



Responding to Suffering and Evil

INTEGRAL PRINCIPLES

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Suffering and evil challenge us all, but several principles may help Integral practitioners to respond effectively. These include appreciating the role that unrecognized, limited perspectives (and corresponding worldviews) play in creating suffering and evil, and learning to recognize and release such limitations into more integral stances. Doing this skillfully requires taking up effective, authentic psychological and contemplative disciplines, and especially the disciplines of awakening service or karma yoga, whose central elements are described.

Introduction

The Challenge We Face

The question of how to understand and respond to suffering and evil (intentionally created, unnecessary suffering) is one of the greatest human challenges.¹ It has been a critical issue for religions from the dawn of history, for philosophy for millennia, and now confronts contemporary disciplines and, of course, contemporary people. In short, it confronts each of us, just as it has confronted every human being who ever lived.

Most of humankind faces not only inescapable existential suffering, but also unnecessary suffering and evils such as oppression, poverty, and deprivation. However, a fortunate minority enjoy lives of remarkable opportunity and privilege. Those of us so privileged face the double challenge of how to respond to both the suffering of the world and also to our own good fortune.

In the face of these challenges and the pain they engender, we can respond in one of two ways. One choice is to defend ourselves against recognizing the challenges and their implications. For this we can use any of the innumerable psychological and cultural defenses at our disposal, and



thereby slip into what is variously described as inauthenticity (philosophy), unconsciousness and defensiveness (psychology), or ignorance, delusion, and sin (religion).

Alternatively, we can attempt to face these twin challenges openly and live appropriately. This attempt seems to demand that we find some bedrock on which to base our responses and our lives. And this, in turn, requires that we uncover and question our fundamental values and assumptions.

For myself, I find that this questioning leads to a conclusion—which then becomes a chosen assumption and value—that echoes the recommendations of many wise people throughout the ages. This assumption is that trying to relieve suffering and enhance wellbeing as effectively as possible for as many beings as possible is a sturdy basis for a life well lived.² Integral studies practitioners will recognize this assumption as a variation on the Basic Moral Intuition: “Protect and promote the greatest depth for the greatest span.”³

Our Life Koan

Yet this intuition is not the end of our challenge, but rather its foundation, leading to the practical question of how to implement it in our lives. This practical question is stated most succinctly as “What can I do?”

But even this question is not sufficient. For further reflection reveals a deeper and more effective question. That question is “What is the most strategic thing I can do?” In other words, given my unique situation, skills, and opportunities, how can I best work to protect and promote the greatest depth for the greatest span?

Such questions are of a particular type: they are koans or wisdom questions. Questions are of two types: knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge questions can be answered by simple information. For example, “What is the temperature?” Answer, “ten degrees above freezing.”



But koans or wisdom questions differ in three distinct ways. First, they do not seek facts but understanding, and especially wisdom.⁴ Second, they have no one, final answer. Third, they are questions that can unveil deeper insights into ourselves and reality each time we ask them.

What are some of the insights, especially integrally-based insights that emerge through asking the question “What is the most strategic thing I can do?” The answer will depend, of course, on all sorts of personal variables, especially people’s worldview and development. But one integrally informed insight is that fundamental and effective responses to the world’s suffering and evil will be inclusive. That is, such responses will respond to both the suffering *and* its causes, and will attempt to transform both the world *and* ourselves.

Action in the World

Clearly, the causes of the world’s suffering and evil are innumerable. In fact, deep examination leads to an appreciation of incomprehensibly complex networks of interacting causes: physical, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual—in other words, causes that span all four quadrants and all manifest levels of what has traditionally been called the Great Chain (Nest) of Being. In short, examination leads to a recognition of the Buddhist principle of codependent origination, and what we might call “omnideterminism” (everything affects everything).

In seeking a way to contribute, each of us must choose a specific place at which to intervene in this vast dynamic network. Some will choose to work on physical causes such as pollution or disease, others on social factors such as poverty and inequality, still others on psychological and spiritual dynamics such as greed and anger. The list of arenas for potential contribution is endless.



Hypothesized Integral Principles

Several general principles may be particularly important for effective integral interventions.

These hypothesized principles include the following:

- Attempts to relieve suffering will be more effective when interior psychological, cultural, and spiritual causes are addressed as well as exterior causes. In other words, our contributions will be more effective when we work to relieve both the exterior causes of suffering such as poverty and pollution, and also their interior psychological, spiritual, and cultural causes.
- More generally, the more quadrants and levels of causes that are addressed, the more effective and enduring may be the healing.

But relieving these interior causes requires understanding them, and the following hypotheses may therefore constitute crucial integral principles.

- To the extent that any perspective is not recognized as such—i.e., is not recognized as partial, relative, and perspectival—it will produce a corresponding worldview that will be assumed to be complete and true, will therefore tend to go unquestioned, and result in self-delusion, well-intended suffering, and self-justified evil.

Integral responses to suffering, and integral disciplines in general, will therefore attempt to:

- Recognize partial perspectives, in both ourselves and others.
- Release and integrate these partial perspectives into more encompassing (contextually wider and developmentally deeper) perspectives, and eventually into integral-aperspectivalism.⁵
- Beyond this, integral disciplines will eventually aim to dissolve all perspectives into pure awareness, from which perspectives can then



reemerge with their partial, perspectival nature recognized, their integral-aperspectival potentials realized, and their spiritual ground remembered.

- Integral disciplines can be seen as perspectival therapies.⁶

Work on Ourselves

But our ability to recognize, release, and integrate limited perspectives is a function of our developmental maturity. This means that a prime imperative for integral contributors is to foster our own maturation. The goal is to optimize health at our current level (healthy translation) and also foster development to higher levels (healthy transformation). And this in turn means that we need to engage in authentic, effective psychological and spiritual practices as fully as we can.

How do we practice? One crucial element is to make practice as continuous as possible. In fact, each of the great spiritual traditions emphasizes the importance of continuity: “every moment Zen” (Buddhism) or “pray without ceasing” (Christianity and Hinduism).⁷ This implies that we need to find ways to transform our service and work in the world into part of our practice. Fortunately, a way to do this was forged over 2000 years ago. That way is karma yoga, or what we might call “awakening service,” which according to Aurobindo is the art of transforming “the whole act of living into an uninterrupted yoga.”⁸

Awakening Service

Karma yoga is one of the classic yogas of Hinduism. Its central goal is to transform all service and work—all actions—into spiritual practice. Its essential elements are threefold: offering the activity, impeccable action, and relinquishing attachment to the outcome.

Before beginning any activity, it is offered. Traditionally it is offered to Brahman (God), but the practice can be effective if offered to diverse transpersonal goals. The central requirement is that the action be done for a transegoic purpose that transcends the mere gratification and



reinforcement of one's (currently conceived) self.⁹ The desired result is a motivational shift up the hierarchy of needs.¹⁰ This shift of motivation fosters transpersonal motives and development, reduces egocentric motivation and reinforcement, decathects one's current self-sense, and undermines the Atman project.¹¹

Next, one attempts to carry out the activity as impeccably as possible, which includes maintaining the transpersonal motivation. Simultaneously—and this is what makes karma yoga such a powerful, multipronged practice—one attempts to let go attachment (addiction or craving) to the way things turn out: to the outcome of one's actions. In the words of the *Bhagavad-Gita*,

Do your duty, always; but without attachment.

That is how (one) reaches the ultimate Truth;

by working without anxiety about results.¹²

According to Aurobindo, with this practice, “The joy of service and the joy of inner growth through works is the sufficient recompense of the selfless worker.”¹³

An integral vision calls for an integral practice, and an integral practice eventually matures into a continuous practice that necessarily includes awakening service or karma yoga. Through awakening service, we go out into the world in order to go deeper into ourselves, and we go deeper into ourselves in order to go more effectively out into the world, seeking to realize in each action the integral vision, in both ourselves and the world, and to thereby reduce suffering and evil.

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**Endnotes**

¹ This simple definition of evil was provided by Rabbi Marc Gafni at the Integral Spirituality conference in 2005 and will serve well for the purposes of this paper, since we need not become embroiled in the endless debates over the fundamental nature and definition of evil.

² In existential terms, this appears to provide a basis for what Satre called a “fundamental meaning structure” for a worthy “fundamental project” (the basic orientation towards life that informs and underlies all our decisions).

³ Wilber, *Sex, ecology, spirituality: The spirit of evolution*, 2000b, p. 640

⁴ I would define wisdom as deep understanding of, and practical skill in responding to, the central, especially existential, issues of life. Consult Walsh, *Essential spirituality: The seven central practices*, 1999

⁵ “Integral-aperspectival” is a term introduced by Jean Gebser, *The ever-present origin*, 1985, and then expanded by Ken Wilber, *Sex, ecology, spirituality: The spirit of evolution*, 2000b; *Integral psychology: Consciousness, spirit, psychology, therapy*, 2000a. It describes the capacity of vision-logic to hold and integrate multiple perspectives. This postformal operational cognitive capacity is central to integral disciplines.

⁶ The ability to take increased perspectives (e.g., second person, third person, and so on) is a central capacity that develops with cognitive maturation. In general, the greater the cognitive maturation, the greater the available perspectives, the wider the circle of identification and compassion, and the less suffering and evil one is capable of. The fundamental role of perspectives in constituting experience is introduced in Wilber, *Integral spirituality: A startling new role for religion in the modern and postmodern world*, 2006, and is a central thesis of his second volume of the *Kosmos trilogy*, a work currently in progress.

⁷ Walsh, *Essential spirituality: The seven central practices*, 1999

⁸ Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, 1922, p. 283

⁹ The classic account of karma yoga is the 2000 year old “gospel of Hinduism”: The *Bhagavad-Gita*. Also consult Prabhavananda and Isherwood, *The song of God: Bhagavad-Gita*, 1972. One of the most sophisticated commentaries on it is Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, 1922. Exercises for applying it in contemporary life can be found in, Walsh, *Essential spirituality: The seven central practices*, 1999.

¹⁰ Maslow, *The farther reaches of human nature*, 1971

¹¹ Wilber, *The collected works of Ken Wilber* (Vol. 2), 1999

¹² Prabhavananda & Isherwood, *The song of God: Bhagavad-Gita*, 1972, p. 46

¹³ Harvey, *Teachings of the hindu mystics*, 2001, p. 123

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