Core Coaching
Getting To The Heart Of The Matter

From Theory to Practice

Turning Integral Genius into Widely Applicable Wisdom

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Abstract

The overarching breadth and depth of Integral Theory (IT) offers a breathtaking opportunity to create practical, world-changing, consciousness-raising value. At the same time, a key tenet of IT is that each stage of development comes with inherent limitations.[1] In other words, "*with every great strength comes an equal challenge.*"[2] So when it comes to turning integral genius into widely applicable wisdom, what are the challenges that come with IT's great strengths? This paper asserts that **the radical scope of IT is both its greatest strength and its greatest challenge**. If we think of IT as a mountain, the journey into integrally informed wisdom requires climbing the mountain of theory, mastering its gifts, and then bringing them back down the other side. The larger the mountain is, the larger the challenges there are in integrating theory and practice – and IT is a very large mountain indeed.

In working with these challenges, many of our efforts so far have focused on helping each other climb IT's peaks and take in its vistas. We've focused on the first of four key challenges: *model mastery*. In contrast, this paper focuses on three additional challenges that come paired with IT's strengths: the challenges of *judgment vs. evaluation*, learning to *know what we don't know*, and creating *integral key distinctions* from our models. In doing so, it

Four Challenges in Moving
from Theory to Practice

also presents some solutions to these challenges; explores the "*spiritual uncertainty principle*"; discusses the question "*what is the epistemology of the soul?*"; shows a new way or relating AQAL to the work of Huston Smith and David Hawkins; presents five defining characteristics of a key distinction; and discusses six integral key distinctions.

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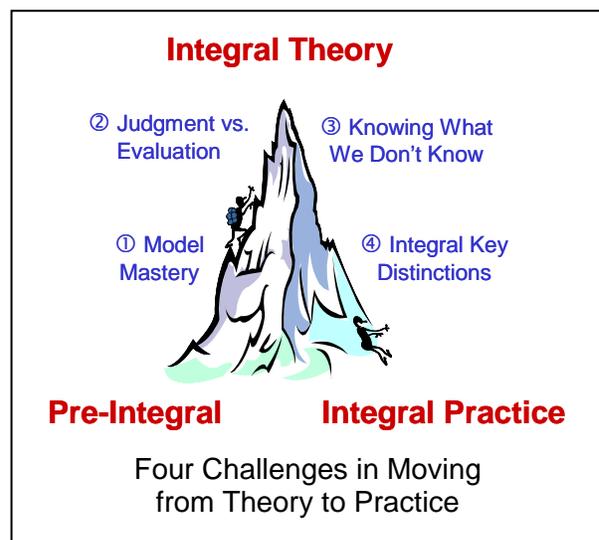
Related Work

In describing Integral Theory, my primary context is the collected works of Ken Wilber. Other sources include Spiral Dynamics,[3] Steve McIntosh,[4] Huston Smith,[5] and developmental theorists such as Robert Kegan,[6] James Fowler[7] and Carol Gilligan.[8] Also, the discussion of AQAL and the two truths principle is similar in some ways to Steve McIntosh's work.[9]

While this paper seeks to generalize its findings to a wider range of application areas, it has been heavily shaped by the author's coaching practice and by the process of creating two "integrally informed" books. Selling By Giving teaches purpose driven practice builders how to create both money and meaning by integrating spirituality and business.[10] Love Beyond Belief uses a synthesis and summary of the field of spiritual psychology to teach people how to heal their shadow. Also, please note that pieces of this article first appeared in two prior papers.[11,12]

Our Shared Purpose

In exploring the topic of IT's strengths and challenges, let's start with the question of intention. Why are we having this conversation? I believe a shared purpose of our community is **to help reduce suffering and support the evolution of consciousness**. This is in line with the Integral Prime Directive, to "*insure the health of the entire spiral of development at all of its levels and waves.*"[13] Doing so can include promoting the "*good of the whole,*"[14] integrating the trans-rational wisdom of the great spiritual traditions with the rational discoveries of modern science, and finding applications for our theories. So let's look at four of the key challenges that can arise in the journey from integral theory to practice as we seek to use IT in service to this shared purpose.

Four Challenges in Moving from Integral Theory to Practice

Wilber regularly points out that "*the map is not the territory.*"[15] Theory is about creating maps, while practice is about using our maps to more effectively traverse the territory. And in moving from theory to practice, we naturally come across four key challenges, each tied to a specific question.

1) **What are our maps?** The first key challenge involves **model mastery**. This consists of learning, discussing, extending, teaching, testing and revising our shared set of integral maps. For example, it can involve extending IT by showing more specifically how other bodies of research (i.e. business, politics, science, spirituality, psychology, etc.) can fit within the AQAL model. This important challenge is the traditional domain of academic discourse and is not specifically addressed by this paper.

2) **What is my relationship with our maps?** The second key challenge involves **judgment vs. evaluation**. Like any technology or set of beliefs, IT is a tool that can be used in positive or negative ways. When we defensively feel the need to be right about our maps, or we use them to put our self above or below others, we naturally find ourselves in judgment. And judgment creates suffering. In contrast, when we hold them with an open mind and an open heart, we're more often able to use them from a clean and clear place of evaluation. This distinction is not about invalidating the notion of hierarchy (or holarchy). It's about how we hold those hierarchies – how we are inside in relationship to our beliefs.

3) **What is the relationship between our maps and the territory?** The third key challenge is learning to **know what we don't know**. In seeking to connect a map with a territory, it's important to understand how large the gap is between the two. How accurate is the map? How much translation is required to move from one to the other? Are there places where the gap is larger than others? And how does this vary from person to person? Where in the first key challenge our goal is to expand the scope of what we know, in this challenge a key task is to expand our understanding of the limitations of that knowledge.

4) **How can I use our maps to create applied value?** The fourth key challenge involves using our maps to create **integral key distinctions**. Creating applied value from theoretical maps involves using the maps to create mental models and then using these models to create decisions or distinctions about the territory. Do I turn left or right? Is this piece of the engine broken or is that one? Is it more important for me to meditate today or exercise? Does this concept or that one have more value? Given this, we can choose either to teach our models and ask others to do the work of creating applied distinctions; or we can do that work ourselves, and offer integrally informed key distinctions others can use to directly create applied value. We can either offer people models built out of integral genius, or we can translate this genius into key distinctions which provide more widely applicable wisdom.

Interestingly, the more successful we are with the first challenge, the greater the challenges we may face with the other three. The broader and more valuable our maps are, the more attached we tend to become to them, and the more we tend to move into judgment over them. Similarly, the larger our maps are, the harder it becomes to discern their limitations. And the greater the level of abstraction our maps have, the larger the gap there is to cross in moving from theoretical models to applied distinctions. IT provides us with a remarkably broad, valuable, large, high altitude set of

maps, and when it comes to moving from theory to practice, this scope is both its greatest strength and its greatest challenge.

Because of its radical scope, IT is like the Mount Everest of mental models. Climbing the peaks of IT is no easy task, and mastering its models requires a significant investment of time and energy. I know a number of very intelligent people who have attempted to do so, only to give up and declare Wilber's work beyond their comprehension. Model mastery requires commitment – and commitment creates attachment. People usually don't climb mountains just so they can go down the other side, and the higher we get, the less we may want to come back down. Think of the people who die on Everest because they aren't willing to turn back as a storm starts blowing in. Similarly, the larger a theoretical peak is, the more our ego tends to get attached to conquering the summit, and the harder it can be to place an equal focus on the other three challenges involved in turning theory into practical value in our own practice and in our support of others. So let's take a look at them.

Challenge 2: Judgment vs. Evaluation

Among other things, the challenge of moving from judgment to evaluation lies at the root of "developmental theorist's disease" – the tendency of theorists to place themselves at the top of any stage-based developmental hierarchy they create. This perceived arrogance is one reason why some people react emotionally against IT, or perceive the integral community as having a bent towards "*evangelical integralism.*"[16] It also relates to any conflicts that might occur within the integral community, [17,18] and to how we are in relationship with each other as we work with IT's models.

The root challenge here is not that IT includes hierarchies, but that developmental hierarchies are particularly prone to "*the challenge of beliefs*"[19] – our tendency to hold our beliefs from a place of judgment instead of evaluation. As a race, our beliefs are both our biggest strength and our biggest challenge. They're at the core of our many achievements, while also being at the root of our many conflicts. And while we tend to think that the solution to the challenge of beliefs is to create **agreement** over a single shared set of beliefs, thousands of years of conflict say otherwise. Instead, the solution comes from **acceptance** – it comes not from changing our beliefs but by changing the way we hold them.

Judgment happens when we hold our beliefs in a way that creates perceived separation from Spirit.[20] When we use our beliefs to claim superiority or inferiority, we're in judgment. When we hold our beliefs with involvement but not attachment, we're in evaluation. When we use our beliefs as weapons, we're in judgment. When we use them as tools, we're in evaluation. When we

go in to self-righteousness, we're in judgment. When we connect with an authentic sense of spirituality, we're in evaluation. When we believe that things should be different than they are, we're in judgment. When we get how everyone is doing the best they know how while also having the opportunity to learn how to do better, we're in evaluation.

For example, I was raised a devout Mormon, and left that church when I was 18. In leaving, I took with me a deeply rooted sense of insecurity. Deep down, I feared that maybe they were right, maybe they did possess the literal Truth, and maybe my leaving was proof of how selfish and unworthy I was. While my parents continued to love and support me, I feared they were judging my path as inferior. Many years later, it was a deep relief when I found IT. I felt it showed that amber religious dogmatism was an earlier stage of development than my orange scientism or green spirituality. I used my new maps to judge their judgments, and tried to convert my father to my new perspective. Funny enough, this caused more conflict and perceived separation, rather than less – because **judgment creates perceived separation, regardless of the truth of the beliefs involved**.

A key way to distinguish between judgment and evaluation is to pay attention to our feelings. When we feel a negative emotion, we can be confident we're in judgment regarding one or more of our beliefs. We can be even more confident we're in judgment if we also notice that we're blaming something or someone for these feelings. Almost any statement that starts with "*I'm upset because…*" is a judgment – and a mistake.[21] This is because events don't cause our negative feelings – our judgments **about** events cause our feelings. For example, "*I'm upset because they didn't put the toothpaste lid back on*" is less accurate than saying "*I'm upset because I judged them as violating one of my expectations about what it means to love and respect me.*"

Judgment is automatically created in the gap between how we believe the world is and how we believe it should be.[22] And along with blame, one of the most common places judgment shows up is in our comparisons between ourselves and others. For example, when I believe that "*Ken is so much smarter than me*" and I start feeling bad, I'm in judgment, usually because of an unconscious expectation that "*I have to be as smart as anyone else if I'm to be worthy and valuable.*"

A major challenge of developmental hierarchies is that they make explicit comparisons between different stages of evolution – and in doing so, create the temptation to use these hierarchies to judge ourselves as either superior or inferior to others. Note that the challenge does not lie with the hierarchies themselves. It lies in the way we hold them. When we hold our beliefs tightly, as things we **need** to be right about or as reasons to pass judgment, we create suffering and perceived

separation from Spirit. When we hold them firmly but lightly, with an open mind and an open heart, we're able to use them as tools in service to the Highest Good.

Judgment is not wrong. Learning right from wrong is a core developmental task, and judgment is a stage appropriate function. However, I can't say exactly which stage it's rooted in – and I often find it counter-productive to try. It seems to be particularly prevalent at the red through orange stages of the cognitive and values lines, and it appears to be a primary tool that society has used in civilizing our basic instincts (i.e. "*the taming of testosterone*."[23]) At the same time, it appears to be a near-universal human trait, and some of the spiritual teachers I most respect teach that it's the primary root of suffering.[24,25,26,27]

What I can say is that on the many times when I've used my knowledge of IT to judge myself as more evolved than others, I've found myself feeling less connected to Spirit. When I've felt a self-righteous need to be right about my integral worldview, I've found myself turning my cognitive line development into a hindrance to my spiritual growth. When I've tried to share my IT maps from a place of judgment, I've found others perceiving this more as preaching rather than teaching. And in my desire to use IT to be of service, I've found my tendency to turn its hierarchies into judgments to be one of my greatest challenges.

One of the reasons for this may be that the more tightly we hold to our beliefs, the more we tend to go into judgment when those beliefs are challenged. The broader and deeper our beliefs are, the more explanatory power they have, the more our ego depends on them – and the more likely we are to go into judgment over them. Whether we're talking about physical conflict, mental conflict, emotional conflict, or spiritual conflict; where there's war, there's judgment; and where there's judgment, there's tightly held beliefs.

In addition, as competent adults, our shadow often becomes the primary challenge in our spiritual evolution. Our stored pool of judgment makes up a primary aspect of our shadow. And our spiritual evolution (i.e. our consciousness or presence) is a key factor in the level of practical value we're able to offer others.[28] As the saying goes, "*people don't care about how much you know until they know how much you care.*"

There are many tools for working with our judgment and shadow. The 3-2-1 process from Integral Institute is one.[29] Others include The Work of Byron Katie[30] and self-forgiveness.[31] For more on this, including 25 power tools that support the 5 core practices of spiritual psychology, please see Love Beyond Belief.[32]

Challenge 3: Learning to Know What We Don't Know

In moving from theory to practice, another key task is to understand the nature and size of the gap between our maps and the territory they describe. This process is less about understanding our maps, and more about discerning their boundaries and limitations. Doing so allows us to become aware of our blind spots, to reduce the dangers of overconfidence and spiritual pride, and to discover the translations required to turn integral genius into widely applicable wisdom. This task forms the third key challenge, that of learning to know what we don't know.

This challenge is illustrated by a joke I heard during my first year of graduate school, when I felt like I was drowning in an ocean of knowledge. In sharing my feelings of despair with an older student, he replied, "*Don't Worry! There's a saying that you get your bachelor's degree when you think you know everything. You get your master's degree when you realize you know nothing. You get your doctorate degree when you realize 'Yes, but neither does anyone else.'*"

Similarly, as a field matures, it often begins to quantify its own limitations. In physics, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle states a fundamental limit on physical knowledge. In math, Godel's incompleteness theorem proved that formal logic can never fully encompass truth. And in spirituality, the two truths doctrine declares the limits of what our mind can know about Reality. As described by Wilber in Excerpt G,

> *"In the final analysis, the traditions are very clear that the 'first step' in involutionary manifestation is indeed a nondual Mystery and cannot in any way be adequately captured (or even hinted at) by conventional truth, including any sort of science, leading-edge or otherwise. The reason is that the great traditions from Parmenides to Padmasambhava are unanimous in what Vedanta calls the 'two truths' doctrine: namely, there exists absolute or nondual truth, and relative or conventional truth, and they are of radically different orders. Relative truth is concerned with states of affairs in the finite realm, such as 'water molecules contain one oxygen and two hydrogen atoms.' […] You can make definite true or false statements about such finite events, and truth in the relative realm is indeed a search for those conditions under which relative assertions are true. This is relative, finite, or assertoric truth.*
>
> *Not so absolute truth, about which literally and radically NOTHING may be accurately said in a non-contradictory fashion (including that one; if that statement is true, it is false). The great transcendental dialecticians – from Nagarjuna to Kant – have thoroughly demolished such attempts, showing that every single one of the attempts to categorize*

ultimate reality (as, for example, by saying it is a quantum energy potential) turns on itself and dissolves in ad absurdum *or* ad infinitum *regresses. They are not saying that Spirit does not exist, but simply that any finite statement about the infinite will categorically not work – not in the same way that statements about relative or conventional truth will work. Spirit can be known, but not said; seen, but not spoken, pointed out, but not described; realized, but not reiterated. Conventional truths are known by science; absolute truth is known by satori. They simply are not the same thing."[33]*

The two truths doctrine states that infinite Truth cannot be adequately described by a finite mind. This brings up an important question. Given our knowledge of IT and the two truths doctrine, and in service to our shared purpose, how can we better discern the limits of our integral maps? How can we use IT to better learn how to know what we don't know? The first step lies in accepting and embracing the task; not as a way of finding fault with IT, but as a sign of the maturity of the field and as a consequence of IT's great strengths. Then from this perspective, we can explore the limits of IT, starting with the question of how the two truths doctrine relates to the AQAL model.

AQAL and the Two Truths Doctrine

In <u>Integral Spirituality</u>, Wilber laid out a new foundation for AQAL. Where he originally started with the axiom "*I have one major rule: Everybody is right*,"[34] this new presentation of Wilber-5 grounds AQAL in a theory of Integral Methodological Pluralism. It shows how the different human epistemologies can be divided into "*8 primordial perspectives*," and grounds each quadrant in two of these ways of knowing.[35] Based on this philosophical bedrock, he then makes the claim that the 4 quadrants rest at the root of all knowledge, with spiritual experiences occurring in zone 1.

"The quadrants 'go all the way down.' In simpler terms, according to AQAL, all knowledge is embedded in cultural or intersubjective dimensions. Even transcendental knowledge is a 4-quadrant affair: the quadrants don't just go all the way down, they go all the way up as well. It's turtles all the way down, and it's turtles all the way up, too."[36]

Give this, how are we to relate AQAL and the two truths doctrine? There are at least two options, which are shown in the figure below.

Option 1 assumes the transition between duality and non-duality is itself dualistic. The 4 quadrants create the foundation of all knowing, up until a more or less binary transition, at which point absolute Truth takes over. In this picture, everything we can know fits within AQAL, up until

Option 1   Option 2

AQAL and the Two Truths Doctrine
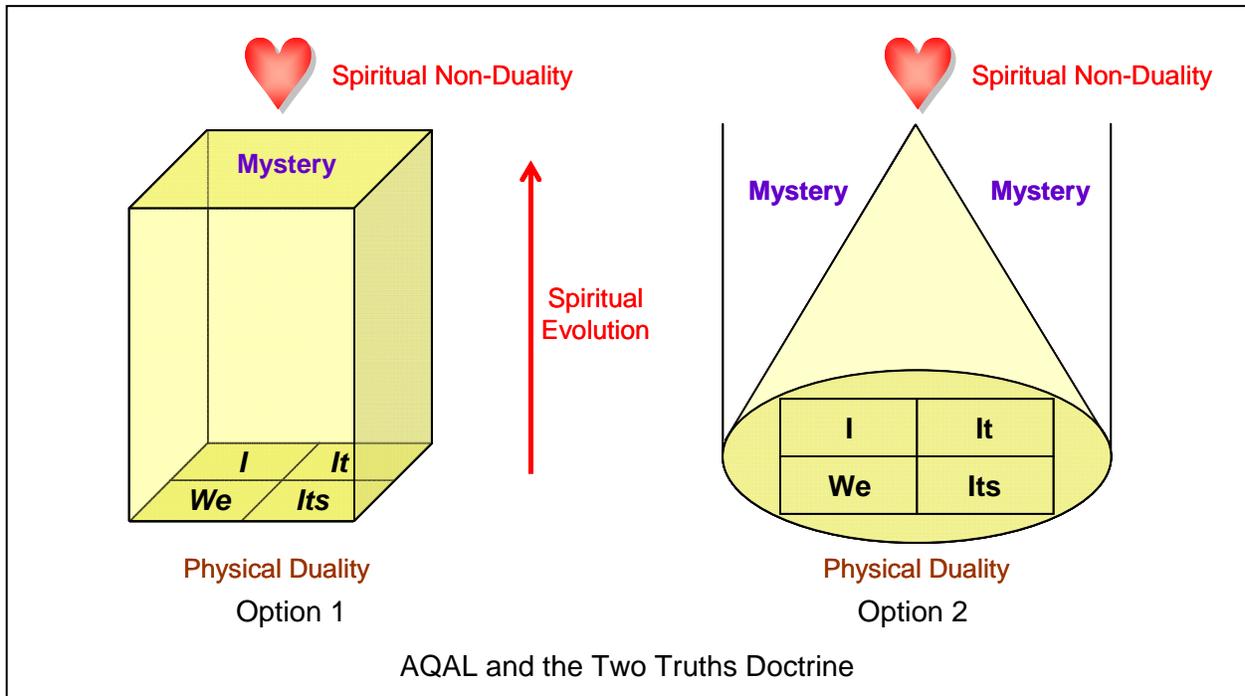
some final transition into Mystery. The four quadrants and eight epistemologies form the basis of all but the very last states and stages of spiritual evolution, and the rational models of AQAL provide a firm foothold from which to assess the validity of trans-rational wisdom. Option 2 assumes the transition is more subtle, and that as we evolve, the dominion of relative knowledge increasingly gives way to the dominion of absolute knowledge (often in non-linear, non-dual ways.) In this picture, while AQAL retains approximately the same scope, increasing spiritual evolution is accompanied by increasing levels of Mystery.

This paper holds that this second option is more accurate and useful, particularly in the context of learning to know what we don't know. For it reminds us that as we evolve spiritually, the scope of what our ego can know becomes increasingly constrained, while the gap between our mental maps and the spiritual territory becomes increasingly large. This perspective creates what I call the *spiritual uncertainty principle*. **Trans-rational spirituality cannot be adequately described by rational models, and the higher we wish to go, the more important this truth becomes**.

This second option also helps us resolve some of the challenges and contradictions that occur as we seek to take AQAL's explanatory power in the pre-rational and rational domains, and extend it in to the trans-rational domain. For example, one of Wilber's motivations in his introduction of Integral Post-Metaphysics is the paradoxical duality that emerges out of the old definitions of Enlightenment.

"In chapter 4, we introduced the idea of 'the sliding scale of Enlightenment' – namely, if evolution occurs in the world of form, and if Enlightenment involves a sense of being one with the world of evolving form, then how can you define Enlightenment in a way that fully acknowledges the evolving world, yet doesn't rob Enlightenment of its timeless nature? This is an unbelievably challenging issue..."[37]

He then poses the challenge in terms of the following duality. Either we define Enlightenment as "*being one with that which is Timeless and Eternal and Unborn*" and in doing so "*create a massive duality in Spirit*" or else we redefine Enlightenment. His answer is to redefine Enlightenment:

"Enlightenment is the realization of oneness with all states and all structures that are in existence at any given time."[38]

However, this definition itself creates an internal contradiction, because it violates the two truths doctrine. Enlightenment defies definition. And so in trying to define mystery and eliminate paradox, we find ourselves back in mystery and paradox. From the perspective of Option 1, this would seem to indicate a mistake in IT. While from the perspective of Option 2, it becomes an example of the spiritual uncertainty principle, and a reminder of the importance of continuing to learn to know what we don't know.

This perspective seems to align with the teachings of many spiritual traditions. For example, in The World's Religions, Huston Smith uses three concepts to describe the wisdom traditions' common characterization of Reality: goodness, integration, and mystery.[39] Ultimate reality is infinitely better than we can imagine, more integrated than we can imagine, and more mysterious than we can imagine. In our focus on model mastery, IT has tended to focus primarily on the evolution/better-than and integration pieces. Yet something very strange happens as we begin to move from the domain of the mind into the domain of the soul, from the rational realms into the trans-rational. Reason starts to break down. As E.F. Schumacher explains in A Guide for the Perplexed, we find ourselves increasingly dealing with divergent problems (i.e. problems that have many valid answers, none of which can be proven superior through reason) instead of convergent ones (i.e. problems where reason reliably produces the same solution).[40] As David Hawkins explains in Power vs. Force, what we thought was a world based on linear causality, begins to reveal itself as being based in non-linear attractor patterns, fields of consciousness, and mystery.[41] As Huston Smith puts it:

"Beyond the unity of things and their inestimable worth is the wisdom traditions' third report. Reality is steeped in ineluctable mystery; we are born in mystery, we live in mystery, and we die in mystery. ... A mystery is that special kind of problem for which the human mind has *no solution; the more we understand it, the more we become aware of additional factors relating to it that we do not understand. In mysteries what we know, and our realization of what we do not know, proceed together; the larger the island of knowledge, the longer the shoreline of wonder."[42]*

One of the ways that David Hawkins makes this distinction is by pointing out that no matter how brilliant, no philosophy or rational framework can extend beyond the rational realm. On his scale (which is itself a linear attempt to describe the non-linear) even Einstein maxed out at 499 (on a scale of 1-1000, where human experience normally starts at 20, the 400s are the domain of reason, the 500s are the domain of love and joy/unconditional love, and the 600s and up are the domain of Peace/Enlightenment).[43] And one of the ways John-Roger talks about this is by explaining how challenging it is to evaluate spiritual evolution using physical perceptions.[44]

What is the Epistemology of the Soul?

Using the language of The Great Chain, there's another way to frame this question of whether Option 1 or Option 2 is a more accurate and useful perspective. If the mind lives in the world of duality and Spirit lives in the world of non-duality, then what does the world-view of the soul look like? In other words, what is the epistemology of the soul? Is the soul only able to know the world through the 8 epistemologies of the mind, or does it have some greater way of knowing? The traditions speak of intuition being the sixth sense, and direct knowing being the seventh. Let's stipulate that direct knowing must be filtered through our mental context before we can communicate it verbally. That said, is direct knowing just another form of phenomenology, or is there something more mysterious going on here? While there are irreducible filters on all mental awareness (and therefore on all communication between two minds) do those filters extend to the soul, or just to our ego's interpretation of what our soul tells us?

The following picture is an attempt to frame this potentially divergent, trans-rational question using linear, rational language. It shows a way of mapping The Great Chain and Integral Theory together. It shows how IT looks at the wisdom-of-old through a multi-dimensional lens. In particular, the five domains of The Great Chain form the basis of the different lines of development (i.e. physical, emotional, cognitive, spiritual, etc.) and the different stages of development (i.e. body,

mind, Spirit). Then the self-identity line (which has been considered by many spiritual teachers to be the fundamental dynamic underlying spiritual growth) is actually a combination of these levels and lines, rather than a single line in and of itself. (Note that pieces of this interpretation can be found in IT, for example in Excerpt G[45] and in the charts in the end of Integral Psychology,[46] which show the domains of the different bodies as correlated to the different levels of development.)

Interestingly, as Wilber explains in Integral Spirituality, states of consciousness are also correlated with the different domains of the Great Chain (i.e. gross, subtle, causal and non-dual are correlated to body, mind, soul and Spirit).[47] Seeing this, we could extend this concept into three dimensions, with states on the z-axis, and the circles of the Great Chain becoming concentric spheres. Then, at least from the UL perspective, three of the five primary components of AQAL can be seen as "different ways of slicing" the journey of awakening, from identification with the body to identification with the mind to identification with the soul to identification with Spirit.[48]

Note that this pattern also aligns with David Hawkins' map of consciousness. The bottom of his scale corresponds to the most basic forms of life (i.e. the body and its sensations). The journey of consciousness then evolves through identification with the lower emotions (i.e. 20-199) the physical will and lower mind (i.e. 200-399) the rational mind (i.e. 400-499) the spiritual heart (i.e. 500-599) and then the soul and spiritual will (i.e. 600-850). Finally, with complete surrender of the finite ego, we experience an indescribable identification with Spirit and non-dual Reality (i.e. 1000).[49]

From the perspective of Option 1, the epistemology of the soul fits within the 8 epistemologies of Integral Methodological Pluralism (IMP). From this perspective, the 4 quadrants and 8 epistemologies hold dominion both in the pre-rational, rational and trans-rational domains, up until some final transition point. This is also consistent with the idea of the cognitive line leading the development of other lines even in the trans-rational realm.

From the perspective of Option 2, the epistemology of the soul somehow extends beyond the 8 epistemologies of IMP. From this perspective, the transition between the rational and trans-rational is increasingly marked not by mental or physical lines of development, but by

What is the Epistemology of the Soul?
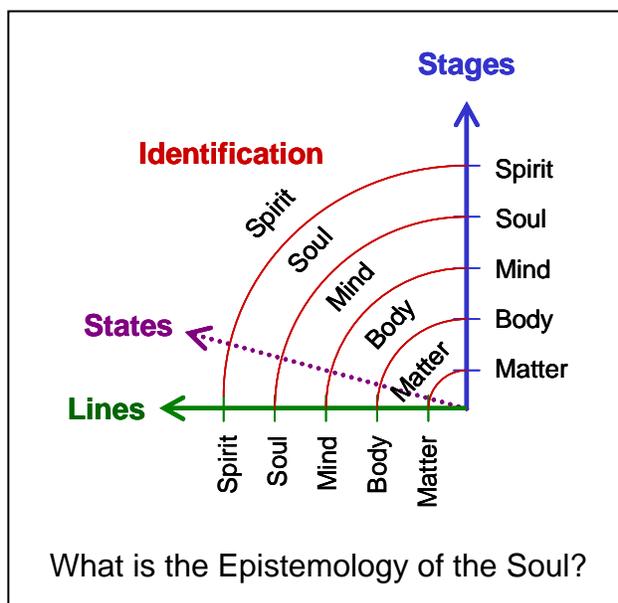
an increase in mystery, humility, non-linearity and love. This perspective is consistent with the idea that where the first half of the spiritual journey is about building an ego, the second half is about surrendering this ego into the arms of Spirit. And it supports the importance of the spiritual uncertainty principle and the process of learning to know what we don't know.

In the context of our shared purpose and our goal of turning integral theory into practice, this provides another reason I assert that Option 2 is both more accurate and more useful than Option 1. And while I posit that this claim lies beyond the realm of rational proof, my belief is that **Love is a primary epistemology of the soul**.[50] Particularly in its more spiritual forms, Love lives in a land of mystery that transcends and includes the mind. Love is the miracle where two become one while also remaining two. Love moves beyond the world of either/or into a land of both/and. Love is the trans-rational, ego-releasing, heart-opening bridge between the physical and the spiritual – the bridge that brings together the duality of the four quadrants with the mystery of Spirit.

Love Is. Love is Good. Love is Integration. Love is Mysterious. And Love is Beyond Belief.

Challenge 4: Integral Key Distinctions

After mastering our models, releasing our judgments around them, and learning to know what we don't know, the fourth key challenge is to translate the models of IT into distinctions that have practical value. At this point we've climbed the mountain of theory (model mastery), navigated the dangers of its peaks (judgment vs. evaluation) and come down the other side (learning to know what we don't know). As we approach the ground again, and after all the investments we've made in our journey, how do we communicate what we've learned in ways that connect with people who haven't made the same journey?

The key to this challenge is to create a set of *integral key distinctions*, which take advantage of our rich maps while also being able to directly provide value to others. For where theory lives in the land of maps and **models**, practice is about **distinctions**, both in terms of the ideas we hold and the decisions we make. Theoretical learning happens primarily through models, while practical learning happens primarily through distinctions. And in order to turn integral genius into widely applicable wisdom, we can either teach IT's models and ask others to embrace the task of turning these models into practical distinctions, or we can use the breadth and depth of IT's models to pick particularly useful distinctions and teach these integral key distinctions instead.

Let's take a look at these two types of learning. When we internalize a new **model**, we're adding a new page to our maps of the world, a new tower to the metropolis of our mind. Models are

like "*cognitive technologies*" – intricate, tightly interconnected, hierarchically layered webs of ideas that come together to form tools of great power. These models can be smaller in size, like a 4-quadrant grid, or larger, like the field of calculus. In the extreme case, like with Integral Theory, they form an entire paradigm – a lens through which we see the world. In contrast, **distinctions** are one of the fundamental building blocks that models are made of. One definition of cognitive intelligence is "*the ability to make increasingly fine distinctions as related to increasingly wide connections.*" If we picture a model as an "intellectual web," connections are the strands of the web and distinctions are the nodes these strands tie together. For example, one of my nephews is currently learning his alphabet. This is a process of taking an undifferentiated soup of shapes and creating distinctions between each letter (i.e. this is an A which has the sound "ay", and it is different than a B, which has the sound "bee"). Switching analogies, if a model is like a building, distinctions are like raw materials and tools we can use to build or remodel different pieces of these constructions.

The primary advantage of learning through models is the potential for rapid construction of new cognitive tools. Continuing with the building analogy, when we learn a new model, we're adding a new construction to an existing landscape. Since we're using blueprints that someone else has already created, we can quickly erect a new home, drop in a strip mall, or top off an existing skyscraper with a new penthouse.

The primary advantage of learning through distinctions is that a distinction can be easily applied and integrated wherever it's most needed. If we send trucks of paint and brushes to a dilapidated housing project, they can easily be applied to the walls that are most in need of repair. Instead of building a new skyscraper, learning through distinctions allows people to upgrade their existing mental structures. Where learning through models involves new construction, learning through distinctions involves upgrading existing constructions. Both are important, in the appropriate circumstances. However, key distinctions often offer more widely applicable practical value.

The Challenge of Unlearning

There are two primary challenges to learning through models. The first challenge is that in order to move from theory to practice, we must translate our models into distinctions. And the greater the scope of a model, the larger the gap there is between that model and the goal of making concrete distinctions and decisions about the territory it describes.

The second challenge comes when we want to build on an area that's already occupied. A core psychological tenet is that **learning tends to be easier than unlearning**. Imagine a nice, little, rustic neighborhood in your personal cognitive city. Old, brownstone, two story homes are nestled away on large, well manicured lots. The families are all friends with each other. Beautiful, mature oak trees line the streets. Now imagine that in the name of Evolution (aka Progress, or Spirit-in-action) a decree comes down that this neighborhood needs to be completely "developed" next year into high-density apartment buildings and shopping malls. What would be an easy task if undertaken on unused land now risks provoking a small civil war. Since our ego is largely built out of the set of things we believe in, our ego naturally tends to feel that any attempts at large-scale deconstruction are attacks on its survival – and it tends to fight back accordingly.

A common teaching is that the first half of our spiritual journey involves building an ego, and the second half involves letting go of our grip on it. As Ken Wilber points out in <u>A Brief History of Everything</u>, each developmental fulcrum involves first identifying with a stage (i.e. learning), then dis-identifying with the old stage (i.e. unlearning, or transcending) and finally integrating (i.e. including) the previous stage. [51] When we're young, there is almost nothing but open green space in our minds, much of our early education involves learning through models, and more energy tends to be spent on identification than on dis-identification. As we age and our consciousness becomes more "full," the developmental bottleneck typically moves from learning (i.e ego building) to unlearning (i.e. letting go of our ego attachments).

Interestingly, most of our academic systems spend most of their time constructing, debating, and teaching different models. Our educational systems are really good at helping people **learn**, but we have very few programs to help people **unlearn**. As students of these institutions, we have a long history of being rewarded for successfully mastering new models, and so when we go to teach or work with others, we naturally tend to use this approach more or less by default. However, this has some particularly acute challenges when it comes to turning integral theory into widely applicable wisdom.

Again, the remarkable power of Integral Theory comes from the fact that it is so astoundingly deep and broad. Wilber talks about it as the "*Integral Operating System*"[52] upon which all our other programming can run. Integrated fully, it becomes a foundation other mental buildings rest upon, a binder other cognitive maps fit in to, a framework between which other cerebral webs are woven. To many, it is the "mother of all mental models." However, undertaking such a major upgrade is not an

easy task. And even once accomplished, it still leaves us with the task of using our theories to create practice changing distinctions.

As we work with other people, we'll tend to find two groups of people – the small group who are primed for an "integral conversion experience" and are capable of the mental surgery this requires, and a much larger group that is not. With the first group, much of our task is made easier by the existing body of Integral teachings – as a starting point, we can simply point them to Wilber's work, light the fuse, and watch the fireworks. The size of this first group is some subset of the "*less than 2%*"[53] of people Wilber talks about as being ready for integral consciousness. As I'll be the first to declare, working with this group is extremely important, and the conversion experiences can be completely life altering.

At the same time, if we're to extend our calling and our reach beyond this particular group, it's important to recognize that **for those not ready for a conversion experience, teaching Integral models often feels like a direct attack on their existing world-views**. As a "post-Mormon," I tend to be very sensitive to religious proselytizing. It was quite a wake-up call when I realized how often I was innocently mounting my own little "integral crusades," trying to convert others to my particular religion – to my "superior" maps and models of the paths of spiritual evolution. The key point is this: **while my integral models are what work best for me, and I believe that they encompass more truth than most other models, I find that they are usually not the most effective way for me to work with and teach others**. Again, I am not saying that we should stop all teaching through integral models – simply that we should be aware of the limitations that come with this approach, as a direct consequence of the power and depth of those models.

However, simply teaching a bunch of random distinctions is rarely effective either, particularly if we're hoping to facilitate not just translational but also transformative change. Instead, the most effective teaching technique often lies in using our maps to determine which distinctions matter most given the current consciousness and challenges of our audience, and then teaching those distinctions instead of the models themselves. I call this the process of teaching through **key distinctions**.

Five Defining Characteristics of a Key Distinction

If we look at the great wisdom literature, we find that most of it teaches through **key distinctions**. In addition to much of traditional scripture, think of Stephen Covey's The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People,[54] or Eckhart Tolle's The Power of Now.[55]

It its ideal form, a key distinction has five defining characteristics.

1) **A key distinction is relatively easy to hear, learn, and integrate.** Because it teaches through distinction, it doesn't require wholesale mental deconstruction to be able to gain value from it. It allows us to remodel and improve an existing building, rather than having to tear down an old one before constructing a new one. Also, because it meets the student where they're at, it can be used with people at a wide range of stages of development, not just with people who "are integral."

2) **A key distinction is flexible and widely applicable.** It provides a tool or resource which can be used in many different places, according to where the client needs it most. The great wisdom literature can be read over and over again, because each time we hear a key distinction, we can find new places to apply it. A key distinction allows unlearning and dis-identification to happen in the areas where we're ready for it, without forcing it on us. It allows us to evolve through the stages of development at our own pace.

3) **A key distinction is highly leveraged.** Because the selection of the distinction is informed by the teacher's broader, more complete maps, as well as by their understanding of the student's current state, it speaks to an issue that is highly relevant and important to the student's growth and evolution. Much of the genius of Covey's book came not in the explanation of the habits, but in the choice of **which** habits to include – a choice he made only after reviewing the vast literature on personal development and creating his own complex models of this field.

4) **A key distinction offers applied, experientially based value.** While mental models are often highly theoretical, a key distinction involves working with clients where "their rubber meets the road." This often involves experiential learning. It "connects the dots" from theory (the teacher's models) to practice (the student's current needs). It directly provides the student with value, rather than making this value conditional on their first having to do the challenging work of learning a brand new theory, integrating it into their existing landscape, and then deriving their own applications and key distinctions from it.

5) **A key distinction is intuitively recognized as valid.** While the validity of mental models is most often determined through academic debate, scientific research, and reference to other models, key distinctions are heard by the heart. When we hear a key distinction, no one has to "prove it" to us. It resonates with someplace deep inside, and we intuitively open up to receive it. It is heard not just as knowledge, but also as wisdom.

Learning of this sort is often associated with "character building" or "developing wisdom." It's the essence of great parenting, coaching, teaching and leadership development.

Six Integral Key Distinctions

So how does this apply to integral theory? Here are six examples of *integral key distinctions* I was sensitized to through my reading of IT, and which I have found particularly valuable in my coaching, teaching and writing.

1) **Pre-rational religiosity vs. trans-rational spirituality.** This is another way of talking about the pre/trans fallacy.[56] This can be particularly useful in helping people who have a negative reaction to religion (seeing it as strictly amber/pre-rational) but are finding that a strictly scientific perspective (i.e. orange/rational/RH) leaves them empty. This distinction shifts the playing field: from a battle between religion and science, to a way of showing how trans-rational spirituality transcends and includes the strengths of both. Plus, it shows that one can be spiritual without having to be religious.

2) **Darwinian evolution vs. spiritual evolution.** This distinction is closely tied to the previous one, and is rooted in the idea of evolution as the hand of Spirit-in-action.[57] It takes the battle between creationism vs. evolution and illustrates a third option that integrates both. It moves evolution from being the province of Darwinian materialists seeking to disprove pre-rational myths, to being an example of where scientific truths line up with spiritual wisdom. It is also useful in working with people who are moving from their needs for survival and success, to being motivated by their needs for fulfillment. Fulfillment comes from evolving our capacity for Love – through learning and growth, service and contribution, spiritual connection, and loving relationships.

3) **Our shadow as the enemy vs. as the gateway to spiritual evolution.** A key concept in both IT [58] and spiritual psychology [59] is that releasing our shadow (i.e. the aspects of our consciousness we haven't yet learned how to love, such as our repressed anger, fear, pain and judgment[60]) is a primary task in our personal and spiritual development. However, most people view their shadow as an enemy to be fought or feared, rather than as a collection of less mature aspects that yearn for acceptance, loving self-discipline, self-awareness, healing and self-forgiveness.[61] This distinction can be particularly useful for people who see morality as a battle between their "good" side and their "bad" side, instead of recognizing the wisdom that "*what you resist, persists.*"[62] These types of beliefs can create moralistic behaviors that act as a mask for deep inner pain and self-judgment, and contribute to judgment-fueled cycles where the "*harder we try to be good, the worse*

we feel.[63] In contrast, as we learn to see our shadow as a primary gateway to spiritual evolution, we begin to see everything that happens as an opportunity for learning and growth; we can shift from seeing therapy and depth work as something for "broken people" to seeing it as a set of power tools for life; and we can more fully embrace the power of an inside-out approach to life.

4) **Different beliefs vs. different ways of believing.** This is another way of describing the shift from first tier to second tier thinking, and it's particularly useful in working with people who are stuck in emotionally charged conflicts. This is because these conflicts invariably involve a conflict over beliefs. We don't get upset because of what happens to us. We get upset because of our beliefs **about** what happens to us. In other words, "*how we relate to the issue is the issue.*"[64] As discussed in a previous section, the key to working with this challenge is by doing the inner work to shift from holding our beliefs as emotionally charged **judgments** to clean and clear **evaluations**. This is much harder to do when we assume there is only one way of thinking, and we believe that the solution to the challenge of beliefs lies in finding **agreement** on the "right" set of beliefs. Instead, as we realize how thoroughly our beliefs are shaped by the stage of development we're presently at,[65] we begin to see how there are different levels of truth, and how the solution to the challenge of beliefs lies more in non-attachment, humility and **acceptance**.[66]

5) **Either/or vs. both/and.**   Another way of describing this distinction is as reductionism vs. transcending and including. It can be particularly useful in working with someone whose paradigm is creating blind spots, as a way of helping them open their mind to a wider range of possibilities. Integral theory is all about integration – instead of looking at truth as a question of picking the ideas of **either** this field **or** that one, Wilber started with the assumption that "*everybody is right*" and went looking for truths that spanned **both** this field **and** that one. Whether we call it Love, Spirit, God, or Truth, the shift from the rational realm to the trans-rational is defined by a shift from either/or thinking to both/and knowing. Love lives in the land of both/and, and our spiritual journey involves transcending and including our mind's tendencies towards dualism, right/wrong judgments, and reductionism. Whether it be the tension between external vs. internal, individual vs. collective, masculine vs. feminine, agape vs. eros, or spiritual vs. physical, spiritual growth happens as we love and integrate all aspects of Reality, rather than trying to pick one over the other.

6) **IQ vs. multiple intelligences.** This is the distinction between seeing intelligence as based only on the cognitive line, compared with seeing it as a collection of developmental lines. This can be particularly useful in working with people who are "stuck in their heads." When our ego sees

cognitive intelligence as the primary measure for success and self-worth, we can get trapped in a "cognitive bypass" where our mind becomes ever more disconnected from our heart. In contrast, as we learn to see intelligence as the process of growing and integrating multiple lines of development, this frees us to embrace a much healthier, more holistic, more fulfilling approach to life.

Conclusion

When we come across a teacher or set of teachings we particularly admire, it's easy to assume that strengths come paired only with strengths. Yet with every great strength comes an equal challenge. The radical scope of Integral Theory presents remarkable opportunities to create practical, world-changing value – and equally remarkable obstacles to doing so. In service to our shared purpose and our goal of turning integral genius into widely applicable wisdom, this paper explored four of these challenges, as well as some initial solutions. It illustrated the distinction between holding our models and hierarchies from a place of evaluation vs. from a place of judgment. In examining the challenge of learning to know what we don't know, it looked at the spiritual uncertainty principle and the epistemology of the soul, as ways of exploring the limits of IT from within its own models. And in discussing the challenge of turning IT into integral key distinctions, it compared learning through models vs. learning through distinctions, laid out the five key characteristics of a key distinction, and presented six examples of integral key distinctions.

Future work could include exploring additional key challenges, sharing practical tools for releasing judgment and embracing ontological humility, creating additional theories about the limits of IT's knowledge, and expanding our library of integral key distinctions.

About the Author

Brian serves as a coach, author, speaker and facilitator. By the age of 30, he had received a Ph.D. in C.S. from U.C. Berkeley, raised $20 million for two startups, become an internationally known speaker and academic, made and lost millions – and burnt out twice. This was followed by six years of deep inner work and a M.A. in Spiritual Psychology from the University of Santa Monica, and he now focuses on the integration of spirituality, psychology and business. With his new focus on servant leadership, he is committed to delivering exceptional value to each client. To learn more, please feel free to visit www.corecoaching.org or www.sixfigurepractice.net.

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