refer to events where the observer is not or cannot be there for geographic or historical reasons. Historical memoir, for instance, is a first person account of historical events for which the third person observer could not and cannot ever be there. Again, data can be inferred from a first person narrator including evaluations of potential for distortion or perspectival bias from within the first person narrator. Conversely, the third person historical or contemporary evaluator of historical content can also be assessed for perspectival bias, with reasonable assumptions being made around the contemporary validity or utility of historical material.

The ownership of perspective, therefore, is central to potential claims of legitimacy or relevance since it reveals the integrity or "humility" of the researcher who is willing to settle for limited claims of absoluteness. There should be an essential humility, if one might call it that, as a necessary ingredient in any integrative attempts at knowledge claims, and it will remain an open question whether IMP can maintain such a commitment. But the deeper benefits of limited claims emerge most beneficially perhaps, out of what one might call mutuality, understood as intersubjectivity and interobjectivity, even in experience-distant modes.

I am suggesting that the central contribution to such methodologies is empathic participation, broadly understood. While empathy is often restricted to direct higher-order cognitive and emotive interactions, it has a utility at many levels of engagement. By allowing for empathic participation across space and time it requires taking on the life patterns of the recipients, even in this more remote experience-distant way. By taking on the perceived life of another allows the textures and flavors that grow out of greater understanding, appreciation, and insight to emerge. Even remote "structural reflection" by a third person's awareness of the remote first person's experience, allows for insights from remote first person individuals in their interior life trajectories to inform contemporary experience.

The broadening that is provided through intersubjective lenses can help avoid metaphysical traps in which unsubstantiated claims ultimately become rejected. For Ken Wilber this means perceptions must be replaced by perspectives (Wilber, 2006, p.42). His point, perhaps overstated, suggests that if perceptions alone are permissible, then only so-called hard data will rule the day.

To the extent that exclusive demands of perception-only evidence were valid it would severely undercut insight and deeper layers of meaning-making, resulting in a thinning of potential awareness. We must remember, however, that postmodern epistemology quite rightly sought to emphasize the perception-driven social construction of reality and thereby enhances the necessity of a structural claiming of exteriors, thereby explicitly affirming the necessary external and cultural forms present within research questions.

What Integral methodology seeks to affirm through AQAL, is that all quadrants reflect embedded knowledge, not only in their cultural forms, but also in their intersubjective modes. I would therefore, insist that that <u>perception and perspective</u> are both vital perspectival and procedural vantage points. Perception engaged with perspective helps create the space by which intersubjectivity can be affirmed as a central mode of knowing.

A vital and necessary caution is in order before we rush into expanded multidisciplinary efforts without respecting the challenges they contain and the efforts required to engage thoughtful and reliable interdisciplinary results. There are several preliminary cautions associated with such broadening (Stein, 2007, p.96). Perhaps the most tempting risk but the easiest to dispense with, is the temptation to generate a "theory of everything." Wilber himself is guilty of this temptation, and this has perhaps been a major factor in a persistent resistance to Wilber's model of (IMP).

A corrective to this temptation includes a necessary reminder that all interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary efforts rest first on "disciplines", i.e. that full competency in one discipline means that the necessary specializations and knowledge capacities of that discipline are well in hand. This requires a full participation of the respective communities' models of inquiry within the competencies pertaining to that field. But even as we find immersion in the rigors of a discipline we must overcome the ethnocentrism of all disciplines. There is an inherent danger of operating strictly within insular, closed, and affiliation-only based inquiry.

The hierarchy of competency is not elitist per se, but comes with demands, not unlike the injunctions, experiential forays into praxis, and communal validation spoken of earlier. Within the hierarchy of competencies, there are steps of mutuality and cooperation that move the enterprise of inquiry forward through the willingness of critique and communal validations.

It is beyond the immediate scope of this paper to flesh out the full working model interdisciplinary praxis, but the two vital epistemological elements described above must be adhered to, namely, <u>ownership of perspective</u>, and a <u>sufficient immersion in the disciplines</u> needed for such inquiry (Stein, 2007). These two elements must be present in all multidisciplinary efforts.

**Can phenomenology be salvaged?**

Phenomenology in the late modern and postmodern era has been seriously burdened by suspicions toward interiority which plague contemporary investigations of "the subject." From an AQAL point of view, the (UL) quadrant particularly suffers under this erosion because it shares the bulk of the burden with regard to so-called inner experience. Unfortunately, the dismissal of phenomenology is often directed toward classic or historical phenomenology by considering only its earliest representatives such as Husserl and Heidegger. It is useful, however, to remember the historical backdrop as to how and why phenomenology emerged in the earliest 20th century as an attempt to counteract the reductionisms of absolutism, rationalism, empiricism, transcendentalism, positivism, psychologism, metaphysics and so on (Kupers, 2009, p. 59). These necessary gifts of phenomenology remain, but perhaps the baby has been thrown out with the bathwater.

It would be important for us to retrieve and utilize the key elements of phenomenology grounded in epistemology. The central task of phenomenology is to seek "the appearances of things", or said another way, "that which reveals itself" (Kupers, 2007, 9. 53). It addresses how phenomena are experienced as they appear in the subjects of awareness. Phenomenology affirms "intentionality," the directness of experience within the world. As Kupers states:

> The objective truth of science must be recognized as grounded in the living acts of human consciousness in relation to worldly phenomena. Accordingly, man [sic] and the world are first and foremost in relation. Thus phenomenology is fundamentally about relationships and not about the subjective end of an encounter between a subject and an object. It is only at the subjective, reflective level of logic that we divide them into separate entities (Kupers, 2009. 59).

This commitment to the unity of experience is a central feature of contemporary phenomenology.

It remains an open question whether the turn toward ontology in Heidegger and others damaged phenomenology too severely for post-modern tastes, but even a short list of post-Heideggerian phenomenologists reveals how wide-ranging the continuing efforts at expanding the boundary zones between phenomenology and the natural world has become. Even a short list reveals how broad and expansive these efforts are:

> Existentialism (Sartre; Marcel)
>
> Hermeneutics (Gadamer; Ricoeur)
>
> Ethics (Scheler, Levinas)
>
> Experiential (clinical psychology; psychotherapy; pastoral counseling)
>
> Eco-Phenomenology (Brown; Toadvine)
>
> Social Sciences/Economics (Shutz; Luckermann)
>
> Post-modern philosophy/post-structuralism (Barthes; Blanchot; Derrida; Lyotard)
>
> Cognitive science (Baumgartner; Gallaher Gallagher)
>
> Neuro-phenomenology (Varela)
>
> (Kupers, 2009, p.62-63).

Even this abbreviated list suggests that the demise of phenomenology has been overstated. But where do we go from here?

A vital necessary step must include the recognition that a first person "I" perspective does not mean that the lived context of that person is somehow artificially separate from the world engagement of the recipient. Thus, phenomenology does not direct any reader into disembodied awareness of the world, but seeks to open up the reflective space needed to appropriate the intentional, embodied, and social-cultural contexts within which awareness takes root.

The second vital affirmation within phenomenology includes the so-called "we" elements and their intersubjective dimensions. Unfortunately, the perception has arisen that phenomenology privileges only the subject and his/her subjectivities. Even Wilber promotes this unfortunate conclusion (Wilber, 2006, p. 92). An integrative phenomenology insists that experiences are an "I" and "we" interwoven event, and can only be understood together.

> My experience of the world as objective is mediated by my experience of and interaction with other world-engaged subjects. Only insofar as I experience that others experience the same objects as myself do I really experience these objects as objective and real… the objectivity of the world is intersubjectivly constituted, i.e. brought to awareness or dis-closed (Kupers, 2009, p.69).

Phenomenology thus understood is certainly a far cry from solipsism. It should not be understood as a private introspection, or a "seeing inside," but rather a resistance to premature conclusions that might limit emerging awareness of broader awareness contained within the phenomenon.

If the claim of Wilber described earlier was to replace perceptions with perspectives, the above affirmations affirm the place of one might call "embodied perceptions" (Kupers, 2009, p.75). Comprehensive awareness affirms that embodied perceptions operate pre-reflexively and are thus fully embodied in one's sensory historical, linguistic, and cultural contexts. It might therefore be better to say that phenomenology integrates perception with perspectives as co-mingled and co-constituted.

Perhaps the most significant contribution phenomenology might make toward quadrant analysis and inter-quadrant communication, is the centrality of the intersubjective and inter relational process we come to know as empathy as described above. Empathy, and its central elements of mutuality, seeking of understanding, and communicative discourse, draws phenomenology into engagement. Said succinctly:

> From the perspective of advanced phenomenology it is through others that we develop into ourselves. Even more, it is through encountering the other that transformation as a holonic affair happens. There is always already a responsive inter-relational at work as an embodied social practice.

Moreover, intersubjectivity is possible only because there is established an (primordial) intercorporeality within the caring sensible (Kupers, 2009, p.80).[2]

A vital element within intersubjectivity and empathy is the capacity for language and communication. At first glance this may be seen only as a first person only event, but it always already contains a series of relationships of first person, second person, and third person relationships. Relationality speaks to the mutual engagement of the interior and the exterior, the collective and the individual, into a web of relationships however free flowing or choppy they may be. This is not to say that one is restricted to overt verbalization, but it speaks to the broader sense of "flow", such as the emotive, nonverbal, and intentional in activities within and between persons.

What is additionally noteworthy is that a phenomena-aware vantage point is inherently praxis oriented. An action-praxis model does not look for the essence of events, but looks to understand the layers of relational meanings involved in the interaction(s). It seeks moreover to uncover the intentionalities and directionalities of the relational patterns at internal/personal, interpersonal, and contextual levels. There is an appropriate unwillingness in contemporary phenomenology to look to causal linkages with demands for predictability and provability. This revised mode of phenomenological knowledge accumulation is much more content with tracking connectivities and interdependencies and their potential meanings. In resisting such "hard" data in mechanistic and objectify modes, there is a recognition that research benefits can come from communal, contextual processes. The data products of praxis, in other words, embodied experience-near methodologies, can help avoid the "so what" thinness of much of de-contextualized knowing.

From these expanded vantage points of inter-relational processes and the meanings arising out of lived experiential phenomena, there is a potentially much richer tapestry available to researchers and his/her subjects. An integrative methodology thus means:

> …conducting research "with" rather than "on" people as co-researchers and creating a research cycle through different types of knowledge, namely propositional, practical, experiential and presentational knowing for deepening experience and knowledge (Kupers, 2009, p.82).

**Can ontology be salvaged?**

Any attempt at claiming comprehensive and encompassing unities as represented in the AQAL integral model runs the risk of ontological resistance, not unlike the challenges phenomenology itself faces. Integral theories' critique of modernity and post-modernity contains a profound desire to not simply salvage ontology, but to provide a more abiding reality-based legitimacy to ontology. Wilber and his Integral collaborators are well aware that the classic metaphysical notions of God, Soul, Spirit, or the "Great Chain of Being" etc., all need radical rethinking. Any attempt to appeal to the "myth of the given", or the "God of the gaps", must be permanently rejected.

What Integral Studies now offers is an updated Hegelian metaphysics that sees the universe becoming in an all-encompassing process where everything must be granted its place (Wilber, 2006, p. 232). The AQAL model seeks to embrace all reality in a "transcending and include" manner.

Among the voices of critique toward this approach to ontology comes from within an ontologically friendly source, namely, Critical Realism. In a five year series of annual conferences between representatives of Integral Theory and Critical Realism in the years 2010 to 2015, there was an initial growing climate of respect and bridge building ( (Hedlund)). In spite of the many mutual affirmations, challenges emerged, not surprisingly around the absolutizing and universalizing impulses of the Hegelian leanings within Integral Research. This critique was most forcefully vocalized by Timothy Rutzou when he blasted Integral Theory for "perpetuating violence against particulars," and a "flight from rational judgment" (Rutzou, 2012, p. 217). One should not be too surprised if a "grand theory of everything" runs the risk of being accused of perpetuating an epistemological AQAL fallacy in its attempts to "combine all perspectives, allowing "alienated Spirit to return to itself" which is, of course, the classic Hegelian narrative.

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[2] It is worth noting that Kupers has richly affirmed what he calls " advanced phenomenology" or Proto-Integral phenomenology, by building upon the work of Merleau-Ponty as a fully embodied perspective that is embedded, embodied, and enfolded; namely, a recognition that both interiors and exteriors are interwoven. It hints at a contiguous Being and Becoming that actualize itself in an encompassing embodiment, a being "in" and a becoming "towards" the world (Kupers, 2009, p. 75-78).

Without becoming bogged down in subtleties beyond the scope of this paper, I would summarize the implicit clash of ontologies found within Integral Theory and Critical Realism as a struggle to give full ontological legitimacy to both "facts" and "interpretations." While Integral Theory articulates a sophisticated stage model of epistemological depth, its primary focus is on what we might call on ontology of "vertical height".  Critical Realism on the other hand, can be described as an ontology of "horizontal depth" (Hedlund; Esbjorn-Hargens; Hartwig; Bhaskar, 2016).  Given the necessary praxis-criteria spoken of above, the seemingly only legitimate way to proceed within this dilemma is to let "lived experience" fully speak.  This means that there should be no reaching for abstract transcendental superiority or claiming of higher ontological mastery for either of these two strands of ontological relevance.  Both perspectives of so-called "imminence" and "transcendence" are vital for ontological exploration, with neither purely subjective nor purely object perspectives having exclusive claims on knowledge.

**Continuing Integral Challenges**

In attempting to pull together current integral perspectives it behooves us to find is much clarity as possible as to the limitations and challenges that face integral attempts at methodology.  The first critical question concerns the loyalty one might feel inclined to retain to its founder, Ken Wilber.  As a charismatic, comprehensive thinker, Ken Wilber has found many devoted and appreciative followers alongside the seemingly growing number of critics.  In the last 10 years, particularly since a so-called rift emerged within the Integral community the list of detractors of Wilber has grown.  The features of this tension are in part driven by personality issues, but more importantly, around whether it is permissible to critique Wilber's body of work, particularly around its theoretical assumptions.

The parallel to this development is not unlike the early erosions one finds in the psychoanalytic world as Sigmund Freud began to be challenged from within and without its ranks.  It did not take long for the Freudian world not only to splinter, such as the Jungian and Adlerian departures, but more importantly, it matured into broad and divergent yet linked versions of its earlier forms.  Modern Ego psychology, Object Relations theory, Self psychology, as well as Intersubjectivity theory, Relational psychoanalysis, and so one, all contributed meaningfully to the rich evolving tapestry we now have within the psychoanalytic inheritance.

The development of Integral theory will likely need to find a similar path.  There are key questions that face integral theory including the following: (1) Can one be integral without Wilber?  (2) Is meta-theorizing necessary? (3) Does everything need to fit?  Or, when does Holism become oppressive?  (4) Can AQAL itself be salvaged?
The emergence of the integral approach in the late 90's was fully manifest by the year 2000  through the publication of Wilber's seminal book called **Integral Psychology**, (2000) and a subsequent extension and elaboration in 2006 with **Integral Spirituality**  (2006).  Other branches of the integral "tree" emerged in short order, including Integral Education, Integral Leadership, Integral Business, Integral Ministry, Integral Ecology, and so on.[3]

By 2006, however, the academic foundation of integral studies was coming under serious challenge through forums such as **www.integralworld.net** and its editor, Frank Visser.  These multiple voices began to challenge Wilber's claims of and encompassing the comprehensiveness, but more importantly, a seeming lack of academic and critical reflection and evaluation.  The first Integral Theory conference in 2010 had as its primary goal the invitation for critical voices, in particular around potential alternatives to Wilber's model including the AQAL components (**www.integralworld.net/forman-hargens.html**).  The organizers of the conference explicitly sought in their program objectives to "de-couple" Ken Wilber and Integral Theory.  This process has continued from many sources, and I suspect will lead to further refinement and stronger potential theoretical utilization in more grounded ways.

**Can everything be made to fit?**

The desire for grand unitive frameworks seems to have had recurring strong impulses within history.  The great shifts in western philosophical assumptions whether Platonic - Aristotelian, Hegelian - Existentialist, or Continental - Analytic tensions, all seem rooted in the fundamental dialectic tensions of any era.  Times of great change with their accelerated disorienting potentials, generate a countervailing force that seeks to reorient prevailing thought forms into the new potential unities that attempt to address the emerging new questions of the day.

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[3] Suny Press provided an entire series of books on integral theory beginning in 2010.  It includes the book **Integral Theory in Action**, 2010, Ed. Sean Esbjorn-Hargens, as a good example of this broadening.

Certainly, the accelerated changes that have come through modernity, post-modernity, technology, globalization etc. and their vastly disparate claims and conclusions, beg for a new cohesion that lets reality find a fit that offers a workable alignment with the questions of the day. Wilber is a prime representative of this unitive impulse and the push toward meta- theory is one of its prime byproducts (Edwards, www.integralworld.net/edwards27.html).

Among Wilber's central premise within (IMP) is the principle of "non-exclusion" as noted above. Plurality is considered essential in a Wilberian universe, but is fundamentally promoted as self-generating, i.e. a self-regulating system that spans all dimensions and all levels of awareness (Paulson, Journal of Humanistic Psychology, Vol. 48, No. 3, July 2008), hence its claim at comprehensiveness.

Further assumptions include the "spiral dynamics" of Graves, Beck, and Cowan, in which a hierarchical model of development is utilized in which the so-called lower is always incorporating into the higher, a method Wilber calls "transcended and include" (Butters, 2015).[4] These assumptions are not simply that "later" is "higher" or "better", but the latter incorporates the former in an ever-more complex and unifying fashion. What seems missing, however, in the Wilber model of ever-higher unification and integration is the regressive tug of any self-state.

There is an inevitable mixed quality of any state or stage on the developmental grid. Higher or so-called lower states of consciousness can and do coexist within both the progress and regressive poles of experience. Furthermore, there is a risky judgmentalism in hierchial models in which higher states are inevitably perceived as superior, thus seemingly negating the mixed and dual nature of all states.

It is worth noting that Wilber does recognize "shadow" elements as an inevitable process in development, and affirms that development with regard to shadow can precede along both vertical and horizontal dimensions. He also recognizes that development can proceed both as a movement within a state as well as between stages of development (Wilber, 2006, p.119-141). The challenge one finds, however, in the Wilberian mode, is that it operates more mechanically and in compartmentalized fashion (Paulson, 2008, p.378). An existentialist vantage point, for instance, seems a necessary corrective to the seemingly more static non-dualism that the Wilber model maintains. The disintegration products of reality are a necessary and vital aspect of knowledge claims, but these are much hard to fit into models of predominantly progressive or higher order frameworks.

An essential epistemological element needed beyond the commitment to plurality would be to ensure a process oriented approach to reality. Not only the recognition that both healthy and unhealthy states of being are co-existing, but that there is an abiding dynamism to the flow of life (Butters, 2015, p.75). All systems have fluidity and their regressive or progress potentials can find acceleration points at any time. Not only the dyadic creative tensions between regressive or progressive modes drive integrative or disintegrative movement, but also the birth of novelty and particularity.

There is a necessary buffering given by a commitment to dynamism, namely, provisionality. Provisionality invites a humility and helps guard against a premature "settledness." Furthermore, it invites multiple perspectives to operate within the knowledge search. It thus leans toward participatory questing with potentially broader enrichment and potentially stronger confirmation of the insights in conclusions generated.

**And How to salvage AQAL?**

For AQAL as a meta-theorizing discipline to thrive it needs to define the limits and possibilities of this mode. Marc Edwards offers an interesting initial attempt by describing the goals that broad inter/multi-disciplinary efforts require (Edwards, 2008, p.4). They include:

1. Metatheorizing for understanding: this involves having a sufficient familiarity and insight about the research topic(s) or paradigms that are seeking to be explored,
2. Metatheorizing for new theory: this task arises out of the desire to review and analyze prior link theories so that new models and theories can be developed.
3. Metatheorizing which seeks to build overarching theory as a way of unifying and integrating what has been gained from (1)

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[4] The reader will benefit from Butter's excellent overview, in particular historical insights about the evolution of Spiral Dynamics, and the critical responses it has found especially in its hierchial and spiritual assumptions. See also, Wilber, Integral Psychology, 2000, page 54.

4. Finally, <u>metatheorizing</u> must include <u>assessment and adjudication</u>. This task uses the insights gained from (1) and (3) to evaluate, asses, and critically incorporate other theories that can speak to the broader questions being explored.

One must acknowledge that these potential utilizations are only a strong as the methodological capacity and rigor of the researcher. Edwards recognizes that it is easy to slip into mechanical review and not accomplish integration (Edwards, 2008, p. 5). His expanded call therefore is for consistent methodological rigor while proceeding from established and legitimated operations. For a more complete framework he proposes the following phases to research enhancement which includes clarity of topic choice:

1. Specification of topics within their domains,
2. Identification and definition of theoretical concepts within the units explored,
3. Description of research methods including procedures and techniques,
4. Interpretation of results including specification of the relations between examined elements,
5. Description of the theoretical systems of relationships within their contexts,
6. Statement of truth claims,
7. Evaluation of theoretical systems conclusions (Edwards, 2008).

These necessary elements are essential to ensuring reasonable reliability and trustworthiness. Furthermore, these eight methodological phases are not disembodied from each other, but represent the Integral Learning cycle. Edwards reinforces this process model of knowledge enhancement by reaffirming its core elements, namely:

1. Action steps, including the activities of doing, of participation
2. Reflection, has a process of subjectively appropriating the experience and its data content, i.e. apprehending
3. Meaning-making, namely, the phase of interpretation if and Hermeneutic assessment
4. Validation, where in public and social engagement offers verification, conformation and/or critique and challenge (Edwards, 2008, p.9)

If Wilber's critics are correct, then Wilber's AQAL quadrants are seemingly preferencing an individualized "singular" approach, to the neglect of collective and communal elements within each quadrant. In this case, then, there must be a necessary inclusion of both exterior and interior elements in both their individual and collective modes. Both the collective and individual aspects of a learning process must be incorporated and taken seriously.

To strengthen the collective elements in inquiry as to ensure meaning-making beyond individualistic stage based developmental models, we must expand our awareness of the human social environment in its communal forms. Thus the learning quest would require a strengthened flow between the following processes:

1. Action steps, involving actions toward the <u>communal</u> context,
2. Personal reflection, the expansion of interior awareness as impacted by exterior contexts and communities,
3. Interpretation, requires the maintenance of a flow between interior meaning-making and exterior hermeneutic insights i.e. a hermeneutic loop,
4. Social validation, involving mutual recognition of the interior and exterior vantage points including a holding in awareness of the non-integratedable elements (Edwards, 2008, p. 10).

**Methodological choices**

Certainly the broad affirmations of Integral attempts toward knowledge lean in the direction of utilizing mixed methodologies, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed approaches. Depending on the research questions raised, there would likely be an appropriate critical selection made by any of researcher as to which tools/vantage points would serve the questions best. Of course, any mixed methodological choice would require sufficient competency in the refinements necessary for validity assessment. Thus, a researcher in choosing mixed methods for instance, would need to demonstrate reasonable familiarity with statistical analysis, hermeneutics, case studies or grounded theory, for instance. The standard for proceeding for mixed methodological approaches and would include the recognition and affirmation of the norms established by the research community in question.

One might wonder at this juncture why qualitative research efforts even need to be strengthened? Even for persons who operate from mixed methods approaches there can be a reluctance to grant qualitative methodologies a legitimate footing alongside quantitative approaches.

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Because there is an implicit "strictness" to quantitative methodologies, their norms are more readily identified, tested, and confirmed within the specific parameters. Qualitative researchers are more likely to utilize methods that rely on subjective experience and frequently use a much wider array of methods and sources for data. There is often a great deal of flexibility and discretion left to the qualitative researcher as to choice of subjects, types of data collected, including documents, conversations, diaries, and a wide variety of experientially identifiable events. Therefore, clarity and ownership of perspectives becomes critical for gaining legitimization.

Given that breadth of scope is a critical step for any researcher it forces him/her to sharpen the critical question(s) that one wishes to explore. To arrive at a sound qualitative study, it requires a clear and concise hypothesis that frames the entire enterprise. Without this clarity a research undertaking would be considered unreliable and of limited value. Thus, defining sample size is critical for subsequent legitimization. Certainly, for statistical data gathering sample size must also be clearly defined since controlling the parameters will allow for greater reliability regarding affirming or rejecting the pre-designated hypothesis.

Qualitative methods can have greater flexibility in this regard because expanding the sample can be legitimate if the researcher can justify the expansion in that additional information allows the researcher to more fully address the research question. Additional data may in fact help clarify the issues at stake within the research question.

I raised a concern earlier surrounding the willingness of the researcher to claim "implications arising" out of any methodology, whether quantitative, qualitative, or mixed. In some ways the introduction of qualitative methods makes the job of interpretation more vital and potentially valuable for readers, especially for audiences that are perhaps unfamiliar with the questions being explored. There is a potential benefit for both general and specialized audiences because the "implications-arising" commitment gives both immediate insight but also provides additional guidance to future knowledge enhancement.

Since qualitative efforts are so central to integrative undertakings is important to name the key qualitative methodology is available to researchers. There are six fundamental types of qualitative approaches which are commonly considered. They each have their unique contributions to make. They are: Narrative, Case Studies, Hermeneutics, Grounded Theory, and Ethnography.

Narrative. Narrative describes all the possibilities of storytelling including oral, written, diary and memoir etc. The richness of narrative is that is it is not simply a linear thread of events, but every narrative is layered and textured. Potential meanings arising out of narrative flow from empathic participation with the narrator. Empathic and embodied reading or listening leads to self-inquiry and reflective self and other dialogue, with insights for broader personal and cultural awareness.

Case studies. Case studies have as their objects an individual, a system, or a series of events that can be examined in an in-depth uncovering of meanings and themes of rising from the lived experience of the participants. It includes developmental or transformational movements, subject object interviews, sentence completion tests, journaling, and thick description with analysis of insights generated.

Hermeneutics. Hermeneutic inquiry is the interpretive twin to narrative and case studies. Interpretive analysis, cultural analysis, and historical hermeneutics all seek the most comprehensive meanings available that allow for depths of insight. Hermeneutics in an AQAL way would require that the understandings gained must rest upon both interpretation and empathy. Again, ownership of perspective, recognition of bias, including broad collective introspection, would help guard against less valid conclusions.

Grounded theory. Grounded theory seeks to create a theoretical framework based upon a set of experiences or events that are identified as a problem to be more fully understood or solved. These research endeavors incorporate many participants, so sample size is critical in order to enable the researchers with sufficient data for theory building. The coding of themes being considered, preliminary investigations, and follow up engagement are all central to the ultimate task of building a meaningful summary into the questions and categories that ultimately result in a theory.

Ethnography. Ethnographic research aims at describing cultural events in which social patterns that inform the behaviors or attitudes of groups within a culture are made visible. Typical methodologies include observations and interviews, usually requiring embeddedness in the direct environment in which the experiences occur. In an interesting and perhaps controversial adjustment to standard ethnographic approaches one can consider auto-ethnography which is a combination of ethnography and autobiography.

It is an attempt to gather insight and deeper personal understanding by exploring one's cultural identity for the purpose of analyzing how personal experiences intersect with the broader cultural themes. This effort does not only lead to greater personal awareness, but ultimately provides insight useful for other persons and for the culture at large.

## Conclusion

The abiding value of utilizing AQAL as a deepening research enterprise is that it allows objective and subjective realities to meet and mingle. What then can or should one do with the assumed unities of AQAL with its insistence on hierarchy as manifested through the "transcend and include" ontology.[5] Holonography, I would propose, it is not required for AQAL to be an effective and a valuable methodology for research. Unities folded upon unities inevitably end up preferencing one over the other. Non-dualism can do violence to particulars as much as dualism can.

What a broadened epistemological effort requires is a respect for mystery, which does not mean that reality is mysterious. It means that not everything can be nailed down, and "conclusions" may for now be beyond the reach of our understanding. Mathematics, the "purest" of the sciences has lived for millennia with unanswerable questions within its own domain. Surely if we can grant mathematics such a high status and respect of its methods and conclusions even as it stands humbly before its own mysteries, we should grant the same cautions and humility toward other yet to be understood mysteries in all other domains as well.

The triad of (1) injunction, (2) experienced engagement, and (3) communal response, is an essential element in all inquiry. Because such a triad engages exteriors and interiors, individual and collective perspectives, it reduces the chances of distortions having free reign or premature legitimacy. There is always potential distortion in any evolving dynamic process, but in insisting upon a foundation of (1) disciplines, (2) experiential 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person ownership and (3) communal critique, the chances of distortion being permanently embedded are greatly reduced.

Thus, recognition of ownership, of vantage point, of perspective, is essential for authentic integrative praxis. Ownership of perspective in an AQAL way helps guard against an absolutizing of one perspective above all others. Perspective does not mean relativizing everything and is not synonymous with reductionism. It is more a question of honesty, or better said, of authenticity, as in "here I stand."

The place of empathy as a research tool is certainly controversial, but I would propose that it offers interiors and exteriors the connectivity that the knowledge quest requires. Empathy is the way one describes the flow between subject an object, between interobjectivity and intersubjectivity. It allows for further meanings to emerge and whether through attraction or repulsion, a higher form of mutuality and participation is realized. Empathy is the bright star of research and is not to be confused as fuzzy warmth, or mutual unconscious admiration or merger. It is the discipline of knowing intimately, and knowing from within. Surely such ownership can only add to the unfolding mystery of knowledge.

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[5] Holons is Wilber's preferred term for a "Great Nested Hierarchy of Being," in which each higher level holistically subsumes the lower. They reflect Wilber's theory of everything, namely, that the great web of life is a series of holistic webs, which each sphere enveloping the lower including the entire universe (Wilber, 2006, p.142-162).

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