

# Argumentum ad Wilberiam: How truthiness and overgeneralization threaten to turn integral theory into a new scholasticism

Elijah J. Petersen and Mark E. Jaruzel II

Elijah J. Petersen, PhD (independent scholar) and Mark E. Jaruzel II, PsyD candidate (Michigan School of Professional Psychology)

## **Abstract**

While expansive cross-disciplinary inclusivity has created transformative and beautiful metamaps such as Ken Wilber's AQAL theory, one of the main pitfalls in this process, and one which we both unfortunately believe that many components of Wilber's integral theory fall into, is when limited data is utilized to reach spurious, or at least largely untested, truth claims. Such patterns of emphasizing and relying on small data sets are indicative of utilizing over-generalizations instead of orienting generalizations. We believe a careful review of the currently published research will cast doubt, for example, on the delineation of four distinct stages in Third Tier, many of the tenets of integral life practice, claims that meditation has been shown to induce structure-stage growth across the full range of adult development, and statements about the high percent of people developed to the integral stage of consciousness. We find that these questionable claims are consistently repeated as if they were research consensuses in the field without the use of references to support them, the use of outdated references (when references are used), or assertions of truth through repetition, a pattern we dub Argumentum ad Wilberiam. This pattern reminded us of a word coined by Stephen

Colbert – truthiness, or preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true. Many of Wilber’s truth claims are in our opinion more representative of hypotheses, which pass philosophical rigor and sound accurate, but which need more experimentation and data before solid validity claims can be made. Examples of brilliant hypotheses that have been formed in various disciplines which appeared to be true intellectually but were not borne out by future experiments will be discussed. Suggestions for improvement are also provided.

## **Introduction**

### *History Sometimes Rhymes*

There once was a brilliant polymath of great vision who sought a deep understanding of the world around him. While his early interest was in biology, his focus became much more panoramic extending to essentially every discipline known to humanity at the time. Even though his teachers were hopeful that he would follow in their footsteps, he broke dramatically with their views and eventually created his own institution. He was a prolific writer with volumes of work covering the spectrum of the known sciences and even extending to include some humorous fiction. He made sophisticated distinctions that clarified thorny philosophical problems that had vexed his predecessors. Numerous adherents followed his work, many of whom who had only fragments of incomplete texts with which to approach the full corpus of his complex philosophy. He opined about almost everything, sometimes with deep insight and sometimes with little concern for the actual facts of the matter. The problem with this habit was that those who followed his work were often so impressed with his stunning genius that they neglected to check some of the most basic facts, facts which the simplest

empirical investigation would reveal to be incorrect. These assertions went largely unquestioned for a long period of time leading to little further development of the work and an unhealthy reliance on deferring to what the brilliant philosopher had said. We are speaking of course of Aristotle (see Bodéüs, 1999; Press, 1999; Guthrie, 1975), but if you thought we might have been referring to Ken Wilber, there may be good reason.

One of the legacies of Aristotle was that even many centuries after his death his work or variations of it were taken as the final authority on a wide range of issues. Despite making pronouncements that were sometimes fairly ridiculous such as insisting that women have fewer teeth than men (Mayhew, 2004), most of his truth claims were taken as gospel even if all that was required to falsify them was a simple “Now say ah.” The school of philosophy that epitomized the almost wholesale reliance on the unquestioned statements of Aristotle (and other earlier experts) was called scholasticism. The scholastics more or less took what had been stated as verbatim truth without bothering to investigate the actual facts of the matters in question themselves.

While we believe that most of the members of the integral community are far savvier about their reading habits than the scholastics, we are aware that there appears to be a disturbing trend toward introjecting many of the assertions made by Wilber on a range of topics where evidence is tentative at best, lacking, or outright contradictory. In this paper, we will endeavor to count some teeth. We will also strongly encourage the integral community at large to join us in bringing a greater awareness to when Wilber and others are making assertions that are unsupported by investigations through appropriate methodologies. We are inviting a lively and vigorous tussle with theory, experience, and our intuitive frames about what sounds likely and what feels comfortable. To do less is

to run the risk of turning the integral enterprise into a new scholasticism where parrots are prevalent, and the juicy work of enacting still deeper, more whole, realities remains undone.

*Now Say Ah*

The history of ideas is replete with hypotheses that sounded like a good idea at the time. The hypothesis that the earth is still and steady feels far more grounded in commonsense experience than the notion that it is actually moving with extreme speed in a number of different ways. It would seem to make sense that the shape or size of the skull must say something important and obvious about the characteristics of the brain inside of it, about a person's morals, judgment, or intelligence. The reality of aether was taken as an established truth by the scientific community for many years. Still, all of these obvious 'truths' are now known to be woefully partial or flat out wrong. They represented the conflation of a particular perceptual frame with the way things must be, an immature understanding of a process being observed, or a projection of biases and concepts of how things should be onto reality in such a way as to dramatically color the experience of the observers.

We believe that there are quite a few ideas in the integral community and Wilber's articulation of AQAL that also sound reasonable, but may not weather the acid test of actual empirical investigation and community confirmation or rejection (using empirical in a broader sense that includes methodological pluralism). Many of Wilber's truth claims are in our opinion more representative of hypotheses, which pass philosophical rigor and sound accurate, but which need more experimentation and data before solid validity claims can be made. A problem that we perceive within the integral

community is that Wilber will suggest something that sounds reasonable *prima facie* and it will often be accepted by large portions of the community as being necessarily the case. Similar to the myth of the given, there is a sort of myth of the given by Wilber where what he says is often largely accepted as is. We suggest two notions that may be helpful in making explicit when such an occurrence may be arising. They are the notions of truthiness and the *Argumentum ad Wilberiam*.

### *Truthiness and the Argumentum ad Wilberiam*

We will draw on two notions, one sourced in postmodern culture and the other a neologism that is an homage to the formal tradition of philosophical argument. The first notion is that of truthiness. Merriam-Webster (2013) gives one definition of truthiness as: “the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true.” In this regard, as we proceed we will see that many of the ideas prevalent in the integral community may have the ring of truthiness, in that they sound right and would be preferable to what actual data and research does say or might say on the matter.

In homage to the scholastics and with the deep intention that we learn from their oversights, we wish to introduce the *Argumentum ad Wilberiam*. It is derived from the traditional fallacy of the *argumentum ad verecundiam* or argument from authority. Blackburn (1996) defines the *argumentum ad verecundiam* as: “appealing to an authority outside its legitimate area; illicitly trading on reverence and respect (p. 24).” That is making the mistake of relying on a source of information because of respect for them or appreciation of their expertise in another domain. With that in mind, we offer our definition of the *Argumentum ad Wilberiam*.

Argumentum ad Wilberiam: appealing to assertions made by Ken Wilber as the final authority on a given question or matter especially concerning disciplines or areas of research where his expertise is dated, questionable, or both; or taking statements made by Ken Wilber as being inherently true, without checking the validity of them or the evidence or process through which such statements were formed. Often found in the integral community stated in the form: “Ken says...” A special case of the Argumentum ad Wilberiam is the Argumentum ad Wilber-I-Am where Ken Wilber personally makes statements or pronouncements with little or no evidence given to support them, behaving in a manner that implies they will simply be accepted as obviously or inherently true.

We invite our fellow integral scholars into a discussion where we are alert to phrases that start “Ken says...” We hope to engage in a lively dialog about what Wilber’s expertise is and what it is not. We hope that the community increasingly moves away from a place where “Ken says...” is the end of the investigation and into a place where it is the just the beginning of our collaborative tussling in, with, and as the kosmos. Holding both of these notions in mind, we would like to directly challenge some of the specific assertions made by Wilber and other members of the integral community.

### **Specific examples from integral theory**

#### *Four Distinct Stages in Third Tier*

To our knowledge, Aurobindo and Plotinus are the only authors (other than Wilber) who have posited something like four distinct structure-stages that could be considered third tier, although the construct of different tiers themselves is even questionable. They gathered their data for these stages exclusively from a Zone 1 phenomenological methodology, which has numerous limitations in the absence of Zone

2 corroboration. Forman (2010) addresses some of these issues: “As Wilber noted, Zone 2 structures do not disclose themselves to individuals in sitting meditation, but are instead the product of studying large groups of persons and looking for shifts and patterns of identity and self understanding (an objective look at subjective selves). At this point, we have not had enough well-designed studies of such persons, and lack as well large populations suitable for such study. Much of what we know, therefore, is based in spiritual scripture and teachings and phenomenological reporting. This is important evidence for Zone 2 hypothesis formulation, but does not stand up entirely by itself (p. 166).” We are in strong agreement. We also share Forman’s concern about clarity regarding what is empirically supported and what is intriguing anecdote: “The issue here is that it confuses streams of thought based on empirical data-Piagetian postformal studies- with theory generated by a spiritual teacher. Although such theories, particularly those drawn from personal or group experiences, are excellent in terms of generating hypotheses for research, they should not be offered in lieu of empirical studies (2010, p. 90).” Additionally, Aurobindo and Plotinus provided these accounts before a differentiation between structure-stages and state-stages was suggested. Thus, Wilber’s framing of these as specific structure-stages in third tier is highly questionable.

Conversely, Susanne Cook-Greuter, who has developed one of the most careful (and perhaps the only) investigations of post-autonomous ego development only had tentative data for a single stage in the territory of third tier which she titled Unitive (Cook-Grueter, 1999, 2001). In this investigation, Cook-Greuter specifically states that she was not able to find evidence for additional distinct stages in third tier (Cook-Greuter 2005).

Nevertheless, Wilber repeatedly and strongly asserts that four structure stages do exist in third tier. For example, “If Fowler continued to refine his research with those higher structure-stages in mind (as Cook-Greuter has done on the Loevinger line, for example) we would expect such research to reveal that, at this time, there are somewhere around 3 or 4 *stages of faith* beyond his stage 6 (which is roughly a **turquoise-level faith**)... (Wilber 2006, p. 100).” Additionally, Wilber makes references to third tier capacities such as the following: “The first is that many of the great contemplative texts, sutras, and trantras were written in the cognitive line from at least the turquoise and often indigo or violet levels (Wilber 2006, p. 106)” without explaining what components of these texts indicate this structure-stage development. We also note Wilber’s use of 2nd and 3rd person language in these passages when 1st person language would likely be both more accurate and more honest.

Given the lack of data by any researcher to posit four distinct structure-stages for third tier, and the arbitrariness of reframing Aurobindo’s and Plotinus’s work as suggesting as much instead of possibly relating to state-stage development, we believe that Wilber postulating four third tier stages reflects Wilber stretching his map far beyond where any data are available. Third tier appears to us to be largely speculation despite Wilber’s strong word choices indicating high certainty in these constructs. Moreover, Wilber includes a distinct “Ego-Aware” stage in Table 2.4 of *Integral Spirituality* for the Loevinger/Cook-Greuter line, but evidence and information about a separate Ego-Aware stage was not described in any scholarly work by Cook-Greuter that we are aware of, and when this stage was mentioned, it was simply another name for the construct-aware stage (Cook-Greuter, 1999, 2001; Cook-Greuter and Soulen, 2007; Ingersoll and Cook-

Greuter, 2007). This raises some questions: what is the threshold of evidence that Wilber requires for “data” to be included in his map? How carefully does he read the existing literature before doing theory? Lastly, to what extent is data stretched to validate other components of his particular enactment of AQAL?

This discussion is not intended to indicate that second tier is itself a really “real” thing, because it was formulated, somewhat arbitrarily, by Graves (1970) and subsequently appropriated and reified in the integral jargon. The proposition of a third tier requires a second tier, which we question as a potentially useful construct in the first place. One danger of the acceptance of second tier is that it implicitly privileges integral structures above and beyond just being one stage higher. Even if we accept that it is prudent and auspicious to cluster stages into tiers, developmental researchers have suggested a range of different tier configurations that are at considerable variance with a pre-integral, integral, post-integral framing that is implicit in Wilber’s three tier model (see for example Miller & Cook-Greuter, 1990). Furthermore, to our knowledge, the speculation that second tier is logarithmically more effective than first tier (Beck & Cowan, 2003) is entirely untested, and is likely not even testable.

### *Integral Life Practice*

One of the hallmarks of integral life practice is the postulation that cross-training, specifically doing practices in body, mind, spirit, and shadow, unequivocally offers unique synergistic benefits to practitioners (Wilber, 2006; Wilber, Patton, Leonard, & Morelli, 2008). They state, “This *transformational cross-training* accelerates growth, increases the likelihood of healthy development, and vastly deepens one’s capacity for transformational living (Wilber, 2006, p. 202),” and “The 4 Core Modules

simultaneously activate several powerful synergies, between body and mind, spirit and body, shadow (the unconscious) and spirit. Additional modules can further intensify these benefits (Wilber et al. 2008, p. 22-23).” While neither of us would discourage any person from initiating growth-oriented practices in any of these areas when appropriate, we are skeptical of the evidence that supports this claim. There are some readily apparent advantages to shadow work with some personal lines of development (i.e., emotional, interpersonal), but in what ways these different practices are synergistic has not been fully fleshed out to our knowledge. For example, does this mean that doing cognitive growth work in perspective taking would help improve weight lifting? At this point with the possibility of interesting but largely anecdotal evidence available and the possible truthfulness of a proposed synergistic effect, we believe this topic would be a ripe area for future research and data collection. However, we are agnostic about what the potential benefits would be and how the different core modules (and auxiliary models) would influence each other.

Along these lines Walsh asks in a recent article, “Which specific capacities and developmental lines are enhanced by which practices in which people under what conditions?” (Walsh, 2009). While Wilber seems to suggest is that ILP is likely to be universally beneficial, the scientific literature is more mixed. A number of recent studies have called into question even the fact that exercise itself is universally beneficial. Karavirta et al. (2010) found that some individuals do not respond favorably to weight training, some do not respond favorably to endurance exercises, and some do not respond favorably to either weight training or endurance exercises. Timmons (2010) found that exercise training outcomes were highly variable and unpredictable. Additionally, there is

clinical literature that reports serious adverse events from meditation practice (Yorston, 2001). Anecdotal clinical lore also suggests that there are some individuals who are not yet ready to benefit from serious psychological/shadow work.

Taken as a whole, these findings suggest that ILP practice may not be the panacea that Wilber seems to imply. In fact, for a significant minority of individuals it may have little benefit and for a small minority of individuals it may even have an adverse effect. We have heard very little serious discussion of these issues within the integral community. Overall we take the above to be an accurate reflection of the currently available literature, and thus find the claims about the synergistic effects of ILP to be highly premature.

#### *Structure-stage growth and meditation*

One common claim in Wilber's work is that meditation has been proven to foster structure stage growth. For example, "... considerable research has demonstrated that the more you experience meditative or contemplative states of consciousness, the faster you develop through the stages of consciousness. ... For example, whereas around 2% of the adult population is at second tier, after four years of meditation, that 2% goes to 38% in the meditation group. This is truly staggering research (Wilber 2006, p. 196-197)." "On the basis of the research to date, I believe we already have enough data to answer:

*Meditation can profoundly accelerate the unfolding of a given line of development...*(Wilber 2000, p. 639) (italics his)."

Conversely, this quote by Walsh and Shapiro is much more humble about this linkage. "Meditative disciplines claim to facilitate maturation to these kinds of (advanced) stages and beyond, and growing research offers initial support (Walsh &

Shapiro, 2006).” Walsh more fully delineates what is not known about the relationship between meditation and structure-stage, “The first project is to identify precisely which qualities of heart and mind—or more technically, which specific capacities, states, and developmental lines— are enhanced by contemplative practices? Of course, this project will eventually turn out to be far more complex. Eventually the question will become: “Which specific capacities and developmental lines are enhanced by which practices in which people under what conditions?” (Walsh, 2009).

While we are uncertain where the quoted results by Wilber come from for the 2% to 38% change to second tier after four years of meditation, the one study that most closely matches Wilber’s description is described by Alexander and Langer (1990). It is important to point out that they give the timeframe as 11 years and that the original sample of mediators had 9% already scoring at Loevinger’s highest stages to begin with. This would seem to indicate that Wilber’s four year claim is unsupported, the percentage he gives is inaccurate, and that there are some very reasonable questions that could be raised about how representative or generalizable the study might be. We were surprised to find that many of these criticisms had already been raised by Andrews (2006) though we are unaware of any replies to his concerns.

We are also aware that a variation of the above research was published in a peer reviewed journal by Chandler, Alexander, and Heaton (2005). While the study reports significant differences between the group of meditators and the controls, it reports a mean move of about 0.7 stages in a decade. This is a far more modest claim, namely meditate regularly for a decade and move *almost* one structural stage. More specifically the average developmental stage of the individuals in the meditation group started at 6.1

(Conscientious or Orange altitude) and after a decade of regular meditation increased to 6.8 (still Conscientious or Orange altitude but getting close to Individualistic or Green altitude). This is strikingly different than the way in which meditation is portrayed by Wilber. Additionally, drilling down on the details, we note that the meditation group only had 34 participants that were included in the final data analysis at the end and all of them had been students at Maharishi University of Management. It may be that the university curriculum as a whole played the predominant role that caused the developmental change, or that the average person who is inclined to attend Maharishi University of Management is already very interested in personal growth and on a dedicated trajectory of trying to develop structurally anyway. Regardless, we are of the opinion that a single study of 34 people is a highly valuable starting point, but too small to serve as the final word on which to base giving personal and psychological growth advice to the public at large.

#### *Wilber-Combs Matrix*

One new and intriguing hypothesis described in *Integral Spirituality* (Wilber, 2006) and *Consciousness Explained Better* (Combs, 2009) is the Wilber-Combs matrix (or the Combs-Wilber matrix). This construct postulates the existence of distinct structure-stages and state-stages as opposed to Wilber's earlier models wherein psychic, subtle, causal, and nondual followed centaur (or another "second tier" equivalent) (i.e., Wilber, 1999). Again, while we find this a very interesting hypothesis that in many ways passes truthfulness examinations (i.e., it seems intuitively accurate), the idea was never fully explored or tested. We have a number of questions about this arrangement. Is there evidence for people stabilized at all of the different state-stages at all of the structure

stages (i.e., archaic/infrared and non-dual awake)? Are levels of state-stage familiarity needed for growth to various structure-stages? While there was some philosophical discussion of authoritarian Zen monks who have lots of behaviors reminiscent of amber but are non-dual awakened, there was little additional discussion, and no empirical evidence to our knowledge, of the Wilber-Combs matrix hypothesis that was given directly by Wilber (or Combs). Despite this, our impression is that the Wilber-Combs matrix was uncritically treated as being inherently true in many integral circles since its first mention. We are aware that there has subsequently been a test of this hypothesis that has shown initial support of its claims (Martin, 2010) and we applaud such cutting edge investigations of the claims of Wilberian integral theory, but we note that consensus in integral circles appeared to have been formed well before any initial evidence was in.

### **Suggestions for Improvement**

Given what we believe are some consistent patterns of less than adequate scholarship by Wilber, which are at times repeated in the integral community at large, we would like to offer some suggestions which we believe will help improve the quality of scholarship in the integral community and facilitate greater acceptance of integral scholarship elsewhere in academia. For the most part, these less than adequate patterns are not meeting the criterion of integral scholarship by failing even to meet the standards at lower levels (predominately modernist demands for evidence).

One important adjustment we recommend is the much more judicious use of language to differentiate between hypotheses and other truth claims that are extensively validated in the literature. It is our impression that sometimes hypotheses (i.e., third tier) are carelessly lumped together with other findings that have a wealth of scholarly support

(i.e., the first few stages of child development) with regards to the strength of the certainty used to describe such constructs. This encouragement of various levels of precision resembles different standards of evidence required for court cases in the United States (preponderance of evidence versus proof beyond a shadow of a doubt). By using more care with word choices, this will also alert other integral scholars to topic areas where additional research may help refine important components of the metatheory or encourage new applications of existing theory. For example, we believe, as described earlier, that the Wilber-Combs matrix is still a very tentative proposal, and we wholeheartedly encourage investigations such as the ongoing work by Terri O'Fallon and colleagues to flesh out alternative models to the relationships between structure-stages and state-stages (O'Fallon, 2010). This cycle between honesty and clarity about the areas of strong evidence versus tentative expectations and additional research to confirm (or refute) those less established pieces will help the theory to continue to grow toward more beauty, truth and goodness.

Along these lines, another one of the disappointments we have when reading Wilber's work is the entire lack of discussions around what parts of the model may have weaknesses or pieces of reality that appear to contradict the current version of the model. Instead, readers only discover the limitations of previous versions of AQAL when the next version is ready which contains solutions to those limitations. We worry that this current style of process may subtly enact a version of AQAL within the integral community that either has a wait and see what Wilber says next bias or a subtle bias to not even explore alternate enactments that might better mesh with points of tension within Wilber's most recent works. We think this runs the risk of integral scholasticism

or argumentum ad Wilberiam. While there may be a strong motivation in a theory of everything to exclude parts that may not appear to work, as if they would undermine the whole endeavor, this does not strike us as very integral. We also believe that this construct (integral metatheory), like the manifest world and evolution itself, continues to grow and expand and refine in a recursive fashion, and that such discussions would bring more humility, vulnerability, and a sense of “being in progress” to the model that would make it more alive and active, instead of being the current, perfected (read ‘official’) version. We would prefer this grittier, rawer version, with some components too that currently appear well polished. We believe acknowledging the limitations of the current design would be more intellectually honest and transparent while also fostering a more rapid evolution of the integral endeavor by directing attention to the pieces of metatheory that are perceived to be the most in need of additional refinement (or dramatic alterations).

Two additional relatively straightforward suggested modifications to Wilber’s recent writing (i.e., *Integral Spirituality* and *Integral Life Practice*) are to more consistently support validity claims with references and to more thoroughly flesh out novel philosophical concepts or constructs in the model. Both of these books appeared to us as being more popularized forms, in contrast to the highly referenced and denser earlier books such as *Atman Project* (Wilber, 1999). While the avoidance of extensive citations does make these books more available to a broader audience, we unfortunately find that it will make them less likely to be accepted by the academic community because it does not follow the basic modernist rules of providing evidence/references, and thorough arguments for truth claims. We have found, as described above, that is was

very difficult to understand the evidence for some of the claims made, which causes us to be more skeptical about all of the truth claims made. One more intriguing issue along these lines is how to handle making orienting generalizations for meta-theories in the midst of ongoing academic disagreements within a field. Given that some of these disagreements may stem from multiple developmental level conflicts, resolutions should not be expected and some perspectives will absolutely be more accurate than others. Making developmental distinctions about which pieces of arguments are true and which partial is part and parcel of integral scholarship. What we would like to recommend is transparency in this endeavor, which will likely include explicit developmental assessments of disagreements in the field, so that other integral researchers may more readily follow the process of how such judgments were made. This does not mean the “green” resolution of giving everyone a place at the discussion, nor does it mean excluding those voices that are inconvenient, but it does include transparent explanations of why certain perspectives were excluded as well as why some perspectives were given greater weight than others.

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