

# **The Academic Emergence of Integral Theory: Reflections on and Clarifications of the 1<sup>st</sup> Biennial Integral Theory Conference.**

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## **Introduction**

As founders and organizers of the 1<sup>st</sup> Integral Theory Conference we feel moved to respond to Frank Visser's latest posting ("Assessing Integral Theory"). We do this in the spirit of dialogue and out of a sense that his characterization of our event was misleading and inaccurate in important ways. To be fair, Visser's article is less about the conference and more about what constitutes theory building and the checking of its validity. His main focus is on how Wilber has failed to build theory and have it validated in a scientific or academic fashion. We would like to raise several points relevant to this.

First, however, we would like to underscore that we agree with elements of Visser's article. We agree that Integral Theory (broadly defined or defined simply as Wilber's work) has not yet made strong enough inroads into the academic world. We recognize that the burden is on those of us engaged in Integral Theory to help it conform more strongly to the norms of academic discourse, research, and critical analysis.

Likewise, we agree, as academics, that Ken's writing has generally fallen in a place in between traditional academic discourse and more general popular philosophical discourse. While both of us feel greatly indebted to Ken for his obvious contribution to the Integral movement and honor the extent to which he has indeed sought empirical support (narrow and broad) for many of his ideas, we think that Visser rightly points out the challenges his writing style presents from an academic point of view.

Finally, we also agree that much value could have come out of Wilber engaging with patience and curiosity the various critiques the Integral World website has housed. We would be the first to read and study such dialogues closely were they to take place. And yet we recognize these squandered opportunities while simultaneously not being convinced that Wilber's silence has only been a matter of him being a self-referential jerk. Nor are we sure that the general lack of response by Wilber's students and proponents of his work is simply the result of them sleeping with the devil. We will address this issue further at the end of this essay.

All this said—and we believe these are some substantial areas of agreement—we also feel that Visser's overall characterization of the relationship between Integral Theory and academia misses the mark in several places. More centrally, we believe that his characterization of our conference as a place where "a kind of Wilber celebration is staged"—which we take to mean it will be an unthinking, uncritical, or idol-worshipping look at his work—is both inaccurate and demonstrates the same kind of dismissive tone that he has so vehemently charged Wilber with using with his critics. This accusation

appears especially cynical given that much of the conference has been explicitly and obviously designed to address the kind of critiques that Visser's website has showcased over the years. To us it was notable that he primarily highlighted the potential downsides of the conference (e.g., to be more of the same "self-referential discourse" he attributes to Wilber) without presenting much, if any, of its possible opportunities (e.g., the first open academic space that is beginning a much needed and arguably far overdue process of critical reflection and application of Integral Theory).

We would therefore like to outline a few points that give a more accurate view of the conference and to provide what we feel is a more balanced impression—in the context of discussing the conference—of the relationship between Integral Theory and academia. We will end this response with some of our concerns with the quality and nature of the work found on the Integral World website itself.

### **Critics and Our Call for Papers**

The conference's call for papers was open and decimated widely. It was sent to all the major alternative schools, including those which house significant numbers of Wilber's critics (e.g., CIIS in San Francisco). It was sent out through all available Integral email lists and groups and it was posted, by direct request by us, on Visser's website. We were hoping to get between 50 and 70 submissions and were pleasantly surprised when nearly 120 came in from 11 different countries.

The call specifically stated we were open to critiques of AQAL and alternatives to Wilber's model. We simply did not hear anything—even in the form of a cautious inquiry—from many of those persons who are most identified as Wilber's critics as posted on Visser's site. We did not hear from Andrew Smith, Christian De Quincy, Alan Kazlev, Jeff Meyerhoff, Ray Harris, Gerry Goddard, Peter Collins, Michael Bauwens, John Heron, or Geoffrey Falk about the possibility of presenting or attending. We surely would have offered them a place had they contacted us.

Suffice it to say that given how much these individuals have highlighted the value of critical dialogue and academic standards it seemed somewhat ironic that none of them have chosen to participate in this venue, which took measures to ensure they would feel welcomed and not like they were walking into the pro-Wilber lion's den. A missed opportunity for sure. Furthermore, we personally contacted some of the persons we believe to be among the more articulate of Wilber's critics. These include Sean Kelly, Steve McIntosh, Bonnita Roy, and Mark Edwards (all of whom are attending and presenting) and Jorge Ferrer and Steven Taylor (both of whom declined). We also, as Visser knows, approached him and encouraged him to consider attending and would have been excited about him presenting. Visser's *Thought as Passion* is an amazing overview of Wilber's progression as a theorist and demonstrates his deep knowledge of his corpus.

Critical presentations will be featured at the event—we haven't pushed them under the rug, as Visser's essay would likely mislead one to believe. For example, Bill Torbert, who is perhaps our most prominent presenter excepting our keynote speakers, has titled

his presentation “Developmental Action Inquiry: An Approach That Actually Integrates Developmental Theory, Practice, and Research”. Please note the phrase “actually integrates”—this is a direct and open challenge to the AQAL approach and we were more than happy to allow him the forum to express his ideas. We are not simply giving him one shot at it either. In addition to their 90-minute presentation, Torbert and his team of co-presenters will be represented on one-third of our panel presentations.

### **Critical Panel Discussions**

We have set up two important panels that are aimed at exploring many of Visser’s concerns, which as noted above we share. The first one is “Does Integral = Ken Wilber?” This will be a provocative discussion. The majority of the persons on this panel (Torbert, Edwards, Roy, McIntosh) have been critical of Wilber, so we have weighted this discussion with people who are inclined to say “NO!” And since one of us is moderating the panel (Sean), we can guarantee that we will dig under the surface of a simple “no” and explore the deeper implications of Wilber’s relationship to the field of Integral Theory.

One of the major aims of the conference in general and this panel in particular is to decouple Ken Wilber and Integral Theory. We bring a deep honoring of what Wilber has enacted through his writings and activities and an excited anticipation of any new writings he generates. He is without a doubt the most important theorist associated with Integral Theory and there is no reason to assume this will change anytime soon. But to this orientation we also bring a desire to make sure Integral Theory receives the benefit of many contributors. In other words, we don’t want Integral Theory to be a “one man show.” We are fine with “Wilberian Theory” being synonymous with “Integral Theory” as long as “Wilberian Theory” is understood to mean “AQAL Theory” and not meant as “Ken’s Theory.” So while Wilber might be the originator of Integral Theory, as Freud is the originator of psychoanalysis, he does not own Integral Theory. In our view Integral Theory will only thrive insofar as valuable contributions to its criticism, clarification, application, and expansion come from many individuals working within its context and not just taking aim from the outside (e.g., by people who have never really tried applying AQAL to some contemporary issue). While we welcome insights from “outside” it is our experience that they are of less value than those that come from a committed place to improve Integral Theory by turning Integral Theory onto itself: an act of theoretical-applied self-reflection.

For us Integral Theory is bigger than Wilber, even though Wilber is a big, important, and valuable figure within Integral Theory. Our experience of the Integral World website is that it primarily focuses on Ken Wilber and less so on Integral Theory. In this sense the previous name “World of Ken Wilber” feels more appropriate than the new name of “Integral World.” We find much of website to be Wilber-centric and caught up in assigned failings and limits of Wilber’s personality. This website serves an important function in the ecology of Integral Theory but in our assessment it is a narrow and limited contribution. Our conference is not about Ken Wilber. It is about Integral Theory. This makes it markedly different than the three-day gathering in San Francisco in 1997.

The second panel worth noting here is the one on “Integral Theory in Academia” which is filled with long standing academics, six of whom have Ph.D.’s and 1 of whom is a doctoral candidate. The focus of this panel will be to explore the possibilities and pitfalls of Integral Theory building inroads to the academy. We hope to identify valuable next steps for Integral Theory in becoming a more established academic field of discourse.

Finally, it is worthwhile to mention that our two keynotes are exploring important topics that have been under-addressed in Integral circles. Roger Walsh will be talking in part about the forms Integral shadow takes in individuals and the community. Susanne Cook-Greuter will be talking about the spectrum of narcissism from birth up through the highest structure-stages. Both of these addresses are aimed at bringing a reflective quality to the emerging community of Integral academics.

### **Integral Theory’s Presence In Academia**

While we agree Integral has not yet achieved nearly the penetration into academic circles that it could—and, as a part of the Integral community, we accept responsibility for this—we also feel that the gap Visser describes between academia and Integral is neither as daunting nor as empirically real as he suggests. A quick look at our presenter biographies shows that a large number of them have current, academic affiliations and even more have come through mainstream academic graduate programs. Excluding the alternative programs (ITP, CIIS, JFK, Fielding) our presenters are currently affiliated with Harvard University, Stanford University, Columbia University, Penn State College of Medicine, Boston College, University of Rochester, Florida St. University, University of California, California State University, Augusta State University, University of Pennsylvania, University at Albany, National University, and Cleveland State University. And this is just the U.S. contingent: the vast majority of our international presenters are also academically affiliated in their countries of origin.

Clearly, unless we want to be disingenuous or dismiss evidence we do not want to see, there is some real connection being made between academics and Integral Theory. It may be just a beginning—this remains to be seen—but it is demonstrably real. Our current estimate suggests that upwards of 50 academic disciplines have individuals (many of them professors) within them now applying and using Integral Theory and the AQAL model to address issues in their fields.

Recently, one of us (Sean) wrote about the academic status of Integral Theory in the editorial for the last issue of the *Journal of Integral Theory and Practice* (Vol 3, No 1). In a section entitled “Integral Theory as Academic Contender” it was discussed how in the last few years Integral Theory has made significant steps towards becoming a viable academic field through the establishment of: peer reviewed journals (JITP and Integral Review); accredited graduate level academic programs (5 programs at JFKU, 2 at Fielding Graduate University, and 1 at CIIS—not to mention the many individual academics in various institutions teaching courses based in full or part on the AQAL model); a biennial academic conference – the first of which is a sold-out success with 100

presenters, 12 panels, 20 poster presentations, and almost 500 attendees (including presenters) from over 20 countries; and an academic research center, the Integral Research Center, which is supporting the global community of integral scholar-practitioners engaged in research based on Integral Methodological Pluralism. Soon the IRC website will list nearly a dozen research projects occurring all over the world using Integral Theory as its framework. [Note: the editorial can be downloaded and read from here: <http://www.integralresearchcenter.org/journal.html>]

### **The Importance of Real World Application for Academic Study and Research.**

In his essay, Visser makes the suggestion that the conference's emphasis on application will result in "application [being] mistaken for validation." We feel that this is both highly dismissive and also demonstrates a significant misunderstanding on Visser's part concerning the relationship between application, academia, and critical discourse.

As persons who have actively worked to apply the model in practice (in education, research, ecology/sustainability, and psychotherapy) we have experienced that the realm of application is often exactly the context in which the flaws in theoretical models become obvious. In our call for papers, for example, we specifically asked that those presenting on application address alternatives to AQAL and point out elements of the Integral approach that do not work or that need modification. This is our experience with any responsible group of practitioners who attempt to apply a model "on the ground"—they are often the first to spot the flaws. We dare even suggest that persons who focus on theoretical issues are often (ironically) less capable in their ability to think critically about the real limits of theory than those who are called to work and serve actual persons and communities.

It is worth noting in this context that most of the critics associated with [www.integralworld.net](http://www.integralworld.net) are not scholar-practitioners of the AQAL model or IMP. Rather, they mostly take issue with theoretical aspects of Wilber's work, often through a hermeneutics of suspicion with a deconstructionist tone. All of this is fine and valuable—our point is that the critics associated with Visser's website take up only *one* aspect of the project that we are engaged in. They do not address the issue of making Integral Theory more viable through peer-reviewed research or real-time real-world application.

In addition, Visser's mention of the idea of "validation" in the above quote misses the actual academic meaning of that word. To validate something in an academic context is primarily an empirical exercise—one cannot, by definition, validate something through anecdotal agreement. As academics we know this lesson well and would never presume that a gathering of practitioners proves anything definitively. One must show through some kind of research that a particular model "works" and that it accurately describes a particular issue. Hence the recent establishment of the Integral Research Center, which was created to help address this aspect.

But we also feel that when Visser does correctly discuss the empirical nature of validation he is too narrowly focused on the "scientific" and falls short of an integral

assessment of Integral Theory. In fact, Jorge Ferrer—one of Wilber’s strongest critics—has highlighted the dangers of such a scientific colonization of validity criteria. We want to see and promote a multi-method assessment (e.g., something like IMP) of Integral Theory and its distinctions, claims, and positions. This of course would give “scientific theory” a prominent place at the validity table; but there are many other considerations as well, especially when dealing with meta-theories like AQAL. See the forthcoming article by Mark Edwards in JITP (Vol. 3, No. 2) for a thoughtful and critical exploration of these issues in relationship to Integral Theory and the AQAL model.

In this sense, then, we take the issue of validation seriously and have consciously sought to demonstrate this in our actions related to the conference. We are giving an award specifically for the best research contribution. A good portion of the conference proceeds will go to giving of grants to fund research projects related to Integral Theory (through the Integral Research Center). Also, one of our panels will be specifically on the topic of developmental research. Far from being a unitary chorus, we will have representatives of three different research lineages on this panel and plan to draw out their empirical and theoretical differences (with Mark as moderator). Our surveys suggest that this will be among our best-attended sessions.

Finally, anyone familiar with academic outcome research knows that one ultimately needs an active body of practitioners to begin to do significant research into a construct or set of interventions. To try and validate a particular approach to community development, sustainability, organizational development, business, medicine, or psychotherapy—to try and show in a meaningful way that it does what it claims to—requires that there be a large enough group of practitioners to attract grants, funds, and the interest to carry out research. There was not large-scale research on cognitive therapy before there were cognitive therapists or on meditation before there were meditators. Nor can one research a community intervention until it is up and running in communities. What does Visser suggest? As we see it we need to build a critical mass of practitioners and attract research funds through in part large gatherings at which to exchange ideas and encourage attempts at application. We are doing what is done in every other applied academic field. We see the application aspect of this conference as a part of the larger process of empirical research, not as an attempt to congratulate ourselves on how well we think this approach works.

### **Our Criticisms of [www.IntegralWorld.net](http://www.IntegralWorld.net)**

One of the things that strikes us as most ironic about Visser’s criticisms is that the very ones he applies to Wilber can be applied equally, or even more forcefully, to the content posted on his site. This is the reason that we do not place entire blame for a lack of critical debate at Wilber’s feet. From an academic standpoint the Integral World website lacks peer review and as a result many of the critiques—while worthwhile—are presented in a way that would *never* be accepted in an academic context. So for many of us academics it is hard to discover the gems of this website because they are buried in rhetoric that all too often lacks the rigor, appropriate citation, self-reflectivity, and openness that it accuses Wilber of lacking. On many occasions we have heard academic

colleagues—and we resonate with their perspective—describe the material on this website as “toxic,” “emotive,” “narcissistic,” “self-referential” and so on—as we all know all these characteristics have been assigned to Wilber on this very website. Our point here is simply that as academics we want a different kind of discourse than what either Wilber or the Integral World website offers. We find both unsatisfactory in many respects. The tone and approach of each “party” falls short in several ways of academic exchange and exploration. Our conference is intended specifically to provide a forum for a calmer and more sober debate to occur. At our conference we are excited to celebrate Wilber, there is so much to be joyful about, and equally jazzed to critique Integral Theory, there is much important improvement and clarification to be done, particularly with application.

### **Conclusion**

It is our hope that this response makes clearer the intentions that the conference has in terms of addressing the kinds of issues that are important for the continued growth, refinement, and expansion of Integral Theory. In whatever ways this first conference falls short of our desired goals, we will take those lessons into the next conference in 2010. We are committed to continual development of Integral Theory as an academic endeavor that is supported by a diverse chorus of scholar-practitioners involved in generating integral solutions to the complex problems we face in our communities and around the globe. If you are not joining us for this year’s event, may you be inspired to join us at the next.