**The Basic Moral Intuition in the Context of Social Change**

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***“The intuition is given; the unpacking is our moral dilemma, always.” Ken Wilber***

Are you inspired to change the world and to reach your own potential? To leave this planet a better place for future generations? Ever wondered where to focus your efforts? There is no shortage of good causes and worthy deeds. How do we determine our priorities?  Is guiding the very first steps of a faltering toddler as worthy as solving a global crisis or tackling climate change? Maybe addressing your own needs is as important as those of others? Should we focus our efforts on individuals or the greater whole? You have limited time and resources. You cannot commit to everything so *how do you choose?*

It is 2014. The concept that we will save all species from extinction, alleviate poverty or achieve gender equality by next year through reaching the 2015 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), or even succeed in achieving the most minimal of climate change targets has become yesterday’s dream. So, how does this situate us as global social change agents today? The definitions of sustainable development have always focused on “meeting our needs without compromising those of future generations,” yet the moment where that might have been achievable passed many years ago.

As an example, let’s review some recent species extinctions. As of 2013, the Formosan Clouded Leopard is now officially extinct and the last Black Rhino died in 2012.  The last of the Japanese River Otters died in 2011 and the last remaining Pinta Island Tortoise, affectionately called Lonesome George, expired on June 12, 2012. These are just a few examples of the estimated thousands of species that scientists estimate we are losing every year. Some put the figure as high as 50,000. Historically this has been a huge loss of biodiversity on our planet and we face an increasingly serious future.  Some argue our species is perilously close to instigating systemic collapse. Whether that’s true or not, we are definitely steadily losing ground when it comes to maintaining species and ecosystems for future generations.

While our species is struggling on this front, we have managed to achieve remarkable, unprecedented gains in others. We are interconnected like never before. We can share information at an exponential rate and technological achievements like the Internet have literally changed our world. And, recalling the Arab Spring, using these new forms of communications and other social networking possibilities enable people to *participate* in changing the world in ways they never had before. Our collective knowledge is doubling every five years, building up an immense resource of information and wisdom that is available to anyone anywhere, by a few clicks on a track pad.  Our world seems to be able to handle increasing levels of complexity and the human mind has access to achieving higher and higher levels of potential like no other time in history. We have overarching frameworks such as the International Human Rights Charter to aspire to. Most nations do in fact *agree* with the MDGs; whether or not those have been achieved, it is an achievement in and of itself that most nations *agree* with such a *worldcentric* set of goals. Some collective systems, such as fiber optics and computer networks, can literally move ideas regarding, for example, spiritual and moral development around the planet at the speed of light.  We are living in remarkably complex times!

The Basic Moral Intuition (BMI), a concept outlined by Ken Wilber in his groundbreaking work on integral theory, helps us orient ourselves in such a complex world.  Wilber (and before him Koestler’s) notion of *holarchy* explains the concept of interconnected whole-parts, where each part is autonomously and yet simultaneously part of a larger whole. These holarchies are everywhere. Atom, molecule, cell, and organ. Seed, seedling, sapling, and oak tree. In a pyramidal way, the earlier holons, such as atoms and seeds, are always in greater number, or in greater *span*. Whereas the later holons, such as organs and oak trees, are usually in smaller number, and yet they have more *depth*, meaning that there are more levels of complexity present in their make-up. For an oak tree to exist, it has to have at least these three levels of the holarchy present: seed, seedling and sapling, thus it has greater depth than just a seed for example. The atom on the other hand has more foundation because of its span. Millions of atoms are needed to create a seed and if you take away this earlier more foundational level of the holarchy the seed does not exist and neither does the oak tree.

The BMI suggests that we *intuit* the need *to protect and promote the greatest depth for the greatest span.* We intuit it’s preferable to eat a carrot than to eat a primate. Or, another example as Wilber describes: “What’s worth more, one ape or a thousand frogs? Perhaps it is an ape…. On intrinsic value alone, we would choose the ape. But, if we discover that the frogs are part of a fragile ecosystem and their death would disrupt the entire system [since they have more fundamental value than the ape], then we would choose to save the frogs, since that would preserve the greatest depth for the greatest span, including probably the lives of other apes.” We are constantly and intuitively working out such moral decisions as we act in the world.

The BMI explores this relationship between depth of complexity and span of numbers—or simply, depth and span—and brings a whole new way of understanding the moral decisions that must be tackled regarding our planet’s future.

Wilber’s point is that while we need the earlier holons for their fundamental value, we cannot only protect those earlier holons at the expense of the later, more complex holons. So, the physiosphere is the foundation upon which the biosphere (the sphere of life) and the noosphere (the sphere of mind) function, we cannot only orient toward protecting the physiosphere and not also attend to the greater depth present in the biosphere and the noosphere.

Simply put, social change can’t only be about the numbers of trees standing. It has to also be about the poet or songwriter or an obscure-yet-transformational-philosophy-book-on-a-dusty-shelf-somewhere, matter. These matter, because they hold greater depth and, thus, may have potential to protect greater span. They have to be factored into our intuitive moves in the world today.

The key to understanding Wilber’s concept of the BMI is that without a physiosphere and without a biosphere, humans have no ability to exist or move toward complexity. Without chemicals you have no life, and without life you have no poetry. Poetry, he argues, has more complexity than a rock or a stone, and should have an important place in our moral decision-making.

Perhaps, for some, he is stating the obvious but his work introduces a major conceptual twist based on an exquisite articulation of holarchy that has not yet been brought into the current debate regarding the state of the planet.

Although we are undoubtedly worse off when it comes to the foundational value of biodiversity or ecosystem health, we are arguably a significantly more interconnected and complex global society than we were just twenty seven years ago when the term sustainable development was first coined by the Bruntland Commission.  Depth and span are related, but not on the same axis. And this has important ramifications for today’s moral decisions.

The definition of sustainable development, for example, posits “a desirable future state for human societies in which living conditions and resource-use meet human needs without undermining the sustainability of natural systems and the environment, so that future generations may also have their needs met.” That speaks only of span and not of depth. What depth of consciousness needs to be protected and promoted and included in this conception of sustainable development to provide humanity with the interior scaffolding to carry out such a vision?

The BMI is something that is intuited. But, *how to implement* this basic moral intuition is not given with that pure intuition. How to grapple with these moral dilemmas and implement decisions become part of the intersubjective and cultural and social project that all of us must discuss and decide. Or, as Wilber puts it:

**“The intuition is given; the unpacking is our moral dilemma, always.”**

Unpacking the BMI is the challenge of this century. How do we focus our efforts? Do we spend our time tackling a globally pressing issue like the radioactive water leaking from Fukushima, which is affecting entire marine ecosystems and impacting our planet for tens of thousands of years or do we work with a single child who may grow up and, given the opportunity, evolve in complexity to solve these kinds of foundational problems. Where in the map of span versus depth do we reside? Are there tipping points or fulcrums of change, leadership opportunities, or historical vantage points we can see in this map or do we play this particular game of life by ear; working one moment on larger scale issues, the next moment on the intensely personal? How do *you* decide? Wilber argues that this decision is entirely personal and it depends on where your talents and passions lie.  Do you know where your talents and passions lie?

This simple statement—‘protect and promote the greatest depth for the greatest span’—changes the entire sustainable development game. No longer is our collective challenge just about survival of numbers, or ensuring the broadest spectrum of species gets a chance to live. It is also about ensuring that each conscious being, from an ant to an artist, gets a chance to achieve her fullest potential. Suddenly we have a framework to understand the matrix of Millennium Development Goals and the world consensus on Agenda 21 while at the same time understanding why spiritual development, academic achievement or pushing our human understanding of music, poetry or art is equally valid and worthy.  The human rights charter comes into perspective as a statement not just about our equal right to live but also our equal opportunity to achieve our greatest depth of consciousness possible. Definitions of poverty change from poverty of material goods to include poverty of depth, or that is, a poverty of complexity of mind and extension of care.

Are you interested in joining this discussion on the BMI in development and social change work? Are you willing to bring your own moral dilemmas to the conversation, helping us all deepen our practice, and laying some emergent ground for enacting this intuition in the future? One Sky is hosting an international weekend retreat May 9, 10, 11 in Gibsons, B.C. Social change practitioners will gather to discuss the BMI using voice dialogue and other methods in a peer-learning environment. More information can be found at [www.onesky.ca](http://www.onesky.ca) or integralwithoutborders.org or e-mail Mike Simpson directly at [mike@onesky.ca](mailto:mike@onesky.ca). Participation is limited.