

# What is Integral?

*"The word integral means comprehensive, inclusive, non-marginalizing, embracing. Integral approaches to any field attempt to be exactly that: to include as many perspectives, styles, and methodologies as possible within a coherent view of the topic. In a certain sense, integral approaches are "meta-paradigms," or ways to draw together an already existing number of separate paradigms into an interrelated network of approaches that are mutually enriching."*  
– Ken Wilber

Ken Wilber, the founder of integral theory, has also published 25 books over the past 30 years and is continually evolving the integral model that emerged from his work. Integral theory weaves together the significant insights from all the major human disciplines of knowledge, including cultural anthropology, philosophy, sociology of religion, physics, healthcare, environmental studies, science and religion, and postmodernism.

Integral offers a comprehensive map for the evolutionaries of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Integral is based on common sense simplicity and reveals that most languages in the world share the pronouns 'I', 'we', 'it', and 'its'. So, there are at least four essential ways in which we can look at any challenge or opportunity.

Integral theory provides a way of linking, leveraging, and aligning the irreducible aspects of reality so that these perspectives can help us with the problems and prospects we are facing.

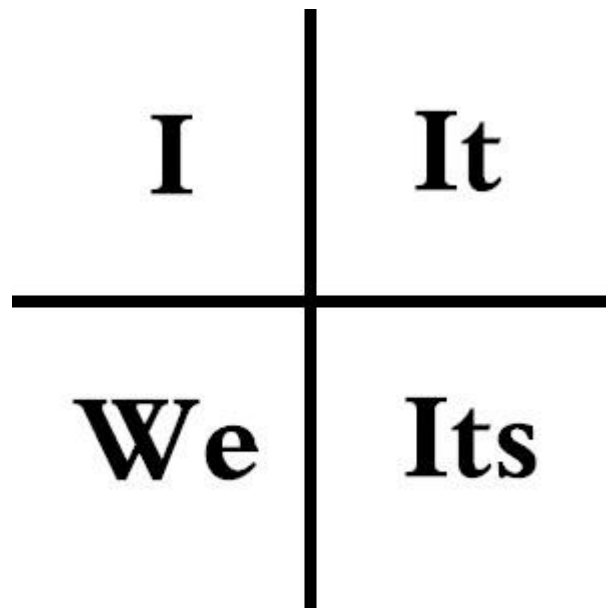


Figure 1: At least four perspectives

For example: When viewing a wedding ceremony, which perspective is correct? Of course, your 'I' perspective of emotions and beliefs is correct. But, so is the shared perspective of the 'We', the cultural and religious significance of such an event. Also correct would be the 'It' perspective which sees the behavioral and physiological dimension as viewed from the outside. And finally, the 'Its' perspective is also correct since it allows for the inclusion of the social and systemic aspects of such an event. All correct, all partial, an integral view provides the map of that reality so that nothing is overlooked and no one perspective excludes others.

And, it is good to note that no one perspective can include the entire picture and that no one perspective can fully understand another. To be fully present to an event, the view must include an integral perspective. All four views are correct, but individually no one of them offers the complete picture of any reality.

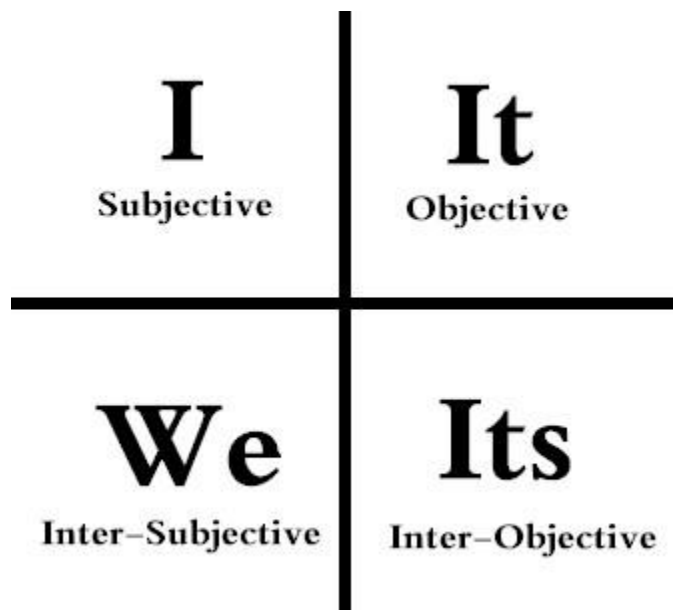


Figure 2: Four correct yet partial dimensions to reality.

According to integral theory, at least four irreducible perspectives must be consulted when attempting to fully understand any aspect of reality, any problem or opportunity presented to us. Since these four perspectives or dimensions of reality arise simultaneously, this means we will be leaving out or missing some key information that may enrich our experience and potential if we neglect any of the four perspectives.

Wilber calls these the *4 Quadrants*. And notice, too, that a 4 quadrant view allows us to view any situation from two fundamental distinctions: 1) an inside and an outside perspective and 2) from a singular and plural perspective.

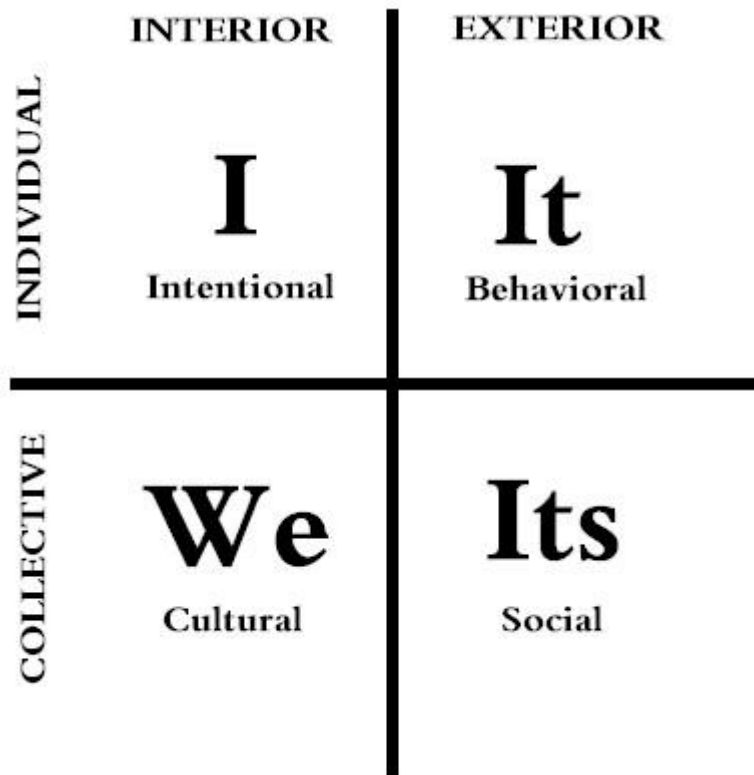


Figure 3: Interior and exterior, individual and collective views.

For example, the birth of the Zen Master's first daughter manifests as a subjective experience at the level of thoughts and emotions (the 'I') and separately in he and his wife; as an inter-subjective experience in them as a couple (the 'We'). This event also manifests as physiological and energy state changes (the 'it', or objective) in each individual; all of which arise with the health system (the 'its') that ensured a secure birthing environment.

All together, all tetra-arising – Integral.

So we can use integral theory to expand our experience and understanding of reality, and also to unify and expand our current ways of approaching the issues we are facing as a race. Look at this next diagram. Does it suggest why there can be such a clash between these four valid perspectives of reality? Again, all are correct, yet not complete, since each of the four dimensions simultaneously arise.

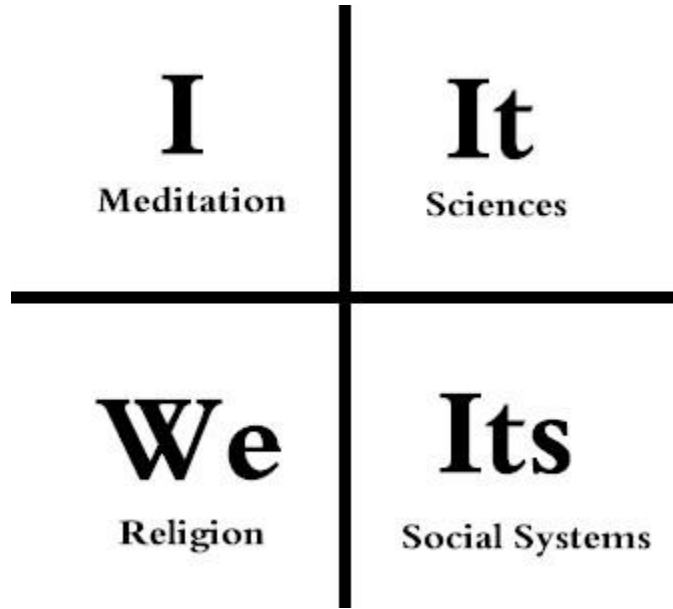


Figure 4: Four correct yet partial views

For simplicity the four perspectives that can be taken on any aspect of reality are labeled:  
 ‘Upper-Left’ (**UL**) – First Quadrant, ‘Lower-Left’ (**LL**) – Second Quadrant, ‘Upper-Right’ (**UR**)  
 – Third Quadrant, ‘Lower-Right’ (**LR**) – Fourth Quadrant

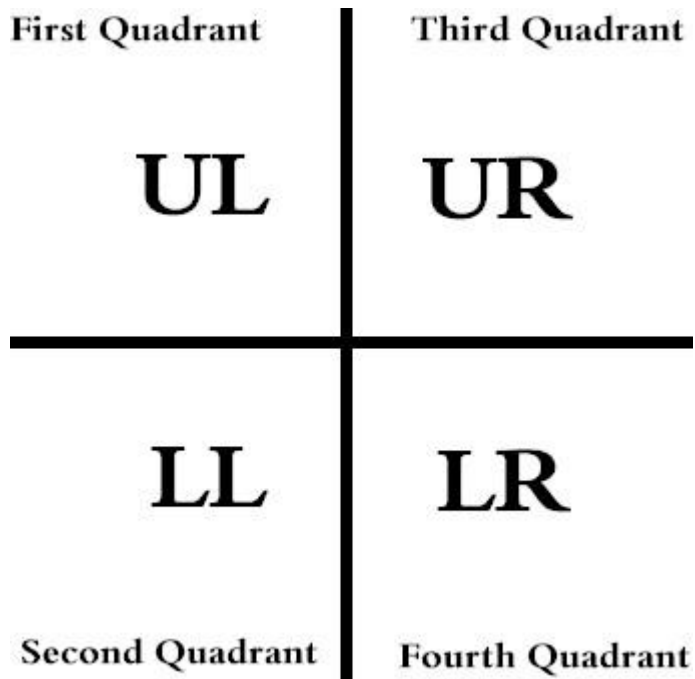


Figure 5: The four quadrants.

We can therefore take an integral approach to solving any problem. For instance, let's say we want to find a solution to poverty. From a first quadrant view we can look at our subjective (FIRST QUADRANT) experience of that issue. We can view it also from a cultural perspective (SECOND QUADRANT) and we can look at what behavioral solutions (THIRD QUADRANT) can be made. And finally, we can also include a view from the social and systemic perspective (FOURTH QUADRANT). Leaving out any one view will deliver an incomplete solution.

This model can also be applied as integrally balanced self-development programs. Since all four perspectives tetra-arise, there is a direct relationship between the effort of development in one quadrant and a rise in the level of achievement in another. For example, people who meditate (Q1) and who also lift weights (Q2) will progress faster in each discipline than a person who only focuses on one quadrant.

On the path of discovering and expressing ones potential for the sake of humanity, a fully functional human being will be sure to apply an integrally balanced developmental program. Here is a simple example of such a program:



Figure 6: An integrally balanced development program.

From Figure 6 we can see that by taking an integral perspective on the evolution of

consciousness and culture, we can make great progress when our practices include work in each of the four quadrants.

For more on Integral-Life-Practice start here: <http://www.integral-life-practice.com/>

This article is based in part on a wonderful summary of Wilber's work by Sean Esbjörn-Hargens, which can be found here: <http://integrallife.com/node/37539>

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