

Not-So-Integral Futures

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Abstract

In this paper I review some notable occurrences at the November 2005 conference Global Soul, Global Mind, and Global Action at Tamkang University. I note the further development of integral and post-conventional futures studies, and ask whether Integral Futures is as integral as it claims to be, based on the events at that conference. I conclude that there is a need for Integral Futures practitioners to honour the philosophical essence of that field, and also to keep its foundations grounded at a level that can be appreciated by futurists not versed in the field, and by researchers and interested parties from other disciplines.

To be successful Integral Futures practitioners will seek to understand the nature, structure and limitations of their own perspective. They will also become proficient in exploring different perspectives in order to find approaches that are appropriate to different situations. Finally they will understand and grasp the nature of the relationships between different perspectives. They will avoid being attached to any single view and be open to a wide range of perspectives and interpretations. (Slaughter 2003)

What happens when you take a prominent techno-utopian futurist (Michio Kaku) and place him in a room full of post-conventional and Integral Futures practitioners? I found out the answer to this question for myself when in November of 2005 I attended the conference *Global Soul, Global Mind, and Global Action* at Taiwan's Tamkang University. More to the point, the result of this "interaction" highlights some crucial issues faced by Integral Futures practitioners, and has important implications for these more esoteric arms of futures studies. It is these issues and implications that are the focus of this paper.

As one might expect from a conference with such a theme, many of the speakers touched upon matters epitomised by the essence of Richard Slaughter's opening paper: "Beyond the Mundane" (Slaughter 2006). The varied topics at hand supported Slaughter's claim that there has been a shift in Futures Studies. The May edition of JFS featured several papers and essays taken from that conference which suggest that this shift has indeed arrived (e.g., Anthony 2006; Jones 2006; Riedy 2006; Slaughter 2006). Meanwhile Bussey's (2006) "critical spirituality", Laszlo's (2006) paper synthesising science and spirituality, and Shambhushivananda's (2006) "cosmic society" all represent con-

Journal of Futures Studies, November 2006, 11(2): 155 - 164

cepts more or less in accordance with this post-conventional perspective. This emergence can be seen as being a part of what Richard Slaughter calls "Integral Futures" (Slaughter 2006: 18). Though the latter theorists do not specifically use the term "Integral Futures", their ideas are highly compatible with the essence of the concept.

First a little background. According to Slaughter (2003) there are approximately four main phases of futures work. The first was the empirical tradition, which was most prominent in the USA. The second was a "culturally based" approach - predominantly European - which eventually led to critical futures studies. Then in the third phase an international and multicultural thrust emerged, which Slaughter finds is still developing. Yet it is Slaughter's fourth phase that this paper is concerned with - the emergence of post-conventional futures and Integral Futures studies. Integral Futures studies has developed from the work of Ken Wilber (amongst others) and the integral tradition which he has engendered (Slaughter 2003). Wilber's four-quadrant model has been discussed at some length elsewhere, so I will merely make a brief account here. (Slaughter 2006; Reidy 2006; Jones 2006)¹. The following diagram encapsulates the model.

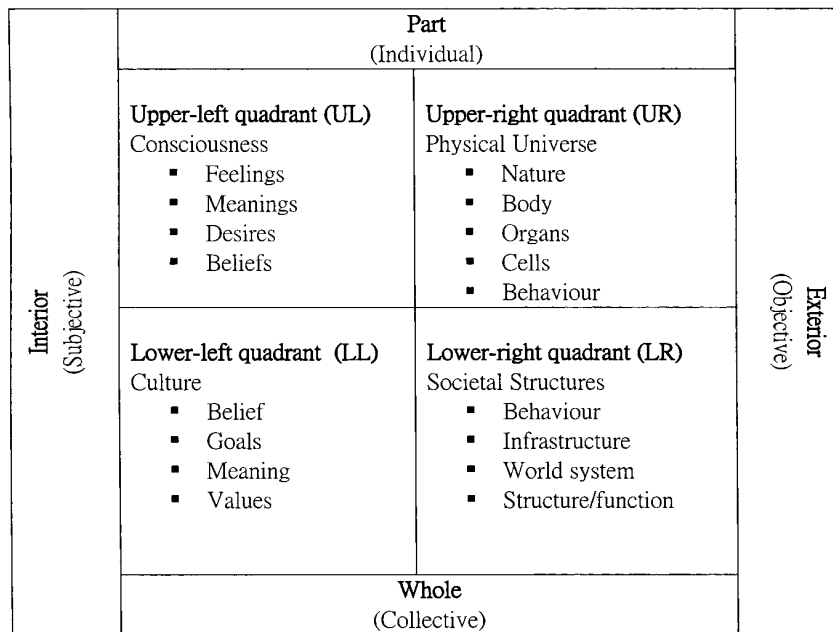


Figure 1
Adapted from Slaughter & Bussey (2005: 103)

The essence of Wilber's model is summarised by Slaughter in the following way. *The central feature of the integral approach is to honor all truths and acknowledge the value of many different ways of knowing across all significant fields.* (Slaughter 2003)

This is further epitomised by the opening quote to this paper, which also comes from Slaughter. The key to Integral Futures is therefore that it is integral - by its very

definition. If we can take the words of speakers at the Tamkang conference and the papers listed in the references of this paper on face value, one could hardly deny that Integral Futures is just that - integral. Yet as they say, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, not in the recipe. Just how integral is Integral Futures, based upon what happened at the Tamkang conference?

In regard to this question, there were (for myself) two defining moments at the conference. Both involved physicist Michio Kaku. Inayatullah (2002) has pointed out that the mythical often reveals the deepest level of a discourse. I consider the presence of Michio Kaku represented something touching upon the mythical – perhaps even the synchronistic if you will. In Wilber's terms he embodied the voice of mainstream science, or the upper-right quadrant – the empirical and material ².

Allow me to backtrack a little further. In 2003 I wrote a critique of Kaku's highly successful book *Visions* (Anthony 2003), where I unpacked his representation of the future and found that it lacked "depth." In particular I criticised its techno-utopianism and its lack of integral, spiritual and non-Western perspectives on the futures of humankind. I also wrote a rather unflattering review of it on Amazon. com, which was not well received by Kaku fans! It was therefore with a little nervousness that I anticipated the conference, knowing that Kaku would be there, even though I knew that it was extremely unlikely that Kaku had ever heard of me or my article in JFS.

The first defining moment at the Tamkang conference came on the first morning of the conference when one of our colleagues was giving her presentation. Kaku had already completed his presentation. With some degree of dexterity I had managed up till that point to avoid a personal meeting with the physicist, which may well have been due to my own cowardice. Kaku was sitting with his partner near the front of the auditorium, and - as luck would have it - I was sitting just a few seats behind him. This was a perfect position to observe him. The presentation in progress incorporated a considerable smattering of Integral Futures and Wilberian theory. I was particularly interested to note what Kaku's reaction might be to such ideas. At first Kaku seemed interested, but soon began to take an unusually strong interest in the conference flyers, and began chatting with his partner. A little later he and his partner got up and snuck out of the room, well before the presentation had ended. It seemed that Integral Futures does not quite resonate with modern physics.

The second notable event occurred later that evening at the conference dinner, which was held at the university. All guests were seated at round tables with a dozen or so people at each table. There were scores of tables and hundreds of guests, because the dinner was a celebration of a special anniversary of the university, not merely for the futures conference. I recalled that a spiritual teacher once told me that you should always note who is seated directly opposite you when sitting in a circle, for that person mirrors an aspect of your own psyche that you have not fully acknowledged. According to my teacher, the opposite person represents a polarity of yourself; a cosmic synchronicity for the singular purpose of bringing something into your awareness.

The seating was all pre-arranged, so there was no chance of my choosing my own seat. So after I walked in I searched for my name tag, and sat down. Of all the hundreds of possible combinations of people who could have assumed the position at my table opposite me, can you guess who was sitting at 180 degrees from me?

If you guessed Michio Kaku, you are correct.

I spent the entire evening chatting with my futures colleagues immediately beside me, while nervously avoiding dialogue with Kaku. Yet as the evening progressed, I could not help but notice that I was not the only one at fault. After a time Michio and his partner were left sitting by themselves. I did not notice anybody approaching them or initiating conversation with them. And much to my shame, I count myself amongst those people. The night came and went and in the end the reality is that I – a man who likes to consider himself a multi-disciplinarian – sat opposite one of the world's most notable physicists and I could not be bothered to raise a single word with him. I would like to present some elaborate excuse as to why I failed to talk to him, but there is none.

So Kaku came and went and somewhere in between he and I (and most of the other futurists present) seemed to have missed each other. In my defense I did make a rather belated attempt to right the wrong. On the afternoon of the second day of the conference, realising that I was a complete coward, I rushed up to Michio just as I was about to board the bus for the after-function excursion. Michio was not going on the bus, so I knew that this would probably be the final opportunity to say something to him. I introduced myself a little nervously. Much to my surprise the expected karate chop to the forehead never came. Michio smiled politely and returned the greeting, and then I jumped on the bus.

What can we make of this seeming division between Kaku and many of the other futurists? What was the barrier? Surely if we call ourselves integral futurists we must also embrace Kaku's vision – even if we consider it limited – not simply discard it without so much as pausing to listen. One explanation might be that Kaku was irrelevant to the conference. Conversation about Kaku's presentation amongst my colleagues that I was personally witness to tended to be critical. They said it was dated, utopian, and dare I say "shallow". Kaku had found a niche and was milking the market for some extra cash, said another colleague.

While I am in agreement with certain parts of these analyses, my belief is that we (largely) ignored Kaku predominantly out of our own arrogance. Secondly, we have not fully integrated or embraced Kaku's preferred domains of enquiry. Many of the futurists at the conference presented papers with a heavy emphasis upon Wilber's upper-left (the intentional, first person). In particular there was a heavy emphasis upon spirituality and consciousness evolution. Notably, this is the very domain which Wilber has been accused of privileging himself (Bauwens n.d.). Others incorporated strong cultural and social perspectives, consistent with Wilber's lower-right and lower-left quadrants. Besides Kaku, few of the presentations I observed embraced the upper right (empirical).³

Let us be reminded of what Slaughter has suggested about the methods of Integral Futures.

Integral Futures work therefore reaches across previously separate realms. It regards developments in the LR with the "eye" of perception that it consciously adopts in the UL. It will participate in shared social processes in the LL and take due note of the interobjective realities in the UR. In other words the invitation to consider Integral Futures work is an invitation to move and act in a deeper, richer

and infinitely more subtly interconnected world. (Slaughter 2003. Italics added.)

By such standards, we failed to live up to the tenets of our own philosophy. There is not much chance of our being truly integral if we do not even have the "integrity" to so much as talk to the out-of-field guests we invite to our futures conferences. The question must be asked: why not? After all he was arguably the most famous and prominent presenter at the conference, and his research knowledge in *Visions* was gleaned via interviews with around a hundred of the world's most prominent scientists and thinkers.

If we are to achieve integrality it must be a genuine integrality, not a token or "shallow" integrality. At the Tamkang conference we had one of the world's great physicists as a guest, and many of us effectively snubbed him. And that remains a source of some remorse for me as a futures practitioner.

Privileging the upper-left quadrant

On the basis of this I can only conclude that Integral Futures as it currently stands is not as integral as those of us writing in the field claim it to be. The danger is that Integral Futures will become increasingly irrelevant or dispensable to those working within mainstream discourses (scientific and philosophical), unless there is a greater degree of integration of all four quadrants. The essential issue is that Wilber's system (somewhat self-contradictingly) privileges the UL quadrant - the spiritual and intentional. And even then it privileges certain aspects of that - specifically Eastern and mystical religious traditions (Bauwens n.d.). This is implicitly the case as the model is constructed from "data" drawn from the insights of mystics.

I personally feel that many futures practitioners who have embraced the Wilberian approach do so with an unconscious perspective of privileging the spiritual and transpersonal domains of experience and perception. It must be recalled that the higher levels of Wilber's (2000a, b) developmental model of consciousness are the transpersonal realms. The "rational" levels fall in the middle, with the material levels at the bottom. Idealists such as Wilber invert the epiphenomenalism of materialist science. In materialist science consciousness is relegated to the status of epiphenomena - an accidental bi-product of the material universe. In Eastern idealism the material is reduced to epiphenomena, a lower tier projection of the universal mind ("Spirit" in Wilber's model), or effectively dismissed as an illusion.

Therefore all four quadrants are not equal in Wilber's model. Implicitly the upper-left (the intentional) is placed atop the system. The bottom two quadrants can be seen as following, emerging largely from the rational and critical mind. Finally the upper-right implicitly bottoms out the system, because it deals "only" with the material and the "surfaces" - Wilber's "Flatland."

In mainstream dominant science the physicist finds herself in a position of exalted and elevated knowledge, working with knowledge that is beyond the reach of the masses, including her audience. This can lead to a kind of arrogance. I feel that Kaku himself was guilty of this. This became clear to me from the opening parable within Kaku's presentation on the first morning. In this parable a succession of people are bought before the guillotine to be executed. Each man is asked for his final words.

However the guillotine malfunctions. The first two men are saved because their final words fail to identify the true mechanical fault with the machine. Finally a physicist is brought before the guillotine. Sadly, the physicist is foolish enough to identify the mechanical fault, and ends up having his head chopped off. The moral of this story for physicists, stated Kaku, was that sometimes physicists know too much for their own good, and therefore are best to keep some secrets to themselves.

Therefore Kaku immediately set himself above his own audience, with his self-professed superior knowledge base. This is the equivalent of "God in a lab coat" - the scientist as God. This inherent arrogance is further suggested in the arguments contained in his book *Visions* where he finds that humankind, with the expanded knowledge of physics and modern science, is on the verge of becoming "choreographers of nature... masters of space and time" (Kaku 1997: 355).

Yet Wilber and integral futurists are often guilty of a similar arrogance. Wilber (2001: 30) finds that only those who have practiced meditative insight are capable of passing judgment upon the transpersonal and intuitive realms of enquiry. Notably these comprise the "highest" knowledge in his development psychology (Wilber 2000c). Those who have not attained - or been trained in - these higher cognitive capacities must be excluded from the communal verification system, Wilber finds. Is it ironic that both idealists and materialists insist that their preferred realm is the most "real" level of the universe? The materialists insist that the material is the basis of cosmos, the idealists insist that the imaginal and psychic is the primary level. Either way, neither party will "see" the other's point of view as long as this mutual arrogance persists. To understand a man, walk a mile in his moccasins the native American saying goes.

There is an inherent privileging process implicit within the Wilberian model, which carries with it the potential for snobbery - and this may be being carried over into Integral Futures. We effectively snubbed Kaku because we believe that we are better than him, that we know more than him. To bring us down to earth a little, and to avoid making the same mistake in future, may I suggest that we integral futurists continue to broaden our own horizons through maintaining an open and non-judgmental attitude to those who are coming from a different perspective. After all, this is the stated essence of Integral Futures. We might even learn something new.

In this sense Kaku represented a mirror to us. I suspect we both felt superior to each other. The result was that Kaku probably learnt little or nothing from the conference, and we probably learnt just as little from him.

Grounding our futures

A related factor that concerned me was that some of the ideas and concepts being communicated at the Tamkang conference lacked a grounded perspective. By grounded I mean theory, data or experience which relate to "hard" science and the everyday physical world - Wilber's UR quadrant. Our work becomes ungrounded when it refers repeatedly to spiritual and metaphysical concepts and experience with minimal reference to physical (UR) and behavioural (LR) experience and data. I believe that discussions of esoteric experiences involving hallucinogens, cosmic mind, and the transper-

sonal are perfectly legitimate aspects of Integral Futures. However when they begin to dominate the discourse there is a danger of perpetuating what Wilber calls the error of the "ascenders" – becoming so focused upon the divine and spiritual that the mundane is neglected. According to Wilber (2000b: 374-375), there has been a split between the ascenders (idealists) and descenders (materialists) since the Enlightenment. In the Enlightenment the ascenders were victorious, but the victory was won at the cost of the divine and spiritual dimensions of human experience (Wilber 2006: 374-375).

In this sense it can be seen that the inability of many integral futurists at the Tamkang conference to meet Kaku on equal terms - and his inability to meet us half-way - is a reflection of this ongoing Enlightenment split. There is therefore a need to ground the work of Integral Futures at levels that can be meaningfully understood by other futurists and non-futurists. This does not mean to "sell out" or "dumb it down", but to make it comprehensible. In order to reach out and be understood by people, our ideas need to touch them, not remain floating out of reach.

In something of an irony it may be noted that the perspective I have taken here, and the perceptions I had at the Tamkang conference are themselves merely partial. For how much can any one individual see of the totality of things? Subjecting myself to a Wilberian analysis, it may be noted that I have included no comments or perspectives from other conference goers in relation to the primary subject of this paper. There is no hard data here (UR). At an introspective level (UL) I may note my own discomfort at philosophy that tends towards the "New Age" – and therein the fear of being labeled "New Age" myself. This is not an unusual fear amongst writers and thinkers at the fringes of conventional philosophy and science. Wilber's late wife Treya wrote of how Wilber expressed his dismay at once finding his works situated in the "New Age" section of a book shop! (Wilber 2000d). Finally my perceptions of the synchronicities involved in Kaku's presence (including at the dinner table) are reflective of my own worldview, with its particular spiritual and holistic predilections.

Nonetheless I conclude with this point. Integral Futures is in danger of being both invisible and irrelevant unless it can bridge the gap between the spiritual and the mundane. As Richard Slaughter (2006) aptly states, we may well be moving beyond the mundane. But in line with Wilber's (2000b) own theory of holonomic development, we must include and transcend, not just transcend. We must not be so arrogant as to believe that we are "above and beyond" the mundane. The transcendence of the mundane must be an all-embracing one. We must not fall into the delusion that we have left the material world behind, nor assume that we know better than others. This has always been the bane of the ascenders, as Wilber himself has pointed out.

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Notes

1. For a good introduction to Wilber's ideas, his *A Brief History of Everything* is recommended (Wilber 2000a).
2. It must be acknowledged that Kaku is not a strict empiricist. His *Visions* is quite speculative in nature. However his view of the future tends to be based upon linear extrapolations founded upon the presuppositions of Western mechanistic and patriarchal science, as I argued in a previous paper (Anthony 2003).
3. A notable exception was the presentation by Ian Lowe (2006), who backed his arguments with solid empirical evidence. Laszlo (2006), though highly extrapolative and metaphorical in his arguments, also incorporated concepts and data from mainstream scientific sources.

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..... Not-so-Integral Futures

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