

A Deeper and Wider Understanding of Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Sustainable development is often portrayed as the act of balancing economic, ecological, and social concerns; this “triple bottom line” approach to sustainable development is dominant in the corporate world. However, triple bottom line approaches, and most other popular approaches to sustainable development, concentrate on the exterior manifestations of development and exclude the interior dimensions of development. In other words, they focus on technological, economic, and institutional development while neglecting cultural and personal development. This paper develops a deeper and wider understanding of sustainable development.

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Because these questions can be interpreted in a variety of ways, their answers—and thus the meaning of sustainable development-- depend strongly on the values of the definer.

This paper argues that values are given too little attention by the most common and popular frameworks for sustainable development. It supports this argument by showing, as an example, how the popular “triple bottom line” approach to sustainability concentrates almost entirely on the exterior aspects of sustainable development, and neglects the interior aspects (including values). The paper then turns to the emerging field of Integral studies to propose a conceptual framework for sustainable development that gives equal attention to the exterior and interior dimensions of reality.

Values and the Triple Bottom Line

The *Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development* identifies three “mutually reinforcing pillars of sustainable development – economic development, social development and environmental protection” (United Nations 2002, Paragraph 5). The idea that sustainable development has these three interrelated dimensions is widespread. For example, it appears in Australia’s *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, which aims to “effectively integrate both long-term and short-term economic, environmental, social and equitable considerations” in decision-making (Section 3A). It also underpins the “triple bottom line” (TBL) reporting frameworks that have gained popularity in recent years.

The *Sustainability Reporting Guidelines* released by the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) set the emerging global standard for TBL reporting (GRI 2002). According to these guidelines, the TBL approach “is currently the most widely accepted approach to defining sustainability” (GRI 2002, p.9). The GRI guidelines encourage organisations to report not only on their financial bottom line, but also on their environmental and social performance. In a TBL approach, sustainable development is implicitly understood as the art of balancing these three aspects of an organisation’s performance.

The TBL framework is useful for expanding organisational thinking and reporting to include environmental and social concerns. However, it provides little guidance on

how an organisation should balance economic, environmental, and social concerns when they are in conflict. This balancing is clearly a matter of values; different people will balance the three pillars differently depending on what they value the most. At present, there is little doubt that the balance is skewed towards economic concerns.

The values and worldviews that cause people and organisations to make particular decisions on a daily basis are therefore of crucial importance to sustainable development. Yet a typical TBL report has very little to say about values, and how they influence the direction of an organisation.ⁱ The failure of TBL reporting frameworks to include specific consideration of values is understandable, since values are more difficult to measure empirically. Nevertheless, any conception of sustainable development that does not include the interior alongside the exterior is partial, as we shall see.

The Framework of Integral Studies

Integral studies is an emerging field that is developing a comprehensive and coherent map of human knowledge and human possibilities. It attempts to integrate objective and subjective forms of knowledge, from the scientific to the spiritual. The American philosopher Ken Wilber pioneered the Integral approach and remains the foremost Integral theorist today. The sections below outline the core elements of Integral philosophy, drawing primarily on Wilber (2000b).ⁱⁱ

Reality is Composed of Holons

One of the central claims of Integral philosophy is that reality is composed of holons (Wilber 2000b). A holon is simply a whole that is simultaneously a part of another whole. For example, a whole atom is part of a whole molecule, which is part of a whole cell, and so on.

Holons Have Four Dimensions

According to Wilber (2000b), all holons have four interrelated dimensions, which he calls the four quadrants (see Figure 1). All holons have both an exterior that can be known objectively, and an interior that can be interpreted subjectively. At the same time,

all holons exist as individuals (wholes) embedded in communities or collectives (of which they are a part). The combination of these properties gives the four quadrants:

(1) Behavioural quadrant (Upper Right): concerned with the visible exterior of individual holons, or the observable behaviour and structure of brain and organism.

(2) Social quadrant (Lower Right): concerned with the exterior of collective holons, or the social system, environment, and techno-economic base.

(3) Intentional quadrant (Upper Left): concerned with the felt interior of individual holons, or self, consciousness, and personal experiences.

(4) Cultural quadrant (Lower Left): concerned with the shared interior of holons in collectives, or culture, worldview, and mutual understanding.

The methods used to study each quadrant are different. The Upper-Right quadrant is the realm of the hard sciences (physics, biology, chemistry), behaviourism, and empiricism. The Lower-Right quadrant is the realm of ecology, systems theory, and economics. The Upper-Left quadrant is the realm of psychology, introspection, and spiritual practice. The Lower-Left quadrant is the realm of hermeneutic cultural theory and cultural anthropology.

Wilber (2000b) argues that the rational worldview that emerged during the Western Enlightenment deified objective knowledge (the Right-Hand quadrants) at the expense of subjective knowledge (the Left-Hand quadrants). As a result, modern (and postmodern) societies focus almost entirely on the Right-Hand quadrants at the expense of the Left-Hand quadrants. This exclusion of the subjective has created a world devoid of meaning and depth, where values are marginalised, deeper meanings are denied, and everything is reduced to objective surfaces. Wilber calls this world “flatland.” If human civilisation is to escape from flatland, Wilber argues that knowledge of all four quadrants must be integrated and equally valued.

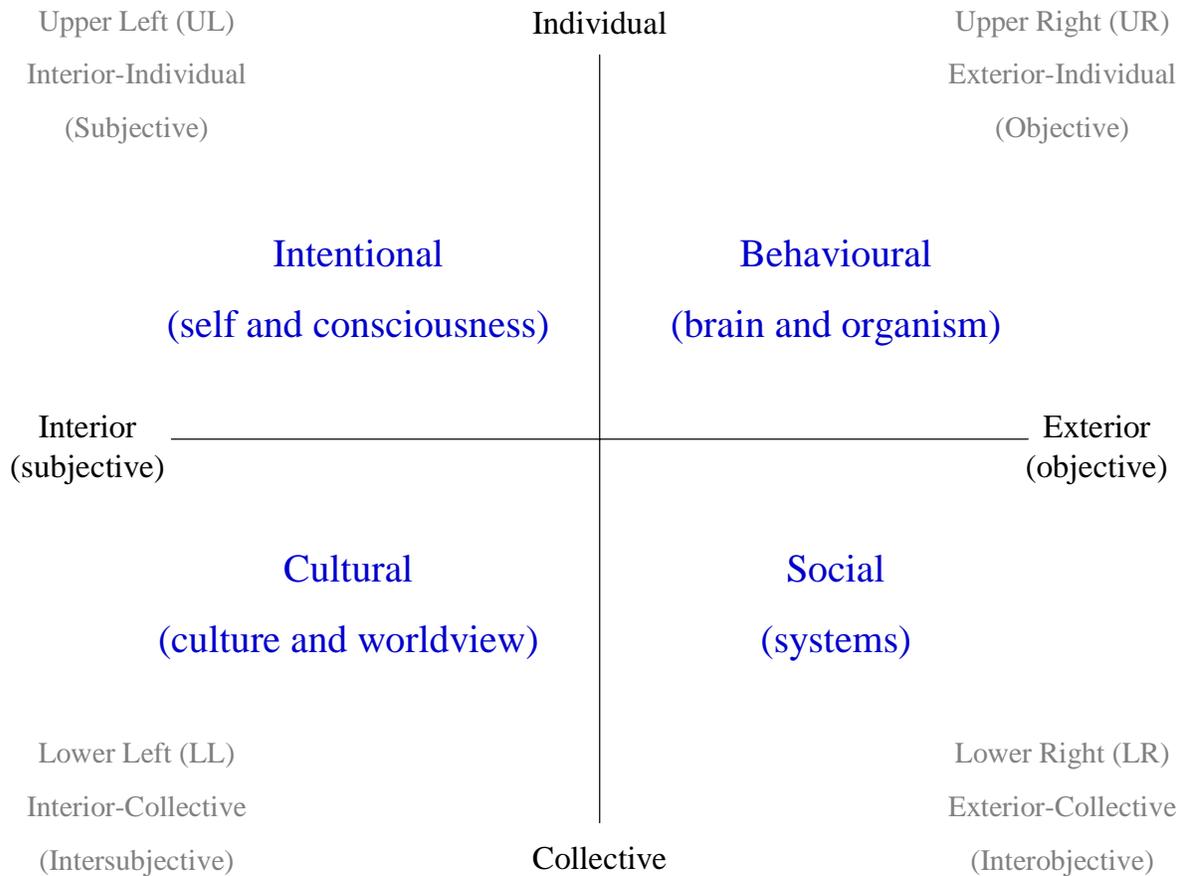


Figure 1. The four quadrants as they appear in humans. Source: Wilber (2000b).

Holons Develop Through Stages in all Four Quadrants

Wilber (2000b) argues that a more sophisticated understanding of developmental processes, particularly in the Left-Hand quadrants, is another crucial requirement for the escape from flatland. He contends that all holons are arranged in holarchies. A holarchy is a hierarchy of holons in which each “higher” level transcends and includes the previous levels. That is, an atom is part of a molecule, which is part of a cell, which is part of an organism. Each new level in the holarchy retains all the properties and abilities of the previous level but adds new emergent properties.

To illustrate, Figure 2 shows the three realms of evolution, as defined by Wilber (2000b). After the Big Bang, evolution initially acted only on the physiosphere, the realm of matter. Eventually, at least on Earth, life evolved and the biosphere emerged. Living things include matter, and must therefore obey the rules of the physiosphere. However,

life also possesses new emergent properties like the ability to reproduce. Therefore, the biosphere transcends and includes the physiosphere, as shown in Figure 2. Similarly, the development of mind and culture created a third realm, the noosphere. Human cultures must obey the rules of both the physiosphere and the biosphere. However, cultures also possess new properties like the ability to communicate through written language. Again, the noosphere transcends and includes the biosphere.

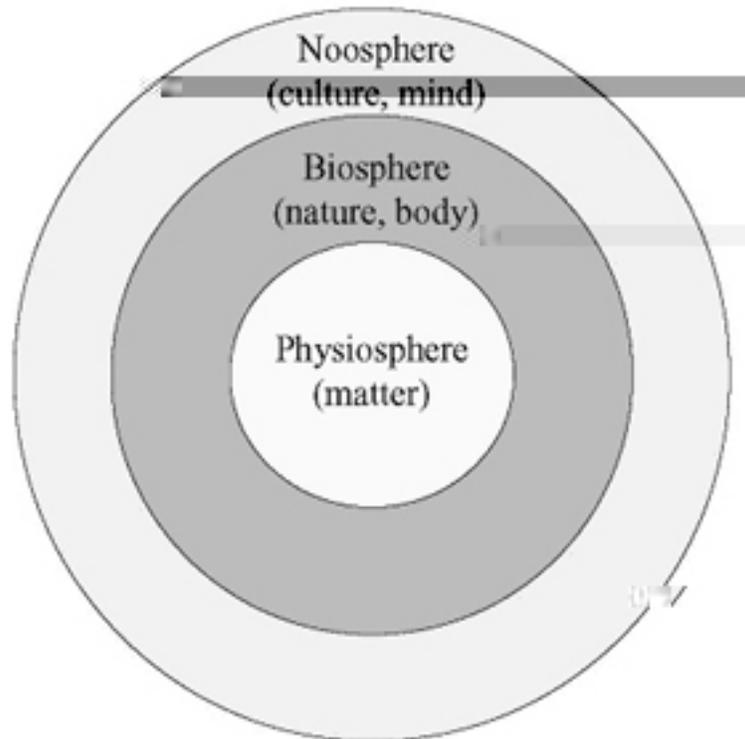


Figure 2. The holarchic relationship of the three realms of evolution.

The implication of this holarchic process is that development, in all four quadrants, moves through recognisable stages towards greater inclusion. Here are some examples of the observed developmental stages in each quadrant from Wilber (2000a):

- (1) Upper Right: atoms, molecules, prokaryotes, eukaryotes, reptiles, mammals, humans.
- (2) Lower Right: human society has developed through foraging, horticultural, agrarian, industrial, and informational stages.

(3) Upper Left: the development of human cognition begins with symbols, then concepts, then the ability to mentally operate on concepts (concrete operational), then the ability to operate on thought processes themselves (formal operational), onto postformal stages.iii

(4) Lower Left: worldviews have developed from archaic to magic to mythic to rational to pluralistic (to integral).

The crucial point is that personal values develop over time, generally towards greater inclusiveness. Similarly, cultural worldviews have developed over time to support greater inclusiveness. The implication is that different people and cultures are at different stages of interior development and therefore have different values and worldviews. It is not valid to assume that all people in a society, or all cultures around the world, share a particular set of values.

The AQAL Approach

Integral studies aims to integrate the four quadrants and the various developmental stages using an “all-quadrant, all-level” (AQAL) approach. An AQAL approach to any particular issue considers the factors in each quadrant that are relevant to the issue, while also considering how the issue appears to people and cultures at different stages of development. The objectives of an AQAL approach are to:

- (1) Consider theoretical and methodological perspectives from all four quadrants;
- (2) Care for all people and cultures at all levels of development; and
- (3) Facilitate the progression of people and cultures through the stages of development.

An Integral Approach to Sustainable Development

An AQAL approach to sustainable development offers the possibility of transcending the limitations of existing sustainable development frameworks by including a deeper understanding of values and worldviews. The sections below outline the implications of an AQAL approach to sustainable development.

All-quadrant

An all-quadrant approach to sustainable development includes the following:

- (1) Upper Right: behavioural, material and biological development;
- (2) Lower Right: socio-political, ecological, economic, and technological development;
- (3) Upper Left: moral, cognitive, and ego development; and
- (4) Lower Left: cultural and ideological development.

Notice that the economic, environmental, and social concerns that are central to the TBL approach are all located in a single quadrant (the Lower Right). An AQAL approach demands consideration of the wider context in which the concerns of the TBL framework are situated. The AQAL approach still recognises the need for technological, economic, and institutional development, but also emphasises behavioural, psychological, and cultural development.

Consider the issue of climate change. In the Lower-Right quadrant, it is clear that a techno-economic system that relies on fossil fuels is unsustainable. Many people therefore call for improvements in energy efficiency, or a shift to renewable energy, as a way of improving the sustainability of the techno-economic system. However, such a shift can only occur if there are corresponding behavioural changes in the Upper-Right quadrant, such as changes in consumer purchasing practices. These behavioural changes are only likely if individuals come to value a future with a stable climate, through a process of personal development and transformation in the Upper Left. Finally, Lower-Left cultural attitudes towards energy use and the environment will influence personal values. An AQAL approach weaves together all these issues.

All-level

Since all humans start out at the beginning in personal development (e.g. the egocentric stage), society is always made up of individuals at all stages of development. Policies for sustainable development must recognise this and care for people at all levels

of development. This implies some attempt to consider how a particular policy will look to people at all levels of development and to tailor policies for people at different stages of development.

At the egocentric level, people are primarily concerned with how a policy will benefit them. At the sociocentric level, people begin to consider how a policy might benefit the groups with which they identify, e.g. their family, organisation, industry, or country. At the worldcentric level, people start to consider how a policy will benefit not only their own country, but people in other countries, future generations, and other species. The idea of sustainable development generally stems from a worldcentric perspective that intrinsically values other cultures and species. Unfortunately, advocates of sustainable development often mistakenly assume that all people share that worldcentric perspective.

In fact, a worldcentric perspective can only be achieved through a long process of personal development. Therefore, sustainable development can only be successful if it helps people move through stages of personal development in a healthy manner. Consciousness transformation and personal development are essential to a sustainable future. Some ways to achieve such transformation include community involvement and spiritual practice (e.g. meditation).

Conclusion

This short paper has only touched briefly on the wide-ranging implications of an AQAL approach to sustainable development. An AQAL approach offers a wider perspective on sustainability that integrates behavioural, social, cultural, and psychological development. Furthermore, an AQAL approach offers a deeper perspective on sustainable development by focusing on the crucial role of values and worldviews in either preventing or facilitating sustainable development. Sustainable development policies and actions that fail to consider the existence of different values and worldviews will inevitably meet opposition from those who do not share the values of the policy maker.

As Wilber (2003, Part III, p.2) puts it:

An increase in exterior or social development can only be sustained with a corresponding increase in interior development in consciousness and culture. Simply trying to put a new form of governance, political system, [techno-economic system] or social distribution network in place without a corresponding development in the levels of the interior dimensions of consciousness has historically guaranteed failure in societal transformation.

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Notes

i The exclusion of values is by no means confined to TBL frameworks. Unpublished research by the author indicates that other sustainable development frameworks, including Agenda 21 and The Natural Step, give minimal attention to the role of values in sustainable development.

ii For readers wishing to explore Wilber's integral philosophy in more detail, the best introduction is *A Theory of Everything* (Wilber 2001).

iii Another scale of personal development that is of particular importance in the context of sustainability is moral development. Young children are egocentric, in the sense that their circle of care does not extend beyond the need to sustain the self. As children grow older, they gradually develop a sense of the other. Their circle of care expands, first to take in their immediate family, and then to take in others in their society; they move from the egocentric stage to the sociocentric stage. If development continues, then the individual may broaden their circle of care to include all people and all cultures; this is the worldcentric stage.