

## EXPLORATORY ESSAY I

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### The Philosophy of Integral Consciousness applied to Integral Art

The purpose of this essay is to articulate my understanding of Art and explore my role as an artist within Ken Wilber's theories of Integral Consciousness and Art. Wilber's model resonates with my experience and his wide-ranging theory offers what I perceive to be an elegant framework. More importantly, I am released from the stress of being confused about art as I understand the ideas he puts forth.

Wilber's Integral Consciousness is derived from what he calls neo-perennial philosophy. The notion of perennial philosophy (Latin: *philosophia perennis*) suggests the existence of a universal set of truths and values common to all peoples and cultures. This philosophy is not new and is linked to Aristotle, Gandhi, Carl Jung, St. Thomas Aquinas, Frithjof Schuon and Aldous Huxley among the many. Integral thinkers before Wilber include: Sri Aurobindo, James Mark Baldwin, Jürgen Habermas and Jean Gebser. Wilber makes the distinction that he is attempting to provide a simplified map to classify the terrain of human potential. Any individual is free to use this map for their own understanding. Similar to a map, he can only guide or suggest. He does not include all points in the landscape of human consciousness on the map.

He synthesizes historic, cultural, social and political contributions from all schools and disciplines throughout human history. Past and present, he organizes them according to observable re-occurring patterns. It is easy to see a pattern if you are not too close to it. He assumes a broad view and asserts all contributions are of value in understanding the human consciousness and nature of reality. His makes room for the known, unknown and includes spiritual development. The inclusion of spiritual vs. religious throws him into territory outside of academia and into controversy.

The grandiose title *A Brief History of Everything* is intriguing and the ideas he presents are complex but consistent. "The exceptional feature of Wilber's approach is that, under this methodology, all of these mental structures — subconscious, rational, mystical—are considered complementary and legitimate, rather than competing in a zero-sum conceptual space. And that is perhaps Wilber's greatest accomplishment — the opening up of a space wherein more ideas, theories, beliefs, and stories can be considered true, responsible, and acceptable."<sup>1</sup> Wilber portrays the development of consciousness "as a ladderlike structure, with consciousness progressing from lower levels to higher levels."<sup>2</sup> Each new level integrates the preceding level while demonstrating new properties associated only with the higher level.

Confusion has a paralyzing effect when it comes to understanding the self or Art. My unwillingness to commit to one particular area at the exclusion of another is explained through Wilber's model in his discussion on span (breadth) vs. depth. He explains you can not have depth if your focus is span. A span of art work functions to enrich depth and depth is more infrequent than span. His model takes into account and accepts a variety of often opposing definitions, styles and interpretations of Art. I have been able to understand areas of my development and why others behave the way they do. The classic Greek inscription found on the main lintel of the temple of Apollo at Delphi "Know thyself - and thou shall know all the mysteries of the gods and of the universe.", takes longer and is more difficult if you don't have a good map.

Wilber's main idea involves identifying what he considers the basic building blocks of existence. These elemental blocks are called holons. "A holon refers to a system (or phenomenon) that is a whole in itself as well as a part of a larger system. Although you are made of parts (your nervous system, your skeletal system, etc.), you are also a part of your society, and of your nation-state. A letter is a self-existing entity and simultaneously an integral part of a word. Everything from quarks to matter to energy to ideas can be looked at in this way—everything in creation except perhaps creation itself is a holon."<sup>3</sup>

In *A Brief History of Everything*, he divides human consciousness into four basic quadrants. These four quadrants are identified as follows: the "I" or the inner world of self and consciousness in the upper left quadrant, the "It" or external brain and organism in the upper right quadrant, the "We" or culture and worldview in the lower left quadrant and the "It's" of social systems and environments occupy the lower right quadrant.

For an example; “consider four schools of social science. Freudian psychoanalysis interprets people’s interior experiences and is an account of the interior individual or the upper-left quadrant. B. F. Skinner’s behaviorism limits itself to the observation of the behavior of organisms and is an exterior individual or upper-right account. Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics interprets the collective consciousness of a society, and is thus an interior plural or lower-left perspective. Marxist economic theory examines the external behavior of a society in the lower-right quadrant.

All four pursuits; psychoanalysis, behaviorism, philosophical hermeneutics and Marxism offers complementary, rather than contradictory, perspectives. It is possible for all to be correct and necessary for a complete account of human existence. Wilber has integrated these four areas of knowledge through an acknowledgement of the four fundamental dimensions of existence. Further, these four perspectives are equally valid at all levels of existence.”<sup>4</sup>

The four quadrants are divided into stages or levels. Stages are subdivided into lines, states and types and AQAL is used as an acronym for All Quadrants All Levels. Levels, stages, lines, states and types are markers for areas of sequential human developmental growth and consciousness. Examples of levels are: body, mind, soul and spirit. Examples of lines on that level are: egocentric, ethnocentric, worldcentric and beingcentric. This view explains to me why something could be right, just or true at one level of development and the exact same thing could be false, wrong or unjust at a different level of development. People don’t progress evenly and someone who is highly developed cognitively can be socially incompetent and/or ethically corrupt. There is an infinite mix of developmental growth in individuals. To add to the complexity, this changes as people live and have experiences that alter their growth.

### **Integral Art**

These stages, levels, lines and state become important in the discussion of Integral Art. Integral Art does not fit neatly into his model like psychology or the social sciences. In *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad*, Wilber’s model covers the major schools of art interpretation in and inclusive attempt to define Integral Art.

Beginning with Formalism, the artistic value of a work of art is based on its formal aspects emphasizing the Art elements and principles of design over subject, content and meaning. The roots of formalism are traced back to Plato. He believed art is neither particularly useful (the painting of a bed is no good to sleep on), nor, in the strict sense, true. Art is an elaborate trompe l'oeil, and therefore a lie. Plato believed we attain no knowledge through art because art is false and artists do not provide us with the meaning of what we experience.

Another way to interpret Art is based on the original conscious intention of the artist. “The artist in an attitude of intending has a firm yet defensible commitment toward executing a plan.”<sup>5</sup> This is true if the artist is alive and tells you what their intentions are, is aware of them and is honest in sharing when asked. Since we are all capable of self-deception and our perceptions differ depending on what conscious state we are in developmentally, the question becomes, is intention enough to make a work of Art? As Aristotle put it, “A is A,” a thing is what it is regardless of what anyone thinks it is or intends it to be.

By reading the unconscious intent or interior intention of the artist there is yet another path to interpret Art. This method relies on psychological interpretation, perception, image analysis, visual communication and rhetoric. As Nietzsche says, “There are no facts, only interpretations.” The question is then, who interprets the effort, if the artist is unconscious regarding their intent?

Contextualism examines art in the context of the world within which the work was created. A Marxist interpretation looks at the social and culture context that the artist created the artwork in. All people are influenced by class structure and live in a specific culture and a historic period and physical environment. Artists may knowingly or unknowingly perpetuate classism, racism, sexism and speciesism. Art is used by those with power to manipulate and alter the values and beliefs of a culture.

In viewer-response Art interpretation, it is the viewer’s response that defines how a work of art is to be judged. The interpretation of a piece depends on a viewer’s own subjective experience as art happens in the mind of the viewer. Artists have had difficulty with this mode of interpretation and point to the art critic, curator or art historian as the one who creates the Art, not the artist.

The Integral model of Art interpretation includes all the above mentioned interpretations as necessary and valid. Each provides a piece of the puzzle, all have Truth and all are right although in varying amounts of right. The Integral Art approach also takes into consideration the conscious level of development the artist is at when they made the work. A work reflects the maker and is a visual record of all the artists' processes in a given moment of time.

## Finale

Ideally, Integral Art reflects the conscious development of the artist. Artists create work to recreate in the viewer the stage or level the artist was at when they created the work. The idea might be to evoke in the viewer's consciousness a similar state as experienced by the artist. Wilber ascertains that having consciousness stirred up even temporarily allows the viewer to experience expanded states of consciousness that can eventually lead to permanent growth. Artists can create artwork on other developmental levels, to evoke those levels for a viewer's growth. For the benefit of being understood an artist might work at different stages of development than they are at, allowing communication with a wide range of audiences.

An integrally informed artist puts forth effort to have facility and awareness of their consciousness as they create their work. Their consciousness does not have to be fully developed at all levels, all lines (AQAL); this is not the nature of most people's consciousness. Wilber makes the distinction between comprehensive art which tries to include all levels all lines and Integral Art which deals with the development of the artist as expressed visually through the artwork.

Any artwork produced by integral consciousness is considered Integral Art. The integral nature of an artist that is authentically expressed through their art is Integral Art. The process of creating work can be a vehicle for the artist to grow through the stages, levels, lines, states and types. It is at the same time a catalyst for the viewer's growth. Stated simply, the more evolved the artist's consciousness, the better the art is judged by the viewer and the Integral model. I am attempting to bring this vitally forward as it originates from my authentic self to my work. The Integral model is the closest I have found to explain how I understand Art. I am working to be conscious of using all quadrants, all levels (AQAL) as I create artwork.

Integral consciousness makes Integral Art. More dimensions will bear on the work I create as my consciousness expands and my awareness grows. It will be apparent to some and not to others in the Art I produce. Many artists have traditionally taken on the role of teacher and have explored spirituality through their work and I also plan to include to this role in my work. Ken Wilber's ideas help me articulate and clarify much of what confuses me about existence and Art. The question is now what do I do with this clarity? With Wilber's model there are infinite possibilities and space, even if it is to be confused again.

*"Ask a new question and you will learn new things."* —George Greenstein.

Sources:

*A Brief History of Everything* by Ken Wilber

*The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad* by Ken Wilber

\**Kosmic Consciousness* by Ken Wilber \*(originated from classical Greek definition of Kosmos, not American slang)

*Integral Operating System, Version 1* by Ken Wilber

<sup>1, 3, 4.</sup> Wikipedia

<sup>2.</sup> Kasprow & Scotton, 1999

<sup>5.</sup> Paisley Livingston, *Art and Intention: A Philosophical Study*, 2005