

Two ways to get an Integral Theory

Ken Wilber's method of integration

Introduction

Ken Wilber is at times deemed to be one of the most prominent and intellectual integral thinkers of our time. The website of his corporation 'Integral Life' even presents him as being 'widely regarded as one of the greatest philosophers alive today' (Integral Life 2009).

His so-called 'Integral Theory' shows up with no minor claims: it alleges to have succeeded in integrating most of the insights elaborated by contemporary natural sciences such as biology and physics, together with those of the social sciences and humanities, especially with the deep truths found in religion as well as in philosophy from the ancient Greeks until today.

Wilber started developing his theory in the late 1970s. From then on he revised and elaborated it, publishing it in more than 20 books. He himself distinguishes between five different phases, between which major shifts and enhancements concerning his theory took place. Today, he presents his theory as a framework that claims to provide no less than a place for everything that exists, including the various scientific disciplines and approaches. The theory seems to provide a proper place for everything. That place is defined first of all by its level of development and its specific perspective, from which it perceives and describes the world. This makes Wilber praise his theory as a downright 'theory of everything' (Wilber 2000a), being able to provide the long needed integration of the manifold and fragmented bodies of knowledge in our post-modern world. From his holistic theory Wilber derives practical suggestions for a more integral life, an integral practice which consists of meditation, physical exercises and social commitment.

In this article I will examine in particular the method that Wilber applies in making up his theory. The main focus, thus, lays on the question how it realises the integration, that became *the* core concept and main label under which his theory is traded today. Therefore I will start with a short overview of his theory, which for reasons of brevity needs to remain schematic and simplified.

The Integral Theory

Holons

A good starting point is the general concept that Wilber uses in order to name the elements of the universe: holons. According to Wilber, reality is made up of ‘holons’, which are wholes, that are—at the same time—parts of other wholes. Since they are parts of other wholes and themselves contain other wholes, reality is a nested entity, invariably made up of these wholes/parts, in short: holons.

Vertical axis

Each holon enfolds—according to Wilber—other holons, which form its sub-holons, and is itself enfolded by other holons, its superholons. Thus, holons can be ranked according to their level of enfoldment, which equals their level of development, since evolution—in the eyes of Wilber—is the continuing process of enfoldment. When holons develop, they transcend themselves, embrace and integrate their own prior being, getting thereby to a higher level. These levels of development form the vertical axis of Wilber’s framework.

Evolution takes place along this vertical axis of his theory: that’s why on this axis we find the different stages of development, as discovered by Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, James Fowler and others. Wilber’s proprium is the placement of spiritual levels, described by mystics such as Meister Eckhart, Theresa of Avila and a number of eastern mystics, on top of those levels of development (cf. Wilber 2007; see Figure 1). Since in his theory they form stages situated beyond the rational stage, Wilber calls them ‘transrational’ or ‘transpersonal’ stages. On top of this vertical axis resides—according to Wilber—Spirit, God, the ever-present Ground towards whom each holon is striving (cf. Wilber 2002a: footnote 26).

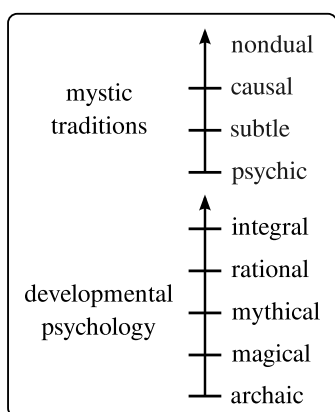


Figure 1. Levels of development.

This doctrine of the different levels of development is the major and almost only topic of Wilber’s early works and it remains an essential part of his current theory. Obviously a lot more could be said about it, but we’ll leave it with that short sketch.

With the so-called fourth phase of his theory (‘Wilber-IV’) he extended it by what can be regarded as the horizontal axes of

his theory. They form the second major focus of Wilber's current Integral Theory.

Horizontal axes

Wilber's 'Kosmos' refers to, as well as the physical realm (physiosphere), which is what is normally meant when talking of the cosmos, also the realm of the living (biosphere); of the spirit (noosphere) and of God (theosphere). To mark the difference of this concept to what is normally called the 'cosmos', he uses the Greek spelling 'Kosmos' (cf. Wilber 2000b: 45). Within this Kosmos, there are not only holons above and beneath one another, but also holons next to each other: that is to say holons on the same level. On that horizontal plane of Wilber's theory one concept plays a major role: the concept of quadrants.

The idea behind quadrants may quickly be explained. It is founded on two tenets:

- 1) There are things in the singular and things in the plural. This distinction focusses on the fact that individual entities need to be distinguished from sets, groups or systems of that entity.
- 2) Things have an interior and an exterior. So when looking at something, you can either look at its interior or the exterior aspect. The interior aspect of something is everything that has to do with consciousness, awareness, meaning, feelings, values and what in philosophy we call the *qualia*, phenomenal qualities. It constitutes the subjective world. The exterior aspect however denotes the objective world, the empirical or material part of something, everything that has a quantity (cf. Wilber 2001: 4-8). So brainwaves, for example, are exterior, for they can be measured, while the cognitive content of the person whose brainwaves are measured is situated on the interior (cf. Wilber 2001: 10).

Now, since these two aspects may be distinguished both within individuals as well as within groups of entities, the two distinctions may be crossed over, so that we again get two axes, which are both on a horizontal scale and result in four quadrants (see Figure 2).

Wilber maps a whole bunch of distinctions onto these four quadrants. For example phenomenology and introspection lie in the interior-singular quadrant; hermeneutics in the interior-plural quadrant; empiricism and behaviourism in the exterior-singular quadrant and ecology, functionalism and systems theory in the exterior-plural quadrant (cf. Wilber 2002d).

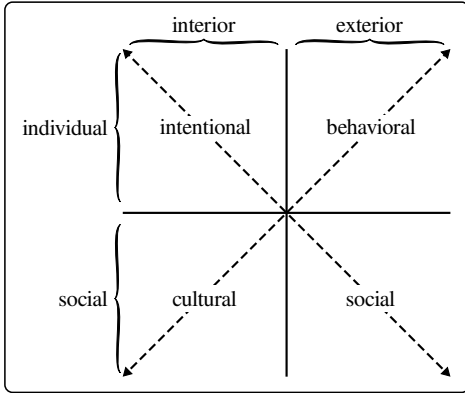


Figure 2. The four quadrants.

Often he groups together the two quadrants on the right, which results in a distinction Wilber calls 'The Big Three'. Other distinctions are mapped onto those: first of all the personal pronouns 'I', 'we' and 'it', which for him are the first, the second and the third person, since he regards the 'we' as the second person. For Wilber the distinction in 'Art', 'Morals' and 'Science' or the transcendentals 'The Beautiful', 'The

Good' and 'The True' also fit into this schema. The Big Three are also the place where the insights of the humanities (interior-singular), social sciences (interior-plural) and natural sciences (exterior) come into play and are integrated, as mentioned before in the introduction (see Figure 3).

Wilber spends a lot of time in his current work spelling out how, in his view, these quadrants emerged, how they are connected, what they mean, what distinctions can be mapped onto them and so forth. We don't need to go into details here, but leave it with that very brief outline, which is enough for this article's purpose.

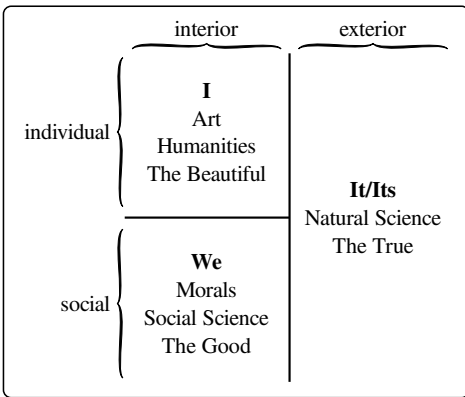


Figure 3. The 'Big Three'.

The distinctions of singular and plural (or as Wilber also says of 'individual' and 'social', or 'communal' holons), and of the interior and exterior, form in a sense the two horizontal axes of Wilber's framework. If you add the vertical axis of stages of development you thus get a three-dimensional framework (see Figure 4), which is at the core of the Integral Theory.¹

1 For the sake of brevity, I leave out lines of development, states and types.

Applied method of integration

Two places of integration

This makes me come to the third and main point; the methodological question of how Wilber achieves the integration of the disparate bodies of knowledge mentioned before, the integration that is the signature feature of his theory. The answer to this question is twofold, for there are (at least) two places to be determined where such an integration takes place.

The first place is the theory itself. The theory combines elements mainly of systems theory, ontology/metaphysics, hermeneutics, psychology, religion and biology. So the theory itself is made up of parts of insights of different scientific disciplines, which it brings together in order to form the framework just presented.

The second place is the aforementioned integration of different bodies of knowledge by giving them a specific address, that is to say by naming their specific level of development as well as the specific perspective from which they perceive the world.

The fabric of the theory

Let us start with the theory itself. I choose to make my point by means of the concept of holons for two reasons:

- 1) Holons constitute the basic components of Wilber's Kosmos. What can be examined here is thus of relevance for his entire theory.
- 2) Holons allow me to illustrate the point I want to make quickly. This point could indeed be made for each and every one of the crucial points of his theory, but would need more time to be shown.

Let us put the concept of holons under the microscope: what actually are holons? When you start to put together the definitions Wilber gives for holons, you won't find one definition, but a bunch of them. That alone would not necessarily pose a problem, as long as these definitions are more or less equivalent. Let us see whether this is the case here.

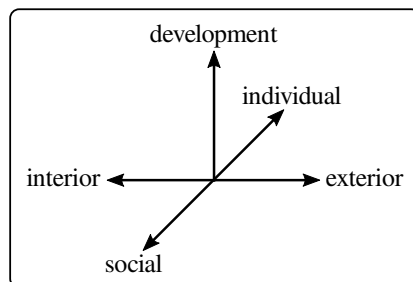


Figure 4. The three dimensions of the Integral Theory.

The context-based definition of holons

Wilber explains that his expression ‘holon’ originates from the native Hungarian author Arthur Koestler, who coined it ‘to refer to that which, being a *whole*, in one context, is simultaneously a *part* in another’ (Wilber 2000b: 26; cf. Wilber 2001: 36).

I want to call this definition the *context-based definition* of holons. Applying it, there is virtually nothing that would not match it, or—as Wilber himself puts it—‘there is nothing, that isn’t a holon, a context within a context forever’ (Wilber 2000b: 77).

The emergence-based definition of holons

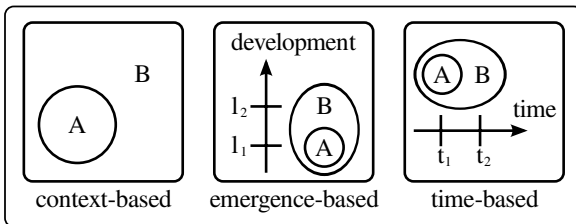
A second definition determines holons by means of a hierarchical relation between the parts and their wholes: wholes are on a higher level of development than the parts that they embrace. These wholes are, according to Wilber, more than just their parts. They are emergent with regard to their parts (cf. Wilber 2000b: 54, 56, 59), and thus are on a higher level than their mere components. This *emergence-based definition* differs from the context-based definition insofar as a context doesn’t need to be on a higher level of development. It could indeed be on any level compared to the object which is placed into it.

The emergence-based definition is a crucial part of Wilber’s theory and is constitutive of the hierarchical (in Wilber’s terminology also dubbed ‘holarchical’) development which pervades it.

The time-based definition of holons

Especially in the excerpts of Wilber’s latest phase of work (‘Wilber-V’) one finds a third definition of holons, in which neither a new context, nor an emergence constitutes the difference between wholes or parts, but time. Thus I will call it the *time-based definition* of holons. He writes:

[T]he previous moment is now a *part* of the *whole* of this moment (i.e., the whole of one moment becomes a part of the whole of the next, which



is why moment-to-moment existence is a holarchy of holons—and that is prehensive unification: each moment is

Figure 5. Three different definitions of holons.

a holon that transcends and includes its predecessors) (Wilber 2002b; cf. Wilber 2002c).

A comparison of these definitions

As one can easily see, all three definitions are quite disparate. Figure 5 shows a graphic comparison of the respective underlying concepts, marking each holon as A and its superholon as B (or each holon as B and its subholon as A).

Each definition gives a different answer to the following questions:

- 1) What are the criteria by which entities count as holons?
- 2) What constitutes the difference between the whole and the part of a holon?
- 3) What are the properties of holons?
- 4) What belongs to a holon?

Ad 1: While an entity needs to have a context in order to count as a holon according to the context-based definition, this is not required for holons according to the two other definitions. While an entity needs to have components out of which it itself emerged according to the emergence-based definition, this is not required for holons according to the two other definitions. And while an entity needs to exist through time for the time-based definition of holons, this is not required for holons according to the two other definitions.

Ad 2: What the emergence-based and the time-based definitions of holons have in common is an asymmetrical relationship between the whole and the parts. Yet, this asymmetry has in both cases completely different causes: in the case of the emergence-based definition of holons it results from an irreversibility of the hierarchy of levels, whereas it results from the irreversibility of the arrow of time in the case of the time-based definition of holons. The context-based definition doesn't seem to necessarily require an asymmetrical relationship between the whole and its parts. The definition allows that one entity constitutes the context of another one, while the latter constitutes the context of the first one. There seems to be no clear hierarchy of contexts. Contexts don't seem to be arranged on a scale with a strict total order as is the case for different moments in time, or entities emerging from other ones.

Ad 3: One can derive the relations between a holon and its subholon from the respective definition whose criteria they fulfill. This relationship is either contextual, a relationship of emergence, or it is temporal, depending on the applied definition. As a result, context-based defined holons don't exist where

no other context exists, whereas differently defined holons do. Emergence-based defined holons don't exist where no emergent properties can be located, whereas differently defined holons do. And time-based defined holons don't exist at one single moment in time alone, whereas differently defined holons do.

Only the superholons of holons, according to the emergence-based definition, must be at a higher level of development. The superholons of holons according to the time-based definition, that is to say their being in the next moment, may well be at exactly the same level of development, yes even at a lower one in the case of a regression. The same is the case for holons according to the context-based definition: the greater context may be at the same, at a higher, or at a lower level of development—if the concept of level of development can be applied to it at all.

For the reason that contexts are not lined up on one scale with a strict total order one can also imagine a bunch of different contexts of one and the same holon, that fulfill the context-based definition at one and the same moment in time. Thus an entity could, according to the context-based definition, be an actual subholon of many different superholons located at one and the same level at the same time. This is not possible for holons according to one of the other definitions (on the assumption that there is only one arrow of time).

Ad 4: While holons according to the context-based definition range over different contexts, those according to the emergence-based definition range over different levels of development, and those according to the time-based definition range over different instants of time. So according to the context-based definition, a holon is made up of an entity and different nested contexts. It is thus itself a hermeneutical or contextual entity. According to the emergence-based definition, a holon is made up of an entity and the elements from which it emerged. It is thus itself an entity composed of elements and their emergent properties. According to the time-based definition, a holon is made up of an entity and its past, its being at a prior instant of time. It is thus itself a temporal being.

Methodological inferences

As already mentioned before: what can be said with regard to the concept of holons is true with regard to all the crucial points of Wilber's theory. If you look at the crucial points, the places where his own intellectual contribution is most at stake, you will find an equivocation, that is a central term with several different meanings.

Equivocation turns out to be not a negligible or forgivable definitional carelessness, but the very method of integration with regard to the fabric of the framework. Wilber coins and uses equivocal terms, which in fact contain several different concepts. The result is a cognitive artifact, an artificial term, that is equipped with the sum of those different, partly incoherent and sometimes even contradictory properties. As such they form the glue with which he connects different ideas, different theories. They are the doors, the connections, the bridges between disparate areas, topics and scientific disciplines. As shown in the context of holons, each of the different concepts, lumped together under the equivocal term, has a different extension, points towards different sets of entities, with very different properties, that allow very different inferences. Once the reader has adopted his equivocal terms, Wilber is in the luxurious position not only of combining disparate topics, but also of using whatever property he needs for his argument in the respective context, deriving it from the definition which fits. As in the case of holons: any time he talks about holons, he can go in at least three different directions. If he needs emergence, he derives it from the emergence-based definition of holons. Where there is no emergent property, or where he finds no further emergence, he can easily switch to context, or—depending on his argumentational need—the holon's being in time. At least one of the three should always match.

This may be illustrated by the following passage:

[R]eality is fundamentally composed—not of particles, quarks, dimensionless points, strings, or membranes—but of *holons*. A holon is a whole that is simultaneously a part of other wholes. For example, a whole quark is part of a whole proton; a whole proton is part of a whole atom; a whole atom is part of a whole molecule; a whole molecule is part of a whole cell, which is part of a whole organism, which is part of the whole Kosmos. . . (Wilber 2000a: 143.)

This sequence starting from subatomic particles and leading via atoms, molecules and cells to organisms and from there to the Kosmos is a very common enumeration of Wilber, used to illustrate his idea of a development proceeding in steps and occasions of emergence (cf. Wilber 2001: 67; Wilber 2000b: 69, 94). Leaving aside the extremely difficult passage from being an individual living organism to being the whole Kosmos, one could assume that having arrived at the Kosmos, Wilber would have trouble continuing the sequence. For what could still be added to the Kosmos? Yet, if the Kosmos itself is perceived as a holon, it should be a part of another whole. Here the equivocal coinage

'holon' can demonstrate its power of an argumentational *passe-partout*. Using it, Wilber has no problem to continue the passage saying:

. . .which is part of the whole of the Kosmos of the next moment, and so ad infinitum. . .What *all* of those entities are, before they are anything else, are holons—they are all whole/parts. The Kosmos is made of holons . . .[E]ach higher level of holons has emergent qualities that cannot be derived from, nor totally reduced to its junior levels—and this gives us the Kosmos, not merely the cosmos. (Wilber 2000a: 143.)

It is obvious that to try to show that equivocation is to be found at each crucial point of Wilber's theory would be a much too ambitious enterprise, which needs to be carried out elsewhere.² The sceptics among the readers should at least be chastened by the fact that holons constitute the bricks of the Kosmos according to his theory. Finding diverse definitions being used in a mixed up fashion is a fatal discovery. Only to accept that this central term is used equivocally within his theory should oblige the reader to check for each usage of the term holon, which concept Wilber actually applies, to subsequently test if his argumentation fits with that specific concept or not, and to reflect what, given the various different concepts of 'holon', in the end it can reasonably mean to say that the Kosmos is made up of holons.

The elements located within his theory

I come to the last point, which is the second place where integration can be found. It consists of all the entities that Wilber's framework is able to address. These entities are not inferred from the theory, but the theory is somehow able to offer a place for them, indeed for virtually everything that exists: to locate it, to name its level, its specific quadrant, in which it is located and so forth. Wilber praises this capacity of his theory as an enormous achievement, of even historical significance:

An IOS [which is just a synonym for the Integral Theory] can be used to help index any activity—from art to dance to business to psychology to politics to ecology to spirituality—it allows each of those domains to

2 On a list of equivocally defined terms, that are at the same time central for the Integral Theory, one will find at least the entries: 'holon', 'matter', 'depth', 'infinity', 'self'/'Self', 'identity', 'transcendence', 'the One'/'Nondual'/'Deity'/'Spirit', 'quadrant' and 'integral'.

talk to the others. Using IOS, business has the terminology with which to communicate fully with ecology, which can communicate with poetry and education and medicine and spirituality. In the history of humankind, this has never really happened before. (Wilber 2007: 3.)

How does Wilber achieve this integration? If it is true that his theory is able to provide a place for everything that exists—and we will assume that it is true—that integrative power ought to be based on the three axes of his framework: they would have to reflect the ascribed integrative power by ranging over virtually everything. So let us one more time have a brief and last look at the different axes.

Vertical axis

On the vertical axis Wilber arranges everything according to its level of development. The integrative power thus lies in the fact that everything can be arranged on a certain scale, especially if that scale starts at zero and is open-ended, or if it's open-ended at both sides. In the same way we could easily arrange all the objects of a given universe on a scale, listing, for example, the number of their corners, the amount of batteries that they contain, or the number of laptops they possess. Nothing really changes if instead we take a scale that is open-ended at both sides, be it a time-scale, a scale of debit and credit, or a scale of the production and consumption of CO₂. As long as we choose a somehow quantifiable property as the order criterion, all entities of a given universe may be mapped on them—including entities that don't possess that property, as long as a tick mark for zero exists.

Horizontal axes

What about the horizontal axes? Why are they able to encompass everything? The answer here is not too complicated either: The easiest way to point to all

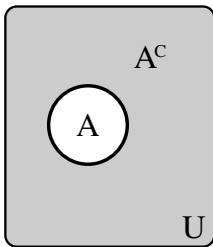


Figure 6. A universe U consisting of a set A and its complement A^C .

the elements of a given universe is to pick some out and take them in the one hand, holding the rest in the other. One could say for example: 'I take these two elements—and the rest.' Expressed in more technical terms, this procedure consists in taking a certain set and its complement. Since the complement of a given set A is defined as those elements of a given universe U , that don't belong to A (i.e. $U = A \cup A^C$), you always get the whole universe, if you take a set and its complement (see Figure 6).

So covering the whole universe requires no mental peak performance at all. We could, for example, take all lively things and all unlively; or all apples and the rest; or we could take—and thereby we come back to the Integral Theory—all interior things and all exterior things, all sets containing only one element and all sets containing more than one element (leaving aside empty sets here).

The highly praised integrative power of Wilber's framework thus turns out to be nothing more than the easiest way to address a given universe. What Wilber's vertical and horizontal axes consist in can be reduced to a common denominator, which in technical terms one might call mutually exclusive and exhaustive distinctions.

Having understood that simple principle, we might off-the-cuff create a concurrent, alternative, three-dimensional framework that *in terms of its integrative capacity* would be equivalent to Wilber's framework. We might choose age as our vertical axis, take 'lively entities' and 'unlively entities' as distinctions of the first horizontal axis and distinguish between those entities having lungs and those without lungs on the other horizontal one. This alternative 'framework' would be equally integral to Wilber's framework.³ Of course, it would differ in terms of the theories used to make up the framework itself—the part that we have treated in the first place. But in the same sense as is the case for Wilber's theory, everything could be integrated by means of this framework: all that exists, all entities could be captured by it, no matter if you call them 'holons', 'entities' or just 'things'. In the same sense as is the case with Wilber's Integral Theory, you could name their exact address, give their exact coordinates, name their place.

Final remarks

This short reflection aims at disenchanting the hymns sung for the integral capacity of Wilber's and others' integral theories. To create an integral framework in the sense mentioned, is child's play. It is independent of the number of axes used for that framework. The distinction children draw when saying 'you take X, I take the rest', is just as exhaustive. Only the identity of the chosen universe might differ, by being, for example, a cake rather than a 'Kosmos'.

3 Note that 'integral' is another equivocal term in Wilber's theory. To say that the alternative framework would be equally integral applies only to the sense of being 'exhaustive', in which it has been used in that chapter. A different meaning was mentioned already in the context of the vertical axis, where 'integral' denotes one of the levels of development.

There is a second point. A judgement about the integrative power of a theoretical framework falls short as long as it concentrates on the mere fact of being integral. Integral as well as non-integral theoretical frameworks need to prove their soundness by showing the usefulness, the fruitfulness, the practical utility of the concrete distinctions they draw. Being integral is a possible property of a theoretical framework, but not a value in itself. An integral framework may draw useful distinctions as well as futile or silly ones, as I hope to have shown. The same is true for non-integral frameworks. Thus integral theories as such don't already trump non-integral ones, just because they're integral. Instead their advantages are yet to be shown.

Summary

To put it in a nutshell, the answer to the question 'what is Wilber's method of integration?' is twofold:

- 1) Concerning the fabric of the framework itself, it is mainly the equivocal use of terms.
- 2) Concerning the entities sorted into this framework, it is to draw mutually exclusive and exhaustive distinctions.

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