

## **On Being Critical: The Role of the Doubting Thomas**

*One night during the weekend in Niederursel I had a wonderful (for me at least) discussion with Monika Fruehwirth and Dennis Wittrock. Among other things we touched on the topic of criticism and how "the Wilber critic" label is used within integral communities. Monika asked me to write down some of my thoughts on this issue. My view is that criticism plays a fundamental role in the validation of knowledge produced in all fields of life. Consequently, healthy communities of all kinds encourage and provide forums for criticism and for the process of producing critical analysis. When we do not support the development of critical voices or when we discourage or ignore criticism we deny ourselves an opportunity for greater insight into what we are, what we stand for and what we can hold as true, just, good and beautiful in the world. I also believe that it is especially important for those engaged in integral approaches to understand how rational and scientific criticism can contribute to the emergence of integral disciplines and their theories, methods and practices.*

### **Introduction**

Ken Wilber has made clear his views on how to read the critics of his work in several places (see, for example, the Shambhala website, the Frank Visser website and the many responses he has made to critics over the years). I agree with Wilber on many of his views towards criticism (e.g. that many critics simply do not understand his work) but I also differ on many others (e.g. that a critic needs to be in direct contact with Ken to really understand his work – see also Frank Visser's site for my response to Ken's concerns). In the following I want to consider a slightly different aspect of this issue of the "the Wilber critic" and broaden the discussion into looking at the role of the critic in general. The questions I ask are these – What role might criticism play in the development of the integral vision? How should integral communities of various kinds look at and deal with "the critic"?

Let me start this with a quote from Sir Bertrand Russell,

In studying a philosopher, the right attitude is neither reverence nor contempt, but first a kind of hypothetical sympathy, until it is possible to know what it feels like to believe in his theories, and only then a revival of the critical attitude, which should resemble, as far as possible, the state of mind of a person abandoning opinions which he has hitherto held. Contempt interferes with the first part of this process, and reverence with the second. Two things are to be remembered: that a man whose opinions and theories are worth studying may be presumed to have had some intelligence, but that no man is likely to have arrived at complete and final truth on any subject whatever. (Russell, 1961, p. 58)

Now I must admit that, as a keen student of Wilber's opinions and theories for well over 20 years, I have much more than a "hypothetical sympathy" for his work. It might be truer to say that I have a passionate empathy for his writings and philosophy. But, at the same time, I also hold a very strong "critical attitude" towards Ken's work. The above quote from Bertrand Russell points out that for the authentic student of ideas sympathetic understanding and critical analysis stand side-by-side. I am sure Wilber would agree with Russell on this point. He would also agree with Russell (and, in fact, as he has said in many different ways) that no person (or community) will develop a (and here I quote Russell) "complete and final truth on any subject whatever". Wilber has pointed out many times that his ideas are a "work in progress" – the progression of "Wilber phases" is enough evidence of that. However, I also believe that Wilber's integral philosophy is by far the best framework we have for developing a more sophisticated understanding (and experience) of our contemporary world and the serious problems it faces. As an enthusiastic student of Wilber's ideas I agree with Russell that real scholarship includes both understanding (standing under) as well as criticism (standing apart). Sympathetic understanding without criticism tends towards reverential, unqualified acceptance. Critical analysis without sympathetic understanding often turns into intellectual contempt and arrogance. Wilber's ideas are certainly worthy of neither of these reactions. And neither of these views has much to do with a scientific approach to scholarship. Discerning criticism and engaged empathy are two essential requirements for the individual student and the community of "scholars" in both theory and practice, in both the world of pure science and the world of applied action, in both the rarefied space of philosophical debate and in the real space of everyday activity. So I affirm the importance of "the critic" for the integral community of scholars, practitioners, organisers, doers, writers, etc.

### **Definitions (naturally)**

The word "critic" comes (via the Latin "criticus") from the Greek words "kritikos" to discern, "kritos", to judge, from "krinein", to separate. We see elements of these words in the English words "crisis", "critic", "criterion" and "endocrine". From these roots the English word "critic" has developed several meanings. Lets take, for example the following set of meaning from the American Heritage Dictionary:

A critic is: 1. One who forms and expresses judgments of the merits, faults, value, or truth of a matter. 2. One who specializes in the evaluation, review and appreciation of literary or artistic works: a film critic; a dance critic. 3. One who tends to make harsh or carping judgments; a faultfinder.

The first definition is related to the process of establishing the veracity of something through logic and observable evidence. It includes, among other things, the rational and scientific validation of an idea, a theory, a factual claim, or a statement of explanation. It deals with the exterior quadrants

and so often involves scientific method. The second definition has much more to do with interpretation, intent and emotional response and attempts to establish the beauty, meaning, quality or subjective worth of something. The focus here is on the interior quadrants and on the validation of the cultural value of something. These are the two very broadest roles that criticism plays – as a process for establishing what is “true” and as a means for proclaiming what is “beautiful” (see Figure 1). Both these processes, validating exterior truth and interior quality are extremely difficult to do well and often fall far short of their best intentions. Scientific criticism and artistic criticism can both become matters of narrow judgementalism and prejudicial faultfinding. Hence, the third definition of “criticism” as a rather narrow-minded preoccupation with whatever is regarded to be deficient in some way.

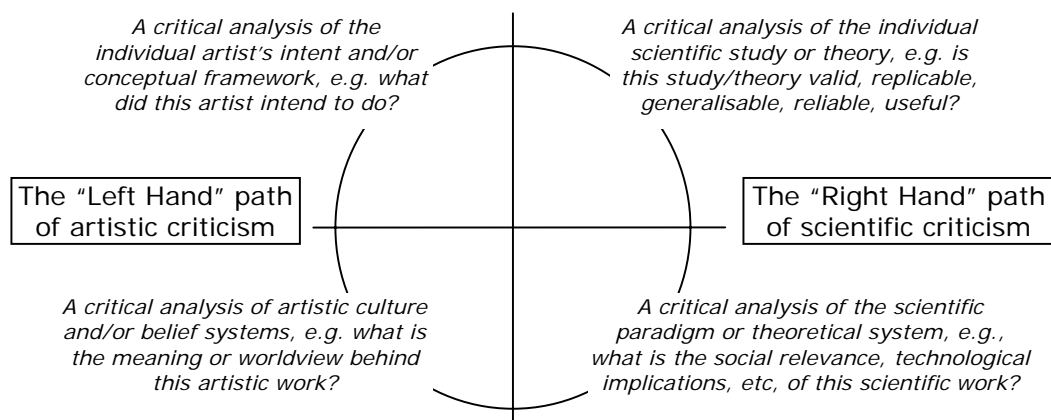


Figure 1: Artistic and scientific criticism

It's this third definition – the inveterate faultfinder - that seems to somewhat of a concern within some integral communities at this time. Of the faultfinding critic we might sometimes be drawn to agree with Dale Carnegie's view that, "Any fool can criticize, condemn, and complain - and most fools do." Sometimes we attribute to the "Wilber critic" the unconscious motivation that they are "Wilber wannabies". In this sense we see criticism, as Emmet Fox puts it, as "an indirect form of boasting". Sometimes we see criticism of integral ideas as a judgmental faultfinding masquerading behind a cloak of plausible arguments.

Whatever we might assume about the motives of the faultfinding critic it is crucial that they not be lumped together with the genuine critic of ideas. It is very important for the development of any authentic body of knowledge that avenues for critical comment be encouraged and that criticism be valued and not simply condemned as a question of sour grapes. This is true for criticism that comes from the inside (writers/thinkers who come from an integral perspective) as well as from the outside (writers/thinkers who come from a different philosophical or academic paradigm). Because integral theory covers so much territory it is likely that any critic will have some expertise in some part of the framework, be that developmental psychology,

sociology, physics, philosophy, comparative religion, etc. Faultfinding and reasoned criticism come from very different places. Confusing the two often says more about our own maturity and motivations than it does about the critic.

### **The “critic of integral theory” and the “Wilber critic”**

I use the term “integral theory” or “integral model” in the same way that Wilber does. For me integral theory refers to the body of propositions and principles represented in the writings of Ken Wilber. He variously calls this body of propositions “integral theory”, “the integral model”, and “AQAL”. As he says,

The integral model that I am proposing--namely, “all-level, all-quadrant”--attempts to provide a framework in which all of those “facts,” if you will, can be accommodated.

(Collected Works, “Introduction to Volume 8”)

Ken offers us a “critical integral theory” and it is this body of work that I have critically evaluated from time to time (for example, see Edwards, 2002). While there are many forms of “integral” and many different “integral approaches” to many different topics (see Cacioppe & Edwards, 2005), when we think of something called “integral theory” or “integral philosophy” or “the integral framework” or an “integral approach” we generally mean some formulation of the ideas expressed in Wilber’s books. While there are many different authors who propose some element(s) of an integral approach, none of them have the same scope or detail as Wilber’s AQAL or IOS frameworks. To this extent “integral theory”, as we now know it, is virtually synonymous with “the writings of Ken Wilber”. To propose an integral approach to some topic without reference to Ken Wilber’s ideas is neither possible nor desirable. At present, to understand and explain what an “integral approach” means is to understand and explain Wilber’s writings on what constitutes an “integral approach”. Consequently, we tend to assume that to be a critic of “integral theory” means precisely the same thing as to be a “Wilber critic”. In the following I would like to disentangle this rather unhelpful association.

As a student and practitioner of the social sciences part of my role within the broader integral community is, as I see it, to be an active “critic of integral theory” but this does not mean that I am a “Wilber critic”. Equating these two very different activities confuses the important task of critical evaluation with the rather mean-spirited task of faultfinding. It also confuses scientific criticism of Wilber’s writings with an *ad hominem* and judgemental form of criticism that is directed against the person of Ken Wilber. I want to support critical appraisal of integral theory and separate this from criticism of the person or intentions, or motivations and so on. Some critics (see Frank Visser’s Reading Room for examples) have made the unfortunate mistake of mixing up these two forms of criticism. Where the rational criticism of ideas

further the goals of science, *ad hominem* critiques have nothing whatsoever to do with science. We need to distinguish between, and not equate, these two types of criticism – the crucial role of “the integral theory critic” on the one hand and the irrelevant role of the “Wilber critic” on the other. The two roles are independent. Unhooking these two forms of criticism helps us to stop labelling the critic of integral theory as “a Wilber critic”. It seems strange to say something so entirely obvious, but nevertheless I point out that a critic can be completely supportive of Wilber and his work and yet, *at the same time*, be critical of some theoretical aspect of his writings.

### **From all sides**

Another general point also needs to be brought forward here. Wilber says that, “I have offered an ‘integral theory’ that I claim honors more types of truths than the alternatives” (Wilber, 2003, p. 58). This means that Integral theory recognises not only the valid truth claims of other theories and paradigms but also their limitations. Consequently, integral theory is likely to be criticised from all sides *because* of its integrative potential. And that is exactly how it should be. How those criticisms are considered and answered will be an important process for the development of integral approaches in general.

Wilber has made the point that he is offering a type of “critical integral theory.” The act of engaging with integral frameworks and methods is, by its very nature, an exercise in criticism. Any integrative endeavour involves a critical assessment of those views which it attempts to integrate. This is not only a theoretical issue. Integral theorists and practitioners work within their particular domains by recognising the valid truths and limitations of diverse views and by bringing them together into a wider embrace. Integral theory and practice is, by definition, a critical discipline. For example, the integral model of a “spectrum of consciousness” resulted from the critical assessment of the partiality of many theories of consciousness and their integration into a broader conceptual framework. The development of an Integral Transformative Practice came out of the critical recognition of the limitations of some spiritual disciplines and the benefits of bringing many different developmental and health practices together into a coherent approach. From this perspective, an integral engagement with any topic necessarily entails a type of critical mind and heart that is essential to any transformative theory or practice.

It’s my view that this type of critical inquiry lies at the very heart of every honest quest for what we might regard as true, good, beautiful and just. We all understand, I’m sure, the central place that critical inquiry, peer review and peer validation (confirmation, falsification, replication) hold for the scientific process. It is less acknowledged, however, that critical inquiry also forms the basis of many forms of contemplative discipline. In the Zen practice of koan study it is crucial that an inquiring, discriminating and critical edge be brought to the encounter with the koan. The figure of Manjushri

embodies this type of critical cutting off that discriminates practice from non-practice (this of course has nothing to do with judging the value of one's practice), that distinguishes between authenticity and pretension ("Miss this by a hair, And you are off by a thousand miles"). Criticism is part of the process of inquiry that occurs at every level of knowledge development.

Criticism and the critic also play central roles in our search for beauty. Speaking personally, my appreciation for the beauty and aesthetic depth of much of contemporary art is largely due to the critical writings of the renowned Australian art critic Robert Hughes. Criticism also drives our search for justice in the world. The critical theory of the Frankfurt School philosophers, including, of course, the seminal figure of Jurgen Habermas, is called "critical" because of its inherent capacity to critically analyse mainstream social and political systems of thought and practice. So, in all spheres of life and stages of development, the many faces of criticism lie at the core of the transformative process. Criticism and the critic are essential companions to any path that hopes to gain new insights into the booming, buzzing confusion that surrounds us. And this is particularly so for any discipline that might be called integral.

### **The dark side of (rejecting) criticism**

The dark side of criticism is that it can also degenerate into a mean-spirited faultfinding – Bertrand Russell's "intellectual contempt". It can become a narrow affair that is more about tearing something down than building something up. When identifying the weakness and partiality in someone's work dominates the critic's ability to see what is valid and useful then criticism becomes something much less than what it might be. Here, the constructive element in criticism is overshadowed by the deconstructive element. Obviously it is true that critics can often be too concerned with the negatives and with what is wrong in "the system". However, communities that do not value criticism also portray constructive critics in this light. They are regarded (branded) as "nay-sayers", oppositional, or fault-finders that don't really understand what they are talking about. They don't need to be heard, their criticism is invalid. In not valuing critics and criticism we run the risk of regarding "the critic" as something exterior to the community and as something superfluous to our core purpose. In seeing the critic as "other" we are, in fact, denying our community a vital source of energy for healthy transformation.

Critics may not simply be oppositional and deconstructive, they can also, of course, be simply wrong. Their criticism can be based on ignorance, misunderstanding and error. But the validity of criticism can only be ascertained if it has a place to be heard and is itself criticised in return. Healthy communities are ones where active debate and free discussion are present. Integral communities need to encourage forums for criticism to allow the rational process of debate to flourish rather than see criticism as a threat to the integral endeavour.

## **Criticism offers a crucial role at all stages of development**

Some conservative minded members of the integral community would perhaps like to just receive with reverence the various elements of integral theory as they fall from Ken's pen and not have them questioned. The dissociated rationalists among us would like to cross every "t" and dot every "i" in finding supporting evidence for every aspect of the AQAL model. The sensitive pluralists among us want every voice to be heard without criticism. Whatever our shadow-side predilections may be, the crucial thing is that at every level there needs to be multiple forums for validating, confirming, questioning, criticising, developing, expanding and contributing to the emergence of the integral vision. We can each contribute in our own way, and the analytical critic can contribute no less than the pragmatic implementer of the integral vision.

There are forms of criticism that play important roles at every stage of development, be they pre-conventional, conventional or transconventional. These forms of criticism function within the validative strand in Wilber's epistemological model. At every level of development criticism performs the role of testing, confirming and legitimating the knowledge that is disclosed by the methods, experiences and interpretations that are related to a particular developmental stage. Based on the epistemological models of Wilber, Habermas and Harre, I consider an integral approach to the development of knowledge as including the processes of injunction (UR), apprehension (UL), interpretation (LL) and validation (LR). This process describes what I call the Integral Cycle of Knowledge (see Figure 2). When any complex entity (holon) acquires knowledge all four quadrants are engaged in the learning process. Hence all learning, at every stage, involves the process of critical validation. One of the core aspects of the development of knowledge for any community (social holon) is the validation of our interpretations through peer group review and critical analysis. Those involved in this criticism must be trained in the discipline, or have experience of the knowledge that is being tested, or have some expertise in the data that is being disclosed through the relevant methodologies.

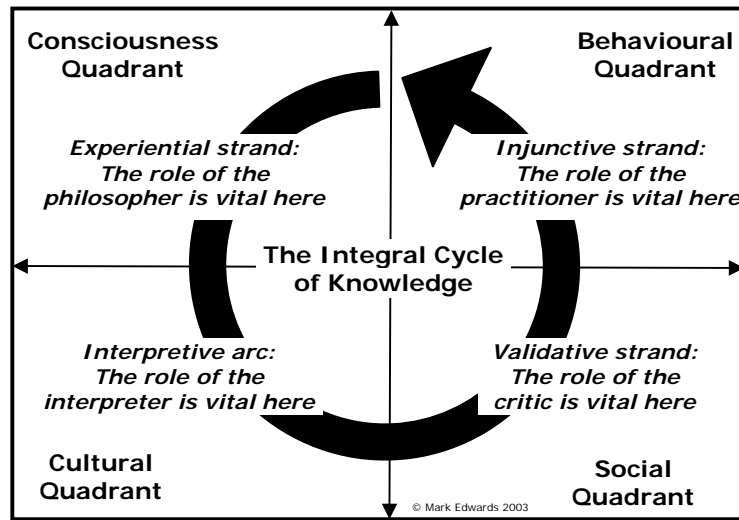


Figure 2: The Integral Cycle of Knowledge and Learning

In scientific domains these validational process also include systems to ensure that knowledge is critically evaluated. These critical systems of evaluation exist in traditional sciences, in modern sciences and in postmodern sciences. Consequently, supporting the critical voice in a community has nothing to do with levels, nothing to do with the GREEN MEME, nothing to do with pluralism, relativism, etc. It has every thing to do with being a mature community of seekers and with the development of knowledge. Table 1 gives an idea of the focus of criticism that operates within each developmental structure of consciousness.

Table 1: Consciousness structures and their critical focus

Consciousness Structure		The critical focus of each identity structure
Third Tier	Violet	How does this help me/us to be present?
Second Tier	Turquoise	How does this help me/us to flow?
	Teal	How does this help me/us to develop?
First Tier	Green	How does this help me/us to relate?
	Orange	How does this help me/us to understand?
	Amber	How does this help me/us to conform?
	Red	How does this help me/us to prosper?
	Magenta	How does this help me/us to belong?
	Infrared	How does this help me/us to survive?

Criticism can validly flow out of any of these motivations. They all have their place and we can do well to listen to the critical questions that derive from all the significant life concerns that we all must deal with as individuals and as social collectives.

## Criticism and the Rational

It seems that criticism and reasoned judgement have fallen on hard times recently. We see it in the fundamentalist attack on formal science, in the pluralist condemnation of the methods of conventional science, in the neo-conservatives desire to weaken parliamentary mechanisms for critical review, and we see it in the traditionalists assault on the independence of judicial process. While forms of criticism are inherent to the acquisition of knowledge at all stages of development, rational criticism and the scientific process of validating theories obviously culminates at the level of formal operative cognition. Consequently, in terms of human development, intellectual criticism is formally associated with the development of rationality, the world of scientific knowledge, with evidence-based reasoning and academic peer review. Our formal powers of critical judgement reach their peak in the rational individualism of midlife, in the collective realm of scientific modernity and in the rational world of egoic self-expression. These are certainly the hallmarks of formal cognitive structures for individuals and for social collectives. On either side of the critical rational-self we have the absolutism of the conformist membership-self and the pluralism of the relativist sensitive-self. In terms of chackra colours (using Ken's new colour system) we have the AMBER and the GREEN on either side of the ORANGE self-systems (see figure 3).

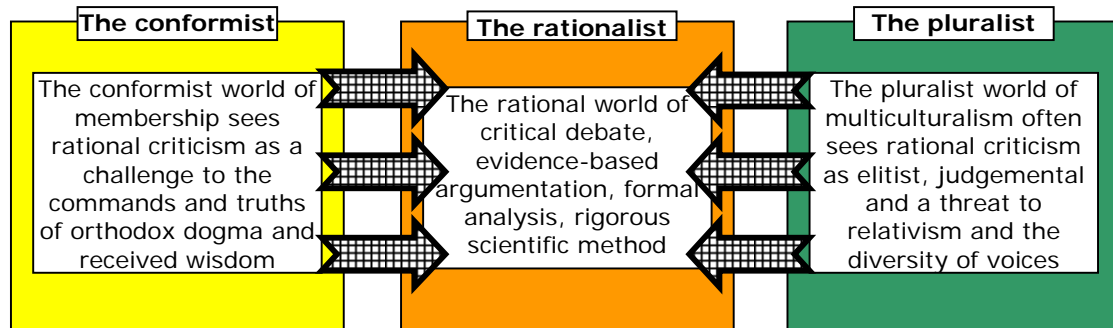


Figure 3: The hard times of rational criticism

Conformist AMBER structures often regard rational, evidence-based criticism as a challenge to authority, as a desecration of the absolute truth of "our values" and as heresy against "the tradition". The critical individualism of the rational self nails the 44 theses to the door of the AMBER institution and gets condemned for doing so. The immature pluralist self often takes rational, analytical criticism as a threat to the truth of relativism. The critical individualism of the rational self gets blamed for the destruction of the relativist paradise because it wants to analyse, criticise, judge and reduce whole to parts. Either way the traditional conservatives and romantic pluralists often condemn the world of rational and critical judgement. It is also true that the ORANGE rationalist critic is often unfairly critical of what is beautiful, good and true about the traditional and pluralistic realities

(amongst other things). Nevertheless, the world of rational criticism acts, in many ways, as a curative medicine to the pathologies of pre-conventional development (archaic, magic, mythic, traditional) and as a gate keeper and basic criteria for higher forms (pluralist, integrative, Kosmo-centric) of what is good, true and beautiful. In any event, the critical gifts of ORANGE are not being well received these days.

The gate-keeping role that ORANGE criticism plays for higher development is particularly important. In this regard I suggest that without the support of rational criticism post-conventional communities and disciplines run the risk of various pre-trans forms of collective pathologies and fixations. Because the higher stages of development are, by definition, post-formal they can, without the doubting Thomas' of rational criticism, often fall prey to the pressures of pre-conventional qualities. That is, they can often suppress conventional rational and egoic qualities in favour of forms of pre-conventional absolutism, and non-critical acceptance. In some spiritual we see the guru figure, the religious tradition or the spiritual community itself require that followers, students and practitioners leave behind the rational world of critical judgement, to deny their use of critical faculties and to take up "the Way" without critical judgement. The problem is that such demands can come out of the invalid and regressive domain of pre-conventional absolutism just as much as they can come from the developmentally valid demands of the transformative process itself. This is a large and complex issue and one not to be addressed here in any detail (see Anthony, Ecker & Wilber, 1987 for a great discussion on this topic). I only mention this here to point out the important role that the critical and "doubting Thomas" can play for the growth of any post-conventional community.

Too often rational criticism is not regarded as a healthy feature in post-conventional communities when, in fact, it plays one of the central roles in developing a "community of inquiry" that can move beyond the goals of conventionalism. For example, as Wilber has pointed out several times, it is a characteristic of some very developed traditions of spirituality for the rational mind to be engaged on a daily basis in intellectual study, critical debate and discursive reasoning as part of the contemplative life. Anselm said in his famous dictum "*fides quaerens intellectum*" - "Faith seeks understanding" - which can be taken to mean that the spiritual experience naturally engages our rationality; they are both essential involvements in the process of transformation. Similarly, integral communities need to include the rational, critical process to be truly transformative.

## **Conclusion**

The foregoing has been a call for integral communities to provide forums for critical debate and evaluation of "integral theory" in all its forms. This is not a task that Ken Wilber can perform alone nor is not a task that we should expect him to perform alone. It is a role that every community which

gathers around the integral vision can contribute to in a healthy and transformative way. Most of us will not be particularly interested in developing critical ideas about the AQAL framework or holons or whatever, and that is exactly how it should be. There are many other roles to be performed in every community of vision. However, all of us might consider that supporting "the critic" is a definitive part of what it means to be integral. Researchers, practitioners, students, armchair critics, professors, essay writers, editorial groups, organising bodies, consultants, teachers, interested readers and others (from both within and outside the integral and academic, professional and practitioner communities) who do offer criticism of integral theory (in all its forms) need to be seen as crucial contributors to the development of this important social movement. Criticism and active inquiry are two sides of the same process of learning and growth. It's my opinion that integral communities can only be developmental communities of inquiry when they support forums for criticism and indeed find and express their own critical voice.

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