

A Paradigmatic Review of Integral Ecology

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When coming to the text *Integral Ecology*, one encounters the articulation of a new paradigm for ecology postulated by Sean Esbjörn-Hargens and Michael E. Zimmerman based upon the underlying ideas of Ken Wilber. Articulating any paradigm requires five central delimitations to be met.¹ The first is the underlying logic of the paradigm, whereby a paradigm's arguments have both order and sequence and are derived through inductive and/or deductive means.² Secondly, the paradigm's epistemology must be defined, including a specific examination of how the paradigm defines how and what can be known and not known³, as well as the relationship between the knower and the researcher, whom Ponterotto terms the "would-be knower"⁴. Thirdly, the paradigm must have an articulated axiology, whereby the values around which the paradigm's inquiry or application revolve⁵ or what is "worth understanding and transforming"⁶. Fourth, ontology, "the ultimate nature and relations of being"⁷ and "abstractions that define a thing to be what it is"⁸ or simply put the nature of reality⁹ must be defined. And fifth to be articulated is the paradigm's methodology or the techniques believed to best elucidate the phenomena to be studied and that are informed by the previous criteria.¹⁰ I would add a sixth category of paradigmatic definition when examining this text of its cosmological positions, defined as how this new view of ecology accounts for the origins of the reality it seeks to know.¹¹ Through a paradigmatic analysis of

this text we have a way of specifically elucidating the positions, values, beliefs and assumptions of the text that seeks to encourage, and rightly so, the need for taking multiple perspectives into consideration when addressing the complex human and non-human and landscape relationships.

At the level of logic, Integral Ecology is presented as a tried-and-tested theory.¹² The very term “theory” implies, despite the authors’ resistance to empiricism, that it will unfold a largely substantiated collection of research and a general consensus from a number of expert individuals. It does not. While the text is organized in such a way as to orient the reader to Wilberian thought, we never quite move from this position. When references are required to substantiate an assertion of truth they are either: (a) entirely absent, such as when the authors assert “even though different lines develop at different rates, we can speak abstract of an overall center of gravity. For instance a 2-year-old will have a very different emotional and moral capacity than an 18-year-old or a 56-year-old”¹³; or (b) they are sparsely utilized and frequently framed through how Wilber previously utilized them, which Adams has described as being a “non-representative use of sources” and counterarguments.¹⁴ Indeed, the only supporting “evidence” they can ultimately produce are three studies which fail to: (a) meet the fundamental condition of the very theory they utilize (interiority; all rely on applying the multi-perspective framework to humans only and relying strictly upon a more traditional definition of ecology and

empiricism for elucidation of the environmental impacts; thereby excluding the possibility of interiority of the actual non-human others involved in the study); and (b) produce any discussion on why they opted to utilize Wilber's framework. Indeed, Riddell's research went so far as to lack critical self-reflection as to why her mode of intervention did not produce the desired and recommended scope of protected land.¹⁵ We are further left in a logical quagmire when attempting to discern how the authors and Wilber determined what ecology is. Relying largely on one researcher's book, they determine that ecology is not defined and therefore they feel free to define it in such a way as to conflate and subsequently obscure any discipline, philosophy, religion or modern movement that has co-opted the term ecology or the "eco-" prefix with the underlying justification that they are creating a meta-framework.¹⁶ In short, their text, while organized, comes across to this reader as logically incoherent.

There are two epistemological issues that emerge within this text that are worth examination, one which I do believe raises a positive epistemological direction; the other a bright yellow-caution sign. What this book does do, and does it well—if not somewhat overly complexly, is emphasize a way of knowing the world that stresses both objective and subjective, exterior and interior perspectives. Drawing upon empiricism and phenomenological (as examples) philosophical traditions, the writers and Wilber by extension have touched on something that is only trickling into modern science and not yet in modern

scientific ecology.¹⁷ The closest and largely comparable evidence of the deliberate merging of these states is in the growing use of mix-methods, which can be grounded within a mixture of philosophical traditions that support both quantitative (and thus empiricist) and qualitative (and thus phenomenological, for example) modes. While the underlying logic and over-arching aspects to the authors' interior/exterior perspectives is problematic, the emphasis on adopting this mixed way of knowing the world is beneficial—this epistemological position is well elucidated in their discussion encouraging a broadening of accepted research methodological systems. However, the cautionary epistemological issue is the underlying assumption that integral ecology, indeed the over-arching integral movement, can ultimately know everything, being limited only by: the actual individuals' developmental stages, narrow or lower-level developed perspectives, or simply shallow frameworks. In this we have an epistemological confirmation that the only limitation to knowledge is one's self and whether one lives in a "Constitutional democracy," which is a developed framework that serves to "create circumstances for interior development".¹⁸ This also speaks to an underlying axiology, where the individual "I" is a pinnacle value as are humans in general (something I will return to shortly). I personally agree with this notion, but then I live in the United States, and like many holding European-Western values, I pride myself on individualism.¹⁹ This is my personal ethnocentric bias, not an ontological argument. Yet, while the authors decry the literally nameless multicultural

critics, who argue against hierarchical models²⁰, they ultimately display their own ethnocentrism (not worldcentrism) quite clearly. Adams specifically critiqued this developmental model, writing that: the ultimate stage of consciousness (and thus the penultimate stage of development achievable only by humans) of a complete and full understanding of the kosmos, was a logical fallacy.

Non-dualism can only represent the highest form of religious awareness, if there is no reality outside of or in addition to the non-dual Kosmos; Wilber cannot confirm the non-existence of such a reality beyond the non-dual Kosmos, and therefore, at best, he should confine himself to the position of a non-dual agnostic, taking no position regarding the existence or non-existence of a reality or Being to which he does not have access through any level of the spectrum of consciousness.²¹

Adams' quote ultimately introduces two other elements of the integral ecology paradigm that are examined: ontology and cosmology.

Ontologically, Integral Ecology adheres to Wilber's view of reality, known as the Kosmos. The nature of this penultimate reality is one of ever-increasing complexity and transcendence and inclusion; whereby human beings are the pinnacle species. They assert that "many agree that cosmic history and terrestrial history have evolved in ways consistent with how they are depicted in these four developmental quadrants"²²; but no cosmologist is listed. Thus the

ontological foundation of Integral Ecology is assumed to be real and largely universal. We find this ontological argument also extends into the veiled cosmological argument, whereby the direction of development is a reflection of a built-in purpose of existence. When we combine the ontological and cosmological platform together, we can infer the authors hold that human beings are the center of that emerging universe: “we maintain that humans are special, in part because humans are endowed with an interior depth that allows us to appreciate the value of nature!” and “only humans can have an ecological realization of ‘oneness’ with nature”.²³ How they have come to assert no other species is capable of this level of consciousness when we have no mode of assessing the interiorities of other species is a question this reviewer is left asking. However, these grand assertions merely reflect the underlying ontological and cosmological positions. This brings me to my concluding comments about the underlying paradigm and revolving around its axiology, the underlying values purported by this text.

Situating human beings as a pinnacle species is an axiological position; there is no current scientific evidence to my knowledge. Indeed, Richard Dawkins, a preeminent evolutionary biologist, has argued directly to the opposite that such a belief reflects a fundamental anthropocentrism.²⁴ Yet, the authors engage in a curious bait-and-switch with this value. They make two arguments, first the claim that environmentalists who hold a web-of-life view²⁵ both ignore the

interiority of Nature (that is a fundamental understanding of reality as symbolized by the capital “N” according to the authors—thus environmentalists ignore the ontological views of the authors, meaning they ignore the natural development of life and the pinnacle status of humans) and are anthropocentric. I am still unclear how that logic unfolds. If environmentalists by and large ignore the ontological arguments of the authors, they simply cannot be assumed as anthropocentric (although some are from an axiological perspective, whereby environmental action is linked to the preservation of human life). Indeed, they write:

Wilber sympathizes with the motives of environmentalists who attempt to overcome anthropocentrism by diminishing differences between humans and other organisms and proclaiming that everything is part of nature. This assertion ignores the difficult problem of defining ‘nature,’ and denies what differentiates humans from other organisms.²⁶

While patronizing environmentalists, the authors themselves never move beyond anthropomorphizing—indeed the entire ontological and cosmological platform rests on the value of the human mind. Environmentalists, who see the shared biological history and reliance upon a fragile living world as we know it, can hardly be viewed as fundamentally anthropomorphic. The second way the underlying axiology of the authors emerges is one that not only continues the anthropomorphic vision, but also refines this to reiterate an ethnocentric bias that I discussed earlier. The authors outright reject any moral “ought” is

involved within the environmental debate, claiming that environmentalists are “confused”.²⁷ Even further, these web-of-lifers are not simply ignorant and befuddled anthropocentrists, but outright fascists. Twice in the text the authors resort to Wilberian polemics; going so far as to conclude their text with a fear-mongering warning against the dangerous environmentalists. The reader of Integral Ecology must accept the tenets of this text precisely to guard against being an ecofascist. Playing on the ethnocentric fear of United States cold-war political rhetoric, the authors write:

survival of the social collective...requires that individual sacrifice themselves and their interests to the good of the superorganisms.... All too often environmentalists assign intrinsic value solely to the web of life, thereby concluding that the parts of the web (individual life forms) either lack value of their own or at best have equal value. Such an approach provides no criteria for making difficult moral decisions. Moreover, this approach indicates that if individual humans or classes of humans are harming the web of life, then other humans (who shall they be?) should prevent such behavior at whatever cost. This is ecofascism”.²⁸

Ecofeminist, Val Plumwood has suggested that there may very well be decisions down the line that infringe upon Eurocentric values of individualism.²⁹ I personally would rather make sacrifices now than have to live in a world where only a chosen few ultimately survive because we degraded our environment to the point where it is bankrupt of sustainability. Are environmentalists

fundamentally short-sighted and infringing upon personal freedom by stating we simply cannot have what we want and that our lifestyles are incompatible with life on earth? Or extremists for asserting that the human species is problematic to other species and ourselves? I personally find this polemical injection a telling one, highlighting the authors in-group identity status as insulated within the worldview of Kenneth Wilber. The text reads, in the words of Ken Wilber himself, as being an “emotionally prejudiced and self-contradictory...polemic disguised as reason...[it is] pseudologic, pseudoscience, and dogmatic absolutism.”³⁰ And I am still trying to determine what color my consciousness is—it must not be very high up on the Wilberian totem pole.

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Endnotes

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23. Esbjörn–Hargens, Sean & Zimmerman, Michael E. 2009. Integral Ecology: Using Multiple Perspectives on the Natural World. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, Inc. p. 12.

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25. To this writer’s knowledge of science an accurate perspective: organisms are in fact shaping and re–shaping the world in fundamental ways and human beings are contributing significantly; so much so that recently a group of geologists have suggested we have entered a new and definitely not glorious geological epoch known as Anthropocene: humans will have made long–term devastating impacts on the non–human world, including being responsible for the second largest mass–extinction. See Zalasiewicz, Jan, Williams, Mark,

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